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**Grotesque as Aesthetic Identity: from Medieval Illumination to
Contemporary Art**

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Abstract: This paper's aim is offering a subjective vision on the grotesque as form of identity for human individuals ranging from at least Middle Ages until contemporary artistic manifestations. A traditional history of art becomes impossible when discovering a synchronous existence of a variety of art events that cannot be placed in parallel discursive lines, without grasping links and ramifications born from obvious similarities between formulas and procedures otherwise separated by long distances and time periods. The aesthetic category that seems best to transcribe the need of simultaneous and irrational perception of mundane reality is the *grotesque* – being, in my opinion, a good strategy for highlighting multiple purpose trends present in the environment as important factors of human identity configuration which, in a mechanistic way, dominated by reason, are often lost sight of. A historicist approach to the grotesque, however subjective, offers nothing else but a history of the meanings given to the word grotesque, term which designates a perpetual value of reality, stratified only in the physical and conceptual artifacts it has been associated with. Nonetheless it is useful as a micro-theory of the chaos which surrounds us and determines opposed dialectical positions such as order, hierarchy, and harmony.

Keywords: syncretism; symbolism; tattoo; graffiti

Introduction

When discussing the art of the 20th century and especially when considering the artistic achievements of the beginning of the 21st century, diachronic perspective tends to become irrelevant and those who analyze the phenomenon have to review both the method and the concepts prevalent on art. A traditional history of art becomes impossible when discovering a synchronous existence of an extraordinary variety of art events that cannot be placed in parallel discursive lines, without grasping the links and ramifications born from the obvious similarities between formulas and procedures otherwise separated by long distances and time periods.

The connection point, the node that combines all these possible dispositions of artistic creativity remains naturally the human being, but what is clear now is the need for research on what remains fundamentally the same, unchanged in human beings, (regardless of historical eras that we can stratify) in an attempt to explain the recurrence of events and practices with artistic or aesthetic value that a pure discursivity could fit but in the ineffable category of coincidence.

Thus, research on art is and will be, inevitably, research about humanity, about how it relates to self, others and the environment, be it animal, vegetal or inanimate and, more and more outstanding, technological and virtual. Anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology, philosophy, but also science and technology become frames of reference which have to intersect simultaneously with

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artistic research to obtain an environment with multiple significance, particularly necessary for surfacing different meaning trends that lead to understanding artistic creativity as a defining element for human being, a source for both the phenomenon of individuation as a species and for configuring a complex personality.

Analyzing a phenomenon that seems to occur strongly in contemporary art, syncretism, we may conclude that, in fact, it has accompanied human being from the earliest stages of existence as a species, but the reason why the awareness of its existence has become inevitable today is, in part, humanity entering the electronic phase of globalization following the great geographical discoveries of the fifteenth century. The difference between the two eras of configuring a new global model is given by the special perception of space that the technological advance makes possible. In the geographical phase, we are dealing with the physical completion of the space, while communication technology, from telegraph to the internet, ultimately, means its elusion.

The illusion of space actually means cancellation of perspective, of spatial depth, of discursiveness and thereby upholding the simultaneity in apprehending the environment, but this simultaneity becomes relevant only in so far as the ordering tendency of reason goes into the background, giving way to irrational to assume reality. Notating the Irrational's manifestations was almost always the art's task, the only proper to transcribe, by its secondary character and lower status among the means of knowledge that classical Greek philosophy has established for it, this hidden part of the human being, unworthy of any constructive or orderly – or in plainer words “serious” – research of the surrounding world.

One of the aesthetic categories that seem best to transcribe the need of simultaneous and irrational perception of mundane reality is the Grotesque – being, in my opinion, a good strategy for highlighting multiple purpose trends present in the environment as important factors of human identity configuration which, in a mechanistic way, dominated by reason, are often lost sight of in English or French. The abstract must be written in English.

