

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Grotesque and the Gothic: From the Origins to Children's Literature**

As stated at the end of the first chapter, my aim in this investigation is to show that Burton's work could be seen as a remediation of a former tradition of grotesque and Gothic illustrations for children. I have identified this past tradition with the picturebooks realised by some illustrators who lived between the eighteenth and the twentieth century. As I shall better explain later on, I have decided to take into consideration those artists whose style is characterised by the presence of grotesque and Gothic elements, and whose illustrations – as I suggest – may have influenced Burton's work. Therefore, to fully understand in which ways Burton remediates all the previous tradition, it could be relevant to make an overview of the main features of the grotesque and the Gothic. However, before going into the details of this issue, an introductory statement is necessary. In this chapter the grotesque and the Gothic will be examined separately, so as to achieve a clearer picture. As a matter of fact, I do not conceive the grotesque and the Gothic as two distinct entities, if not for their origins, which are historically different. In the following paragraphs I hope to show that the grotesque and the Gothic have many elements in common. It may be argued that because of this reason they are complementary and that one often includes the other.

## 2.1 The Grotesque

"I suppose, Watson, we must look upon you as a man of letters," said he. "How do you define the word grotesque?"

"Strange – remarkable," I suggested.

He shook his head at my definition. "There is surely something more than that," said he; "some underlying suggestion of the tragic and the terrible."<sup>112</sup>

### 2.1.1 Etymology and Changes: From "disegni che hoggi chiamano grottesche"<sup>113</sup> to the Grotesque

Giving a precise and unambiguous definition of grotesque is a hard challenge because the meaning conveyed by this term has changed a lot over the centuries. Frances K. Barasch, in fact, observes that "in the course of five centuries, the word 'grotesque' has acquired a wide variety of meanings, many of which are still in use."<sup>114</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, in his ground-breaking study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, suggests that the grotesque could be considered as an aesthetic category because the term is used in connection with several different fields, from literature to the plastic arts, from music to dance and even a form of lettering.<sup>115</sup> Rita Swanepoel states that "grotesque" is a vague term, generally used in the context of artworks "to describe *inter alia* strange, ugly, fantastic, ridiculous yet frightening, demonic, absurd, distorted or unfamiliar shapes and forms."<sup>116</sup>

Looking up the word grotesque in an encyclopaedia or a dictionary, the risk is to remain puzzled. For example, for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* grotesque is a "fanciful mural or

---

<sup>112</sup> Conan Doyle, Arthur, "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge". *His Last Bow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>113</sup> Milanesi, Gaetano, *Documenti per la storia dell'arte senese*, Siena, Onorato Porri, 1854-1856, 3 vols., vol. 3, p. 9. The definition is found in a contract signed by Bernardino di Betto di Biagio, aka Pinturicchio (1454-1513).

<sup>114</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, The Hague, Mouton, 1971, p. 9.

<sup>115</sup> Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Translated by Ulrich Weisstein, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1963, (*Das Groteske: seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, Oldenburg und Hamburg, Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1957), p. 17.

<sup>116</sup> Swanepoel, Rita, "The Grotesque as It Appears in Western Art History and in Ian Marley's Creative Creatures", in *Literator*, 30(1), April 2009, pp. 31-53, p. 32.

sculptural decoration involving mixed animal, human, and plant forms",<sup>117</sup> while *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definitions of the term:

- A kind of decorative painting or sculpture, consisting of representations of portions of human and animal forms, fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers.
- A work of art in this style. Chiefly *pl.*, figures or designs in grotesque; in popular language, figures or designs characterized by comic distortion or exaggeration. The Italian form **grottesco** (*pl.* **grotteschi**) is sometimes used.
- A clown, buffoon, or merry-andrew.
- *Printing.* A square-cut letter without seriph, THUS; formerly called *stone-letter*.
- In a wider sense, of designs or forms: Characterized by distortion or unnatural combinations; fantastically extravagant; bizarre, † quaint. Also *transf.* of immaterial things, esp. of literary style.
- Of landscape: Romantic, picturesquely irregular.
- Ludicrous from incongruity; fantastically absurd.<sup>118</sup>

Maybe Frances S. Connelly is right when he says that "any attempt to define the grotesque is a contradiction in terms",<sup>119</sup> but is grotesque really such an "impossible subject"?<sup>120</sup> Before examining in details its main features and trying to formulate a possible definition, it could be useful to start from the only certain thing concerning grotesque, that is its etymology.

"Grotesque" comes from the Italian word *grotta*. In Italy, in fact, during the late fifteenth century, some archaeologists started to make excavations in Rome and in other parts of Italy. In Rome, in some rooms near the Baths of Titus,<sup>121</sup> they discovered

---

<sup>117</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "grotesque". <http://www.britannica.com/pros/lib/unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/246790/grotesque>. (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>118</sup> "grotesque, n. and adj.". OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/pros/lib/unimi.it/view/Entry/81794?rskey=O2cleS&result=1&isAdvanced=false>. (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>119</sup> Connelly, Frances S., ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>120</sup> Mc Elroy, Bernard, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, London, The MacMillan Press, 1989, p. ix.