If we take the dictionary definition of *Grotesque*¹ we find out that it means:

- a. (adj.) of an exaggerated, funny, unnatural comic, strange, bizarre;
- b. (n. n.) 1. An aesthetic category reflecting reality, contrary to the sublime, in fantastic, bizarre, monstrous shapes; 2. Type of ornamentation of Roman origin, reintroduced during the Renaissance, consisting of a fantastic decoration, painted or carved, composed of vegetal geometric motifs, (bizarre) animals and characters combined with arabesques.
- c. (typo.) Sans serif typeface resulted from combining arcs and line segments.
- d. n. fem. (theatre) sort of comedy. (Fr. *Grotesque*, It. *Grottesco*)

¹ Definition compiled by myself from several definitions of “GROTÉSC” found on the internet at <http://dexonline.ro/definitie/grotesc>, downloaded on 27.06.2012.



Figure 1. Domus Aurea, Decorations Called “Grotteschi”

We see that we are dealing with an aesthetic category reflecting reality, but that the forms in which this reflection occurs are bizarre, fantastic and monstrous and the human reaction will be to reject them, given their character labeled as being ridiculous, strange, bizarre and unnatural.

Such an acceptance of the term may seem true when referring to the ornamentation of Domus Aurea, which, once discovered during the Italian Renaissance through the archaeological excavations around 1480, was a rich source of inspiration for artists such as Raphael (Vatican Loggia). However, when talking about fonts known as *Grotesque* we are dealing with an entirely different matter.

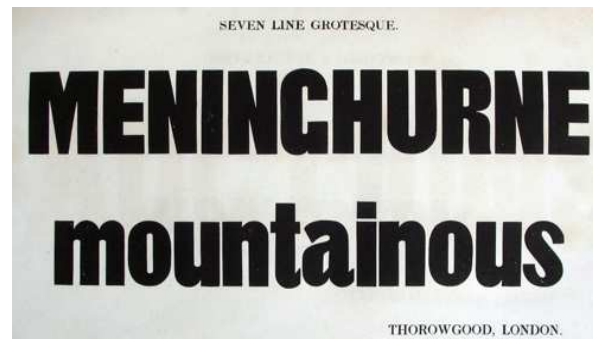


Figure 2. William Thorowgood's Seven Line Grotesque Sample

The typeface contains a series of seemingly obedient characters, a kind of letters resulting only from combining arcs with line segments, *sans-serif*, the first font called *Grotesque* being invented in 1832 by William Thorowgood, who added a set of lower-case letters¹ to the typeface invented by William Caslon composed only of capital letters.

¹ Major, Martin (2007). Inclined to Be Dull. *Eye Magazine, Spring*. <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/inclined-to-be-dull>, downloaded on June 29th 2012.



Figure 3. The *Book of Kells* Manuscript, folio 34r,
the *Chi Rho* Monogram



Figure 4. The Crosby-Schryven Codex, Egypt, 3rd
Century

Their bizarre is not visible to those who live in the 21st century when a variety of typefaces results as a sign of plurality and relativism. The irrelevance of a unique point of view, of a single possible position in the perception of the surrounding reality or of oneself is now obvious. In the 19th century though, when they were first put into use, they were particularly intriguing by their uniform visual appearance, equal and lacking any ornamentation. Still, they are remote from the exotic decorations in Nero's house with which they share the same name.

Denying the totally arbitrary assigning of only one term for many incompatible realities, I looked for a linkage in history. The term makes its appearance once again in the description of medieval manuscript art, and the one making the link is one of the first important theorists of grotesque – Jonathan Ruskin. (Ruskin, 1863)

As we can discover when reading the third volume of his *Modern Painters*, Ruskin sees in this aesthetic category the way art can be released from under the rule of the Renaissance unique point of view, and the medieval illumination as an insufficiently explored art form which would deserve a reassessment and a reintroduction in artistic creation. He distinguishes by *illumination* that action of making writing, simple writing, beautiful to the eye, by investing it with the great chord of perfect color, blue, purple, scarlet, white, and gold, and in that chord of color, permitting the continual play of the fancy of the writer in every species of grotesque imagination, carefully excluding shadow; the distinctive difference between illumination and painting proper, being, that illumination admits no shadows, but only gradations of pure color. (Ruskin, 1863, p. 103)

Searching at any cost for a similarity between the illuminated manuscripts of the early Middle Ages, also known as the Dark Ages, and the nineteenth century font called Grotesque, we see that it is possible only in the text body, with relatively equal characters in size and evenly distributed on the written surface in the first forms of manuscript, dating from late antiquity, with no spaces between words and little, or no, punctuation.