<sup>121</sup> As noticed by Barasch, those rooms were parts of what is actually known as the golden house, *Domus Aurea*, of Nero. Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 17.

freestanding statues, sculptured fountains, coloured walls and frescoed ceilings. The paintings on those walls and ceilings were considered particularly interesting because they “were designed to please the fancy and the eye rather than to instruct the soul”,<sup>122</sup> and they started to be labelled as *grottesche*, from *grotta*, which means cave, underground cavern.



Figure 1 - Examples of wall paintings found in the *Domus Aurea*

---

<sup>122</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 18.



Figure 2 - Fresco details from the *Domus Aurea*

Actually, that denomination came from an accidental mistake. The rooms near the Baths of Titus were excavated below the ground level and, for that reason, archaeologists took them, mistakenly, for caves.<sup>123</sup> So the term *grottesche* was chosen to make reference to the place where the ancient paintings had been found. During the sixteenth century the word

---

<sup>123</sup> Connelly, Frances S., ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, cit., p. 5.

*grottesche* indicated not only the original paintings discovered near the Baths of Titus, but also their imitations. As observed by Kayser,

By the word *grottesco* the Renaissance, which used it to designate a specific ornamental style suggested by antiquity, understood not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one – a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid.<sup>124</sup>

As already pointed out, those paintings aroused a special interest because they represented something new in comparison with the artistic canon of the time. In the fifteenth century, in fact, there was a Vitruvian view of art. Vitruvius was an architect who lived during the reign of Augustus.<sup>125</sup> His idea of art was based on the concepts of symmetry, logic, respect for the laws of nature and proportion. During the fifteenth century Leon Battista Alberti diffused Vitruvian principles through his *De re aedificatoria* (1485).<sup>126</sup> According to Alberti, the most important principles to keep in mind were:

---

<sup>124</sup> Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, cit., p. 21.

<sup>125</sup> Vitruvius, in full Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (c. 80-70 BC-c. 15 BC), was a Roman architect, engineer, and author of the celebrated treatise *De architectura* (*On Architecture*), a handbook for Roman architects. It is divided into ten books dealing with city planning and architecture in general, building materials, temple construction and the use of the Greek orders, public and private buildings, floors and stucco decoration, hydraulics, clocks, mensuration, astronomy, civil and military engines. Vitruvius' outlook is essentially Hellenistic. His wish was to preserve the classical tradition in the design of temples and public buildings, and his prefaces to the separate books of his treatise contain many pessimistic remarks about the contemporary architecture. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Vitruvius". <http://www.britannica.com/pros/lib/unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/631310/Vitruvius> (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>126</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, (1404-1472), was an Italian humanist and architect. He received his mathematical training from his father, and soon he started to apply the principles of mathematics to the art of painting. At about ten years old he was sent to a boarding school in Padua and then he completed his formal education at the University of Bologna. In 1428 he received his doctorate in canon law. By 1432 he became secretary in the Papal Chancery in Rome and after a while he took the holy orders. This allowed him to dedicate himself to his real passions and interests, that is humanistic and technical writings. With his works, *Della famiglia* (*On the Family*, c1432), *On Painting* (1435), *De re aedificatoria* (*Ten Books on Architecture*, started in 1452), he gave a great contribution to philosophy, science and the arts. *De re aedificatoria* is particularly relevant because it is the result of his long study of Vitruvius. It was not a restored text of Vitruvius but a wholly new work, that won him his reputation as the "Florentine Vitruvius." It became a bible of Renaissance architecture, for it incorporated and made advances upon the engineering knowledge of antiquity, and it grounded the stylistic principles of classical art in a fully developed aesthetic theory of

that the universe was created in absolute mathematical harmony; that the universe was conceived as a perfect geometric form; and that its corresponding parts – the stars, the globe, the trees, man, all nature – were based on the circle, most perfect of geometric forms.<sup>127</sup>

Alberti and his followers believed that the proportions of a building and its ornaments had to respect certain absolute rules. This was very important, inasmuch as the fifteenth-century Vitruvian view was not only aesthetic, but also religious, since it saw God as the centre and circumference of a circular universe.

The earliest record of the word *grottesche*, in reference to art production, was a contract for some images that Pinturicchio<sup>128</sup> was to paint at Siena. In the contract, those paintings were defined as “disegni che hoggi chiamano grottesche”.<sup>129</sup>

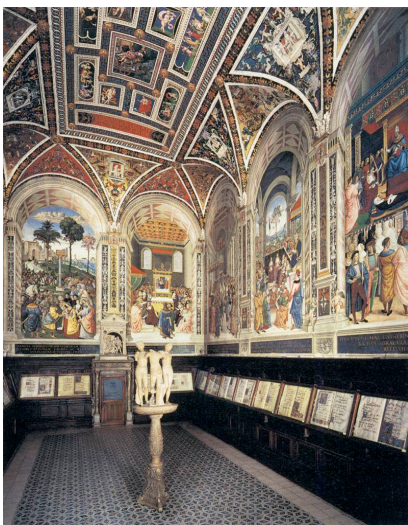


Figure 3 - View of the Piccolomini Library

---

proportionality and harmony. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Leon Battista Alberti”. <http://www.britannica.com/pros/lib/unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/12870/Leon-Battista-Alberti> (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>127</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>128</sup> Bernardino di Betto di Biagio, aka Pinturicchio (1454-1513), was an early Italian Renaissance painter known for his highly decorative frescoes. By 1481 Pinturicchio was associated with the Umbrian artist Perugino, whose influence on him was to be permanent. It is generally agreed that he assisted Perugino on some of the frescoes (“Journey of Moses” and the “Baptism of Christ”) in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican (1481/82). In the 1480s he worked in the Bufalini Chapel in Santa Maria in Aracœli and in Santa Maria del Popolo (both in Rome). Pinturicchio’s most important work of this period was the decoration of the suite of six rooms in the Vatican known as the Borgia Apartments for Pope Alexander VI between 1492 and 1494. Pinturicchio’s last major works were the 10 scenes from the life of Pope Pius II painted (1503-08) in fresco in the Piccolomini Library in Siena. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Pinturicchio”. <http://www.britannica.com/pros/lib/unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/461217/Pinturicchio> (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>129</sup> Milanese, Gaetano, *Documenti per la storia dell'arte senese*, cit., p. 9.



Figure 4 - Painted vault with grotesque designs in the Piccolomini Library

It is relevant to notice that “two main schools of thought regarding the grotesque existed simultaneously at this stage.”<sup>130</sup> Alberti’s ideas, in fact, had influenced a group of Renaissance humanists who condemned the unregulated, disproportioned, extravagant and fantastic style of grotesque ornamentation, and who considered the term grotesque as a synonym of anti-Vitruvianism.<sup>131</sup> The development of a different attitude towards the grotesque was influenced by Giorgio Vasari<sup>132</sup> who, in his *Lives* (1550 and 1568), used the

---

<sup>130</sup> Swanepoel, Rita, “The Grotesque as It Appears in Western Art History and in Ian Marley’s Creative Creatures”, in *Literator*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>131</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>132</sup> Giorgio Vasari, (1511-1574), was an Italian painter, architect, and writer who is best known for his important biographies of Italian Renaissance artists. As an artist Vasari was both studious and prolific. His painting is best represented by the fresco cycles in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and by the so-called 100-days fresco, which depicts scenes from the life of Pope Paul III, in the Cancelleria in Rome. Contemporary scholars regard Vasari more highly as an architect than as a painter. His best-known buildings are the Uffizi in Florence, begun in 1560 for Cosimo I de’ Medici, and the church, monastery, and palace created for the Cavalieri di San Stefano in Pisa. Vasari’s fame rests on his massive book *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* (1550, 2nd ed., 1568; *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 1850-52, trans. of the 2nd ed.), which was dedicated to Cosimo de’ Medici. In it Vasari offers his own critical history of Western art through several prefaces and a lengthy series of artist biographies. These discussions present three periods of artistic development: according to Vasari, the excellence of the art of classical antiquity was followed by a decline of quality during the Dark Ages, which was in turn reversed by a renaissance of the arts in Tuscany in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, initiated by Cimabue and Giotto and culminating in the works of Michelangelo. A second and much-enlarged edition of *Lives*, which added the biographies of a



term to label the new sculptural and architectural style which Michelangelo had created and which was characterised by some deliberate exaggerations and distortions, which Vasari admittedly praised.

During the sixteenth century, the grotesque spread from Italy to all the Western Europe, becoming "all-pervasive".<sup>133</sup> The features of the classical grotesque were to meet with the grotesque sculptures, gargoyles and objects of Gothic cathedrals – thus reconciling the unnatural images of Roman frescoes with the Northern tradition of fantastic images. In France, in fact, the term referred both to the ornamentations of Gothic cathedrals which characterised their walls and sculptures, and to tapestries, jewels, embroideries, utensils, fabrics and furniture. In Germany the word *groteschische* at first meant monstrous and it was also used to describe three major forms of ornamental arts – scrollwork,<sup>134</sup> arabesque<sup>135</sup> and mauresque<sup>136</sup> – associated with the Roman tradition and identified as grotesque.