This similarity is not possible in the highly decorated initials that Ruskin considers when speaking of illumination, though the connection was made and is particularly obvious between these initials and the heteroclit Roman decorations from whose discovery the term originates. At this time we can accept an attempt to define the grotesque as it appears to Jonathan Ruskin, a definition useful to justify the understanding of this aesthetic category as relevant for a contemporaneity apprehensible in its simultaneity. On page 97, the author describes the concept we are interested in like this:

A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in a bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or overlapped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character.¹

But this get-together of symbols, specific to grotesque in Ruskin's understanding, is nothing more than *symbolism* to McLuhan, (McLuhan, 1962, p. 267) and indeed, by the definition he gives a collocation, a parataxis of components representing insight by careful established ratios, but without a point of view or lineal connection or sequential order (McLuhan, 1962, p. 267) makes his opinion – that symbolism becomes “a kind of witty jazz” (McLuhan, 1962, p. 267) a “consummation of Ruskin's aspirations for the grotesque” (McLuhan, 1962, p. 267) – seem justified.

The term used by McLuhan to define symbolism, “parataxis”, is often used by theorists of culture to describe certain works of art in which a series of scenes or elements are displayed next to each other without any particular order or hierarchy. Examples can be found in Dadaist collages or in Rauschenberg's works and even in a wide range of music videos. The world we live in today is essentially symbolic, although the relationship between signifier and signified is far from being stable and unequivocal. However I subscribe McLuhan's opinion about the shock Ruskin would have had (McLuhan, 1962, p. 267) at contact with our contemporary art.



Figure 5. Hannah Höch – *Das schöne Mädchen/* The Beautiful Girl (1919-1920), private collection, Berlin



Figure 6. Robert Rauschenberg – *Monogram* (1955-1959) Moderna Museet, Stockholm

What is the connection between illumination, the fonts we have mentioned earlier, tattoos, implants and familiar names (though not in such an enumeration) such as: Hayao Miyazaki, Quentin Tarantino, Stelarc, Marilyn Manson, Francis Bacon, Frida Kahlo, Julio Cortesar and many others? None, at a first glance. However it seems that it exists and can be recognized without being very analytical on the creation of each of them, at the formal level that the creativity of each of those listed above is

¹ Ibidem, p. 97.

exploiting, *Grotesque* being even now what brings people closer and what allows us all to perceive them in simultaneity. It is the artistic space they all assume or to whom they are assimilated, of whom each of them speaks in animation, film, body art performance, music videos, painting, literature, etc.

About *grotesque* as a form of painterly expression in Roman antiquity, we can get a very good picture from the very accurate description made by Vitruvius¹, although his displeasure and disapproval towards this type of much appreciated art at the time he wrote *De Architectura* are very obvious: inasmuch as monsters are painted in the present day rather than objects whose prototype are to be observed in nature. For columns reeds are substituted; for pediments the stalks, leaves, and tendrils of plants; candelabra are made to support the representations of small buildings, from whose summits many stalks appear to spring with absurd figures thereon. Not less so are those stalks with figures rising from them, some with human heads, and others with the heads of beasts; because similar forms never did, do, nor can exist in nature. These new fashions have so much prevailed, that for want of competent judges, true art is little esteemed. How is it possible for a reed to support a roof, or a candelabrum to bear a house with the ornaments on its roof, or a small and pliant stalk to carry a sitting figure; or, that half figures and flowers at the same time should spring out of roots and stalks? And yet the public, so far from discouraging these falsehoods, are delighted with them, not for a moment considering whether such things could exist. Hence the minds of the multitude, misled by improper judges, do not discern that which is founded on reason and the rules of propriety. No pictures should be tolerated but those established on the basis of truth; and although admirably painted, they should be immediately discarded, if they transgress the rules of propriety and perspicuity as respects the subject²

For Raphael, as we have already had occasion to remark, that disapproval of grotesque did not matter, but we must not forget that Leon Battista Alberti's thesis on painting and perspective had since 1435 a strong influence on the epoch, and at least *De Re Aedificatoria*, which appeared in print in 1485 (the first treatise on architecture appeared in the Italian Renaissance, the first printed book on the subject) is based to a large extent on the above-mentioned work of Vitruvius, whose printing also followed in 1486. These works will contribute greatly to the formation of the official trend in Renaissance art, carrying along, over time, the disapproval for art forms that are not reflecting the comprehensible rational truth, disapproval that has been perpetuated until the nineteenth century.

¹ Pollio, Marcus Vitruvius (2012). *De Architectura, book VII, chapter 5*, translated into English by Bill Thayer, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/7*.html, recovered from the internet on May 19th, 2012.

² *Ibidem*.



Figure 7. Examples of Grotesque Decorations in Italian Art of the *Cinquecento*

Although disavowed in official circles, an art that is inconsistent with classical principles is carried out throughout the period of the Italian *Cinquecento*, where the grotesque becomes the defining aesthetic criterion. Imposed to art criticism by Eugenio Battisti,¹ the term *Anti-Renaissance* – *l'antirinascimento* – tends to revalue the entire complex of astrological and cosmological imagery, and having a magical-esoteric and allegorical-symbolical content of the Italian 16th century art, long silenced by art historians, but of which we know today that are a part of culture, mental universe and artistic production of nearly all great artists of the Renaissance. The eccentric and transgressive aspects of petulant, monstrous and misshapen that characterized the Italian Cinquecento were in an open polemic with the idea of order and balance of classicism, not explaining the inclusion of Anti-Renaissance under the umbrella of mannerism but quite the contrary. Baroque will assume this particular manner of expression as a way of life, although it formally substitutes, at least at an explicit level, ambivalence to the semantic polyvalence that characterized the Anti-Renaissance grotesque. The pictorial metaphor comes to counterbalance the persuasion of the uniform text, striving against the “world of visual perspective [...] of unified and homogeneous space”. (McLuhan, 1962, p. 136) This is evident in the visual simultaneity in the paintings of Rubens, in the symbolic ambivalence of light in Caravaggio, in the theatrical and the implausible aspect of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. Neoclassicism will bring the grotesque to light again under the same formal definition we find in Roman antiquity, that of mural decoration, but in this case we may ask whether this is not made with the intent to control, to neutralize, since a true outburst, cult and with great interest for the historical situation, will only occur in Romanticism. Academism and Realism will try each in its own way to restrain the unconscious compulsion of the human spirit, but Impressionists, out of an almost scientific desire to free the

¹ Battisti, Eugenio (1982). *Antirenașterea, cu un apendice de manuscrise inedite/ Antirenaissance, with an Special Manuscript Appendix*, translated by George Lăzărescu, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1982 after the original Italian edition published as *L'antirinascimento, con una appendice di manoscritti inediti*, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, Milano, 1962.

perception from habits that are not favourable to them, will release again this “monster” of simultaneity which will not be slowed throughout the twentieth century.

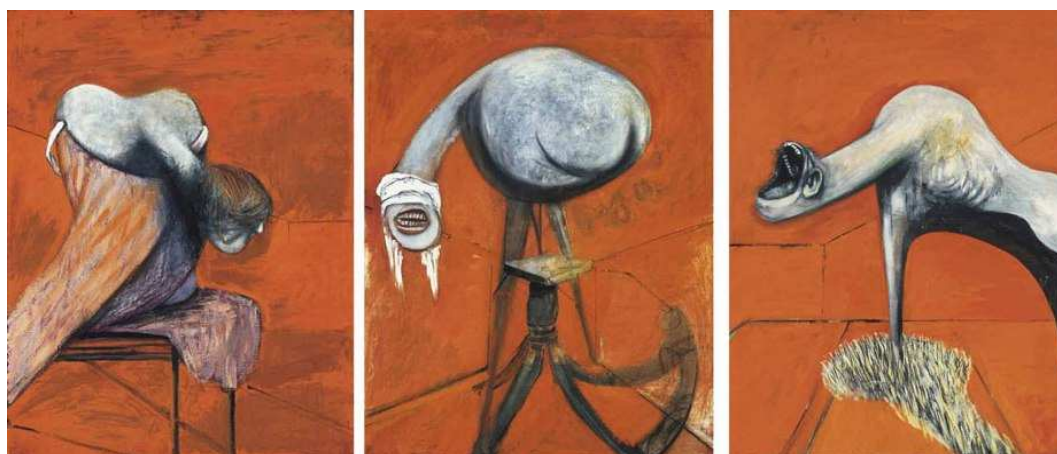


**Figure 8. Andrea Mantegna, (1431 – 1506),
Grotesque selfportrait 1465-1474, Camera degli
sposi, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua**