---

number of artists then living, as well as Vasari's own autobiography, is now much better known than the first edition and has been widely translated. Vasari's work in *Lives* represents the first grandiose example of modern historiography and has proven to be hugely influential. The canon of Italian Renaissance artists he established in the book endures as the standard to this day. Moreover, the trajectory of art history he presented has formed the conceptual basis for Renaissance scholarship and continues to influence popular perceptions of the history of Western painting. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Giorgio Vasari". <http://www.britannica.com/pros.lib.unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/623661/GiorgioVasari>. (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>133</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>134</sup> In architecture and furniture design, use of curved elements suggesting such shapes as a sea wave, a vine, or a scroll of paper partly unrolled. In Classical architecture the main example is the volutes or spiral scrolls of an Ionic capital, which also appear less prominently in the Corinthian and Composite orders. On friezes a common device is the Vitruvian, or running dog, or wave, scroll. In the Early Gothic and Decorated periods of English architecture a type of scroll moulding resembling a scroll of paper again came into fashion, and it is this type that occurs in 19th-century Gothic Revival furniture. During the various Classical revivals, Greek and Roman types of scrollwork found their way into furniture design. An example is the scrolled, or "swan neck," pediment common in American 18th-century design. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "scrollwork". <http://www.britannica.com/pros.lib.unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/530062/scrollwork>. (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>135</sup> A decorative pattern consisting of flowing lines (typically of branches, leaves, and flowers) that scroll or interlace. "arabesque, n. and adj.". OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/pros.lib.unimi.it/view/Entry/10073?rskey=G2FbZa&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>136</sup> Also moresque. Arabesque ornament; an example of this. "Moresque, n. and adj.". OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/pros.lib.unimi.it/view/Entry/122203?redirectedFrom=moresque> (accessed February 28, 2014).

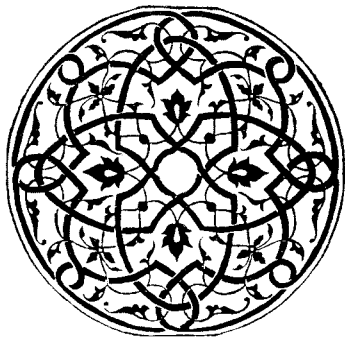


Figure 5 - Example of arabesque ornaments (XVI century)

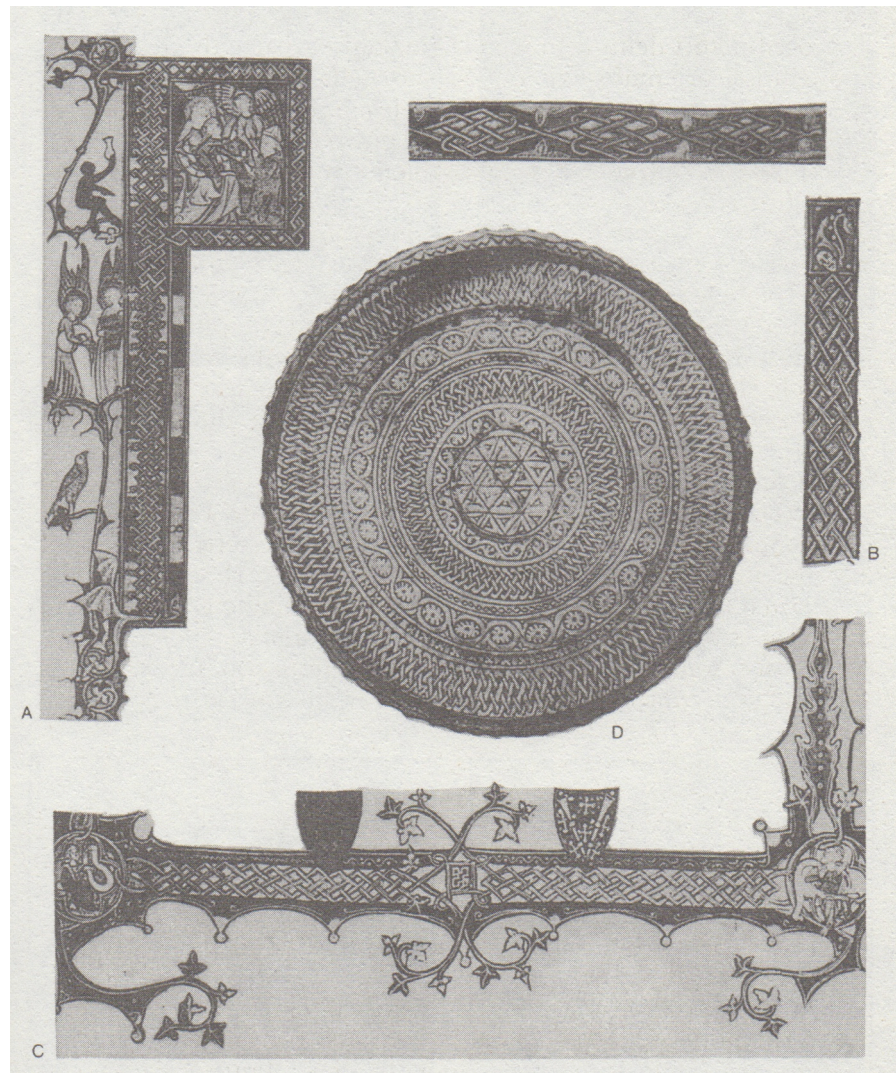


Figure 6 - Examples of Gothic and Islamic interlacements (XIV century)

*Grotteschische* was soon replaced by *Groteske* to indicate a mixing of human and animal forms in grotesque frescoes and sculptures, in which the monstrous was the distinguishing feature. However, in Germany the word was also used to designate the

*Grubengrotteschische*, a style of painting characterised by the representation of demons and goblins belonging to the Teutonic mythological tradition. The *Grubengrotteschische* spread from Germany to England, Italy and France, where it was known as *diablèrie*. According to Thomas Wright, demonology had its origins in the deserts of Egypt and it was linked to the history of the Egyptian monk St. Anthony. To escape from the temptations of the world, Anthony decided to give all his property to the poor and to retire into the desert of the Thebaid to live a life of strict asceticism. The evil one persecuted him to drive him back to the corruptions of worldly life. A series of demons started to appear to Anthony in the forms of the most ferocious animals. Wright notices that

the demons which tormented St. Anthony became the general type for subsequent creations, in which these first pictures were gradually, and in the sequel, greatly improved upon. St. Anthony's persecutors usually assumed the shapes of *bonâ fide* animals, but those of later stories took monstrous and grotesque forms, strange mixtures of the parts of different animals, and of others which never existed.<sup>137</sup>

In sixteenth-century England in place of grotesque we find the term 'anticke'. It was used to indicate demons and monsters to be found in engravings, "the skeletons who performed the dance of death"<sup>138</sup><sup>139</sup> and "the grinning skull of death itself".<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Wright, Thomas, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1875, rpt. by Elibron Classics in 2006, pp. 288-289.

<sup>138</sup> Pictures or sculptures in which "the dead appeared to be wildly dancing off with the living" were known as "Dance of Death". They had their origins in a thirteenth-century legendary story of an interview between three living and three dead men, which was usually told in French verse and appeared under the title of "Des trois vifs et des trois morts." Wright, Thomas, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, cit., p. 214.

<sup>139</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 7 - A detail from Basel's Dance of Death (c1440)

In England the word grotesque would also be applied to Gothic architecture, and particularly to external ornamentation. According to Rita Swanepoel, 'anticke' would be replaced by grotesque during the seventeenth century, when the linguist, translator and lexicographer John Florio<sup>141</sup> translated and explained the word *grotesca* as "antike, fretted or carved worke" in his *Queen Anna's New World of Words* (1611).<sup>142</sup> For the great part of the century, the term grotesque was used almost exclusively in the art field. Then, thanks

---

<sup>141</sup> John Florio, (c.1553-c.1625), was an English lexicographer and translator. Son of a Protestant refugee of Tuscan origin, Florio studied at Oxford. From 1604 to 1619 he was groom of the privy chamber to Queen Anne. In 1580 he translated, as *Navigations and Discoveries* (1580), Giovanni Battista Ramusio's account of the voyages of Jacques Cartier. *Florio His Firste Fruites* (1578), a grammar and a series of dialogues in Italian and English, was followed in 1591 by *Florio's Second Frutes* and by *Giardino di ricreatione*, a collection of more than 6,000 proverbs in Italian. His Italian-English dictionary, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) contains about 46,000 definitions. The second edition, *Queen Anna's New World of Words* (1611), was greatly enlarged. In 1603 Florio produced his major translation, the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne, which he revised in 1613. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s. v. "John Florio". <http://www.britannica.com/pros/lib/unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/210895/John-Florio>. (accessed February 28, 2014).

<sup>142</sup> Swanepoel, Rita, "The Grotesque as It Appears in Western Art History and in Ian Marley's Creative Creatures", in *Literator*, cit., p. 38.