**Figure 9. Giorgio Andreoli, Gubbio 1525: plate
decorated with “groteschi” at Museo
Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza**

As an alternative to discursiveness, to the unique point of view, to the uniformity, to the segmentation and homogeneity, grotesque exalts simultaneity, lack of perspective, mosaic, and individual. Reason loses its strength to penetrate a world of sensory simultaneity. The text loses its hegemony as a way of ordering human spirituality, making room for picture, sound and tactility in a struggle to take possession of the world which seems to convene as a perpetual state to those who no longer feel, from within it, the clear and overwhelming pressure of an authority. For some, this struggle, this confrontation becomes the only possible authority.



**Figure 10. Francis Bacon, Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, oil on board, each 95 x
73.5 cm, Tate Gallery, London, 1944**

Is it the world today in concordance with what Ruskin wanted for art? The works of Francis Bacon are grotesque, and, by examining his manner, one can retrieve that state of formal indeterminacy existing in medieval illumination.

Even at a conceptual level, the analysis of his work can reveal similarities with manuscript decoration art: there light is what transpires in the letter character; here the expression is the one taking control over image determining internal turmoil to formal expressions. And yet, I think that is not what Ruskin meant when proposing “full acceptance of the grotesque” as “an infinite good to mankind”. (Ruskin, 1863, p. 103)

Although prophetic, I do not think he was aware of the extent his prophecies will reach.

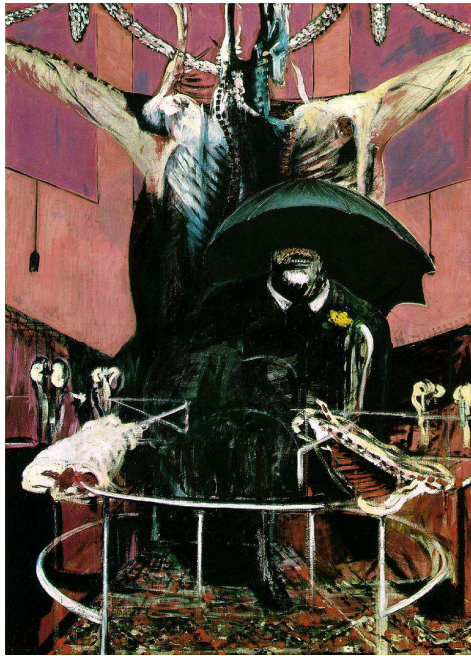


Figure 11. Francis Bacon *Painting* (1946)



Figure 12. Francis Bacon „Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X” 1953, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa

An example of contemporary artistic expression is, in any case, the tattoo. As a body art form, it actually appeared in the early human stages of his individualization as a species, recovered by history. Originally associated with magic, meant for leaders, it becomes in time a form of disavowed individualization, reserved to disfavored categories of society, various criminals and prostitutes. Our century brings tattoo back into focus, after the twentieth century had made irrelevant the ordering limit of the official type of thinking and taking possession of reality. Television shows today highlight us the extent of this phenomenon in countries like the United States where democracy is a profession of faith.

But why talk of tattoos as a form of grotesque? Is this a form of art that meets the “criterion” of simultaneity? Yes, and I think it does it in many ways! More than that, it can even be seen as a particular type of response to Ruskin's desire to resurrect illumination. Illumination on the human body or human body regarded as illumination. An argument in this respect can be given by analysis of an ancient British population, the *Picts*, so called precisely because they had a custom to cover their

body with drawings¹ also found on a series of symbolic and ritual stones decorated in bas-relief. The similarity of these drawings, especially the ones in the second period, decorated with Christian and pagan symbols combined and the illumination on the *Book of Kells* is not random, even as decorations in this Gospel are not very far as origins from the decorations of Roman mosaics or Coptic art. The letter's *body* becomes once again that of the human being and the light, so important for those who developed the art of medieval manuscript in the dark ages, represents the light of the unconscious revealed by colorful drawings that adorn the skin. The simultaneity of being and art that dresses it cannot be circumvented. The visual is combined here with the tactile, a bodily sensation to which the intervention, painful to some extent, produced over the skin of the tattooed, is very important, even crucial for the individual's self-perception from that moment on. Tattoo represents an act of self-transformation, an assumption of a new corporeality, transcendence and transgression of the body limits, the spirit brought outward, visibly fixed with the help of the needle and the pigment, an obvious act of emancipation of the individual. At least at first glance.