to the influence of the works of Jacques Callot,<sup>143</sup> the word started to be also applied to the literary field. Callot was born in France, at Nancy, in 1592. His great passions for the art of drawing brought him in Italy to study and improve his skills. He introduced a new style of caricature, which his contemporaries labelled as grotesque and which took inspiration from the Germanic school of *diablèrie* and the Italian tradition of caricature. The subjects of Callot's plates and sketches were festivals, masquerades, sieges and wars and his aim was to ridicule the follies of the times through exaggerated characterisations of human types. Callot had many imitators in art and comic literature and his works became famous also in Italy and England. This brought to a change in the meaning of the word grotesque, which started to designate burlesque literature and characters similar to those sketched and etched by Callot. Grotesque became a synonym of ridiculous, burlesque, comique, bizarre, fantastic, and extravagant.<sup>144</sup> According to Kayser, this extension in the meaning of grotesque implied "a loss of substance", because it stressed the importance of its humorous and comic elements, neglecting its horrific and terrifying features.<sup>145</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> Jacques Callot, (1592-1635), was a French printmaker who was one of the first great artists to practice the graphic arts exclusively. His career was divided into an Italian period (c. 1609-21) and a Lorraine period (from 1621 until his death). He learned the technique of engraving under Philippe Thomassin in Rome. About 1612 he went to Florence. At that time the Medici patronage expended itself almost exclusively in *feste*, quasi-dramatic pageants, sometimes dealing in allegorical subjects, and Callot was employed to make pictorial records of these mannered, sophisticated entertainments. He succeeded in evolving a naturalistic style while preserving the artificiality of the occasion, organizing a composition as if it were a stage setting and reducing the figures to a tiny scale, each one indicated by the fewest possible strokes. This required a very fine etching technique. His breadth of observation, his lively figure style, and his skill in assembling a large, jostling crowd secured for his etchings a lasting popular influence all over Europe. Callot also had a genius for caricature and the grotesque. His series of plates of single or dual figures—for example, the *Balli di Sfessania* ("Dance of Sfessania"), the *Caprices of Various Figures*, and the *Hunchbacks*—are witty and picturesque and show a rare eye for factual detail. With a few exceptions, the subject matter of the etchings of the Lorraine period is less frivolous, and Callot was hardly employed at all by the court at Nancy. He illustrated religious books, made a series of plates of the Apostles, and visited Paris to etch animated maps of the sieges of La Rochelle and the Île de Ré. In his last great series of etchings, the "small" (1632) and the "large" (1633) *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*, he brought his documentary genius to bear on the atrocities of the Thirty Years' War. Callot is also well known for his landscape drawings in line and wash and for his quick figure studies in chalk. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Jacques Callot". <http://www.britannica.com/pros.lib.unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/90069/Jacques-Callot>. (accessed February 28, 2014). For more information about Callot see also Wright, Thomas, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, cit., pp. 300-311.

<sup>144</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., pp. 78-81.

<sup>145</sup> Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, cit., pp. 26-27.



*Figure 8 - Jacques Callot, Guitar Player (1616)*



*Figure 9 - Jacques Callot, The Temptation of Saint Anthony (1630)*

During the eighteenth century, as far as architecture was concerned, classical grotesque ornamentation started to be applied to the English style. "Foreign workmen helped extend grotesque ornamentation to all parts of the building, but what resulted was a native Gothic shell embellished by Italian taste."<sup>146</sup> Always in that period, the use of the term grotesque further developed in association with literature, thanks to the parallel spread of caricature. The term came from the Italian word *caricare* which meant to overload. In *The Dictionary of British Book Illustrators and Caricaturists 1800-1914*, Simon Houfe observes that caricature developed in Italy during the early baroque period:

Artists and sculptors had always interested themselves in the grotesque, Leonardo's heads are an example, and since the Renaissance had used emblems to make political or religious points in prints. But it was only with the painter Annibale Caracci, 1560-1609, that it came to be realised that the pithy exaggeration of the most striking features of a man, were often more true to life than a portrait. Caracci made rapid sketches that 'overloaded' the characteristics of his friends and dubbed them 'caricature'. He claimed 'to grasp the perfect deformity and thus reveal the very essence of a personality.'<sup>147</sup>

Thanks to the custom of the Grand Tour, caricature became popular also in England, where, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, there were three types of caricaturists: the amateur caricaturists, who made sketches for private circulation and occasionally had them published; the political and social caricaturists, who drew portraits and mirrored current events with a satirical purpose; the draughtsmen of types and characters.<sup>148</sup> The development of caricature affected the evolution of the term grotesque because those two styles were perceived as extremely similar. As far as this topic is concerned, Kayser makes reference to Christoph Martin Wieland's work *Unterredungen mit dem Pfarrer von \*\*\** (*Conversations with the Parson of \*\*\**; 1775). Here Wieland distinguishes between three types of caricature:

---

<sup>146</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 109.

<sup>147</sup> Houfe, Simon, *The Dictionary of British Book Illustrators and Caricaturists 1800-1914 - With Introductory Chapters on the Rise and Progress of the Art*, Woodbridge, Antique's Collectors' Club, 1978, p. 28.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-34.

1. True caricature, when the painter reproduces the natural distortions as he sees them;
2. Exaggerated caricature, when the painter decides to enhance the monstrosity of his subject, but, at the same time, he remains faithful to his model;
3. Purely fantastic caricature, which Wieland defines as grotesques in the proper sense, when the painter disregards verisimilitude and represents the unnatural and absurd products of his imagination in order to arise laughter, disgust and surprise.<sup>149</sup>

Thus, the development of caricature brought to another extension in the meaning of grotesque, which became synonymous with odd, unnatural, bizarre, strange, funny, and caricatural. Moreover, as noticed by Barasch, eighteenth-century “English taste was ‘romantic’, ‘Gothic’, and ‘grotesque’, and the writers of the period gave the public just what it wanted. Their poems and plays were full of false, unreal, fantastic and irrational events and sentiments.”<sup>150</sup>

Rita Swanepoel states that in the nineteenth century it was no longer possible to “describe the grotesque as peripheral to the visual arts.”<sup>151</sup> It was no longer possible to limit its use only to the literary field either. In *Victorian Babylon* Lynda Nead points out that in Victorian England images were considered particularly important because pictures could “convey knowledge in a universal language.”<sup>152</sup> Kate Flint adds that “the Victorians were fascinated with the act of seeing, with the question of the reliability – or otherwise – of the human eye, and with the problems of interpreting what they saw.”<sup>153</sup> Flint also notices that the development of the press, the improvement of printing technologies and the consequent diminishing costs of newsprint allowed a wide circulation of images, photographic or engraved. As a consequence, mass visual culture and its tools – printing technologies, optical inventions such as magic lanterns, kaleidoscopes and stereoscopes,

---

<sup>149</sup> Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>150</sup> Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, cit., p. 96.

<sup>151</sup> Swanepoel, Rita, “The Grotesque as It Appears in Western Art History and in Ian Marley’s Creative Creatures”, in *Literator*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>152</sup> Nead, Lynda, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 57.

<sup>153</sup> Flint, Kate, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 1.



peep-shows, and the spread and improvement of photography – provided the means for the unprecedented diffusion of grotesque images. The satirical magazine *Punch* is a typical example of Victorian mass-visual culture with a taste for grotesque caricature. That tendency further developed during Modernism, when “the grotesque and related topics such as the absurd, the alienated, the social satire and the tragicomic, became the appropriate manner of expression of a time characterised by change and uncertainty.”<sup>154</sup> It is more or less the same concept expressed by Bernard Mc Elroy in *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, where he states that modern grotesque “focuses on the unequal struggle between the self and such a hostile environment”.<sup>155</sup> This leads to contemporary grotesque, which, like sixteenth-century grotesque, is an “all-pervasive” term and phenomenon, insofar as it is used in connection with several different disciplines, ranging from the arts to aspects of everyday culture.

Having traced a brief history of the origin of the word grotesque and of its changes during the centuries, we can now proceed with a closer analysis of its main features.

### 2.1.2 What Do We Mean by Grotesque?: Main Features and Attempts of Definition

As stated at the beginning of the previous paragraph, giving a precise and unambiguous definition of the grotesque is quite difficult. The analysis of the etymology of the word grotesque and of its changes and meaning, as it gradually extended over the centuries, has certainly been useful to understand why this term has acquired today such a wide variety of significances. Although differing from each other, the following definitions are characterised by some recurring topics which are so strongly connected that sometimes one implies the other. I shall try to list these definitions according to the most frequent instances made by critical analysis.

- What grotesque is not;

---

<sup>154</sup> Swanepoel, Rita, “The Grotesque as It Appears in Western Art History and in Ian Marley’s Creative Creatures”, in *Literator*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>155</sup> Mc Elroy, Bernard, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, cit., p. 17.

- The grotesque as a continuum;
- The emblematic image of the *chimera*;
- The grotesque defined through its main features and through its effects on the readers/viewers;
- The concept of play.

The grotesque is often described by stating what it is not. "First let me say what the grotesque is not – it is not a genre",<sup>156</sup> writes Andrew Casson, and, in *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, Bernard Mc Elroy observes that one of the great difficulties in defining the grotesque is due to the fact that this term does not indicate a genre, a school or an artistic theory. According to him, the grotesque is a sort of continuum; this is the same notion expressed by Rita Swanepoel when she says that the grotesque is not "a fixed concept but a fluid one".<sup>157</sup> Mc Elroy also states that

The source of the grotesque in art and literature is man's capacity for finding a unique and powerful fascination on the monstrous. The psychic reasons for this proclivity are far from clear, but the proclivity itself has left its mark on a variety of cultures, from the most primitive societies to the most sophisticated. From ice-age cave paintings to modern films, from shaman costumes and devil masks to the painting of Dali and Picasso, from folk stories and fairy tales to the writings of Kafka, the transmutation of men, beasts, devils and chimeras have made their bizarre progress, constantly changing with the world-views of the cultures which produced them, yet still retaining the essential qualities by which we may attempt to designate them as grotesques.<sup>158</sup>

This concept is emphasized by Frances Connelly, who notices that "the grotesque is culturally relative, and the notion of what constitutes the grotesque can vary from one

---

<sup>156</sup> Casson, Andrew, *Funny Bodies: Transgressional and Grotesque Humour in English Children's Literature*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Stockholm University, 1997, p. 22.