Figure 13. Pictish Monument at Aberlemno, Class II, IX th century, Aberlemno kirkyard, Angus, Scotland



Figure 14. *The Book of Kells*, folio 32 v, *Hristos pe tron*, VIIIth century, upper side detail where resemblances with Aberlemno Class II can be observed

Those who find tattoo as a specific way of affirmation of individuality, of the nonconformity, are themselves tributary to a type of conformism. Tattoo, contrary to the desire to assert their freedom by which these people are propelled, does nothing else than designates them as targets! They become visible; can be easily sorted, catalogued, labeled! Freedom is an illusion! Trying to counteract a certain authority, a particular set of conventions, the constraints of a certain system, by changing the body appearance they fall in another constraint, following a different set of rules, but still rules. Accepting a certain assumption of reality at the expense of another, they adopt a perspective, a point of view; they

¹ "The most civilized of all these nations are they who inhabit Kent, which is entirely a maritime district, nor do they differ much from the Gallic customs. Most of the inland inhabitants do not sow corn, but live on milk and flesh, and are clad with skins. All the Britains, indeed, dye themselves with woad, which occasions a bluish color, and thereby have a more terrible appearance in fight. They wear their hair long, and have every part of their body shaved except their head and upper lip." C. Julius Caesar, *Caesar's Gallic War*, book V, chapter 14, translated by W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn, 1st Edition, New York. Harper & Brothers, 1869, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0448.phi001.perseus-eng1:5.14>, recovered from the internet on May 14th 2012.

make a choice, encoding their existence in a way to which they will remain tributary. Even when the outer appearance no longer sustains their insights on existence, the desire to return to the original shape will move them back into a space of the constraint that they initially wanted to evade.

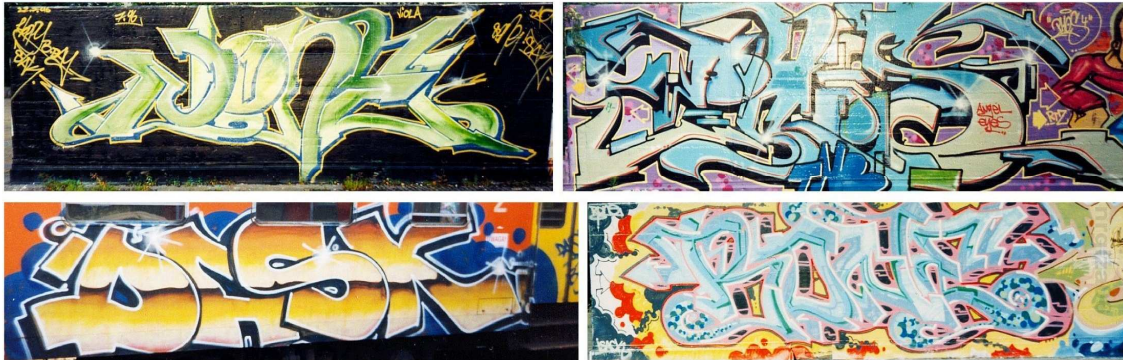


Figure 15. Examples of graffiti, relevant for the identity importance of formal aspect of used characters

Graffiti can also be perceived and understood by analogy with medieval illumination. The resemblance is more obvious than in the case of tattoo because of the dual function graffiti fulfils. Both as text letter and as the underground artist's personal brand, *graffiti* is seen by those who have analyzed this phenomenon as a form of re-taking possession of an area that the word "public" no longer defines credible:

The graffiti writer's goal is a stylization inseparable from the body, a stylization which, in its impenetrable "wildness," could surpass even linguistic reference and serve purely as a mark of presence, the concrete evidence of an individual existence and the reclamation of the environment through the label of the personal. (Stewart, 1988, p. 165)

In medieval manuscript a standardized writing – a text less interesting in shape than in the content of ideas it conveys – coexists along with those decorated initials whose utmost importance is relevant at the level of aesthetic shape, of how interaction with senses reveals its symbolic potential. In our century this is replicated in terms of undesirable "decorations" that *graffiti writers* join with ordered and standardized urban space, out of the need to add a symbolic supra-text to the official text of social conventions whose authority they do not recognize. Or rather, in the pages of medieval manuscripts, are recovered through illumination those meaning tendencies, the symbolic dimensioning sent underground by the dominant discourse of the time, the Christian discourse not being able to annihilate but only to reduce at the level of underground murmur the voice of pagan beliefs in the assimilated people.

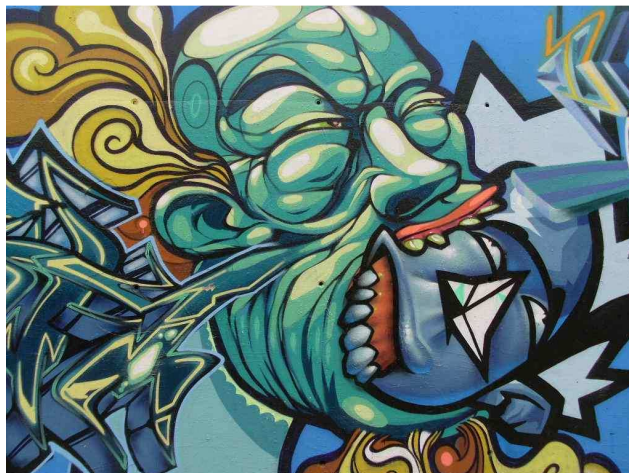


Figure 16. Graffiti in Barcelona, a significant example of the grotesque that characterizes this type of art

For those who would consider this relation between illumination, tattoo and graffiti, a forced interpretation, a speculation without any scientific basis, a widening of the above argument on the Saxon people called Picts could be necessary.

Those who inserted the illuminated characters in medieval manuscripts are Irish monks, representatives of a Celtic or Insular Christianity, and their vision is recognizable both at the level of the carved stelae, of the goldsmiths' work and at the level of the decoration of manuscripts that we have in mind. Although the Irish are a Celtic population different from Picts, the latter seem to have maintained "wide connections and parallels" (Foster, 1996, p. 17) with neighbouring groups. Because the naturalistic representations of noble Picts carved on monumental stones come from the time of their conversion to Christianity there is no physical evidence that this population would have practised tattooing.

As some authors maintain:

The practice (of tattooing)¹ became popular and continued to spread within the military until it was banned in the third century by the Christian Emperor Constantine who maintained that it violated God's handiwork.

Centuries later the Anglo-Saxons continued to practice this ancient form of decoration as members of the nobility bore tattoos that, most commonly, displayed pledges of devotion to loved ones or had religious significance. [...] From the eighth through the tenth centuries, western tattooing was again banned by the Church as a form of devilry and because it disfigured the body created in God's image. (Sanders, Angus, 2008, p. 13)

What cannot be overlooked is that the name that designates men and women represented on stelae without any obvious depictions of tattoos is derived from the Latin word "picti" which initially appears in a panegyric written by Eumenius in 297² and is considered to refer to "painted or tattooed people" in Latin "pictus" meaning "painted", then confirmed in *Cronica de origine antiquorum*

¹ My addition to the original text.

² Arntzenius, Henricus Joannes; Arntzenius, Joannes (the Younger.); de La Baune, Jacques; Schwarz, Christian Gottlieb (1828). *Panegyrici Veteres Ex Editionibus Chr. G. Schwarzii Et Arntzeniorum Cum Notis Et Interpretatione* [reprinted from La Baune's Edition]/ *The Story of Chr. G. and Schwarzii Arntzeniorum and Macbeth. Interpretations, the old edition. Usum Delphini, Variis Lectionibus, Notis Variorum, Recensu Editionum Et Codicum Et Indicibus Locupletissimis Accurate Recensiti/ Dolphins, the Code.* London, p. 1291.

Pictorum (a medieval source probably dating from the thirteenth century, then compiled together with other documents in the manuscript Poppleton, in the fourteenth century) where we find the following statement:

„Picti propria lingua nomen habent a picto corpore; eo quod, aculeis ferreis cum atramento, variarum figurarum stingmate annotantur” which translated would read: “The Picts take their name in their own tongue from their painted bodies; this is because, using sharp iron tools and ink, they are marked by tattoos of various shapes.”¹

We can now accept a link between tattoos and sculptures in bas-relief, between the latter and the manuscript illumination in the Dark Ages, the formal link is easily recognized in the present interlaced decorations, both in the manuscript of Kells, the one in Durow or the one in Lindisfarne, interlacement found both in Roman mosaics or fabrics of the Copts, but also in Pictish monuments from Aberlemno, pertaining to class II, which give the name of so-called *Celtic knots*, decorative motif strongly speculated in contemporary tattoos.



Figure 17. Relevant Images for the Interlaced Decorative Model Used in the Illuminations of the Book of Kells

If the world's most tattooed man Lucky Diamond Rich can no longer provide a relevant image for the similarity between tattoos and illumination, it certainly is a great example of personified grotesque, like the woman designated as having the most piercings, Elaine Davidson.

¹ “The Picts take their name in their own tongue from their painted bodies; this is because, using sharp iron tools and ink, they are marked by tattoos of various shapes.” recovered from Daily Campello Art News, art critic and American artist F. Lennox Campello’ s blog



Figure 18. Lucky Diamond Rich, the World's Most Tattooed Man



Figure 19. Elaine Davidson, the woman designated as having the most piercings

And if even now the term grotesque does not appear as characteristic of those dealing with changing their body appearance today, it should be noted that the term grotesque in architecture refers to stone carved figures similar by their bizarre and monstrous appearance to those of the gargoyles with which they share the roofs of Gothic cathedrals, but different in lacking the utility as drain-spouts that only the latter have. Where is the connection to body modification art? The images speak for themselves advocating mental association between the two art forms and from the formal similarities, obvious at the sensory level, the meaning tendencies seem to sprout bearing witness to the power of subconscious accumulation which reverberates through the body limit transgressed in the process of asserting a shocking personality.

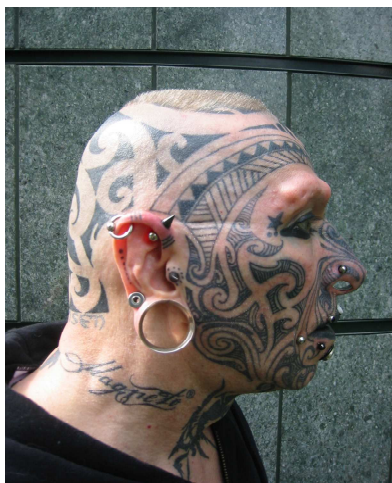


Figure 20. Grotesque human figure, resulting from body modification techniques including tattoo, body piercing and transdermal implants



Figure 21 Carved grotesque figure, on the cathedral Notre-Dame in Paris

What is the purpose of making an analogy between a specific form of medieval artistic expression and forms of art of Antiquity, Anti-Renaissance and Contemporaneity? Is there a constructive consequence of such an approach?

In the way we used it, the purpose of this analogy is to discourage the discussions on the artistic phenomenon crisis, a crisis obvious only in a discursive perception of art, resulting from the analysis of a single evolutionary line, of only one manifested level of reality, ignoring its other dimensions.

If we can give a definition of art, if we can circumscribe this phenomenon by counting, sorting and categorizing some of its effects which, for various reasons, are closest to us, then it becomes obvious that what lies outside these limits, subsumed to the non-artistic, will bring what we accept as artistic, through formal proliferation, through the abundance of manifestation, in a state of tension, overstraining the categorical limitation and, by this isolation, closer to death.

The extensive use of the term illumination in the analysis of grotesque may seem absurd to those who cannot see as obvious the resemblances between artistic creations of the different periods pointed in this exposition, but let us not forget that one characteristic of the grotesque is absurdity, an absurdity which can be assumed as a working method when breaking-out from under the influence of linear and discursive reason is intended. As the ever larger phenomenon of globalization produces in the human being the feeling of an inability to assume a single guideline of existence the attempt of a simultaneous, integrative perception of art, one coming from within, becomes more and more relevant.

Acknowledgments

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