<sup>157</sup> Swanepoel, Rita, "The Grotesque as It Appears in Western Art History and in Ian Marley's Creative Creatures", in *Literator*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>158</sup> Mc Elroy, Bernard, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, cit., p. 1.

culture or era to another.”<sup>159</sup> Also because of this, the possible variations and combinations of the grotesque are limitless.<sup>160</sup>

As pointed out by Rita Swanepoel, during the Renaissance *grotteschi* were also called monsters or chimeras;<sup>161</sup> especially in architecture the word *chimera* indicated any grotesque, fantastic or imaginary beast used in decoration. Actually, if we would like to visually represent the grotesque, perhaps the image of the chimera would be the most appropriate. In Greek mythology Chimera was

a fire-breathing female monster resembling a lion in the forepart, a goat in the middle, and a dragon behind. She devastated Caria and Lycia until she was slain by Bellerophon. In art the Chimera is usually represented as a lion with a goat's head in the middle of its back and with a tail that ends in a snake's head.<sup>162</sup>



Figure 10 - A representation of Chimera (ca 350-340 BC)

<sup>159</sup> Connelly, Frances S., *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>160</sup> Connelly, Frances S., ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>161</sup> Swanepoel, Rita, "The Grotesque as It Appears in Western Art History and in Ian Marley's Creative Creatures", in *Literator*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>162</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Chimera". <http://www.britannica.com/pros/lib/unimi.it/EBchecked/topic/111597/Chimera> (accessed February 28, 2014).

In effect, many critics see the grotesque as a whole made up by clashing features. Philip Thomson, for example, defines the grotesque as an “ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence.”<sup>163</sup> Thomson identifies the most important feature of the grotesque with the “copresence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable.”<sup>164</sup> Actually, John Ruskin had already given a similar definition of the grotesque in *The Stones of Venice*. In the chapter dedicated to “Grotesque Renaissance” in fact, he says: “First, then, it seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; [...]”<sup>165</sup> Casson suggests that the main feature of the grotesque could be found in “the junction of two fields of tension: those between the real and the fantastic on the one hand and between the comic and the horrible on the other.”<sup>166</sup> This tension, due to the coexistence of contrasting elements, can be totally perceived only when there is a response, because, as observed by Kayser, the grotesque “is experienced only in the act of reception.”<sup>167</sup> In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Kayser explains that the word grotesque applies to the creative process, the work of art itself and its reception. As far as the creative process is concerned, it could be relevant to make once again reference to Mc Elroy's *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. According to Mc Elroy, in fact,

The artist of the grotesque does not merely combine disparate forms or distort surfaces. He creates a context in which such distortion is possible, an implied world where men can and do find themselves metamorphosed into vermin, where playing a child's tin drum can and does have magical efficacy. This, then, is the first quality of the special kind of terror that discharges itself in images of the grotesque: it is primitive, magical, uncanny. The grotesque transforms the world from what we 'know' it to be to what we fear it might be.<sup>168</sup>

---

<sup>163</sup> Thomson, Philip, *The Grotesque*, London, Methuen and Co., 1972, p. 11.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>165</sup> Ruskin, John, *The Stones of Venice*, London, J.M. Dent, 19.., 3 vols., vol. 3, p. 115.

<sup>166</sup> Casson, Andrew, *Funny Bodies: Transgressional and Grotesque Humour in English Children's Literature*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>167</sup> Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, cit., p. 181.

<sup>168</sup> Mc Elroy, Bernard, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, cit., p. 5.

Whenever “something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing”,<sup>169</sup> whenever we are in doubt “as to whether to laugh or to be afraid, whether to interpret the phenomenon before us as belonging to a real world of our senses or to some fantastic world beyond their reach”,<sup>170</sup> then there is the grotesque. “The grotesque the estranged world”,<sup>171</sup> an alienated world which is no longer reliable and in which we are unable to orient ourselves because it is absurd. Kayser defines the grotesque as a “play with the absurd”<sup>172</sup> made to try to “invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world.”<sup>173</sup>

Kayser is not the only one to associate the grotesque with the notion of play. In *Rabelais and His World*, in fact, Mikhail Bakhtin enhances this connection by associating the grotesque with the carnivalesque. Bakhtin starts his study of Rabelais' work stating that it has its roots in the popular culture. Therefore, to really understand Rabelais, it is necessary to explore the tradition of folk culture. According to Bakhtin, the main manifestations of this folk culture are: “1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the market-place. 2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular. 3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons.”<sup>174</sup> These three forms of folk culture are closely linked and in a sense each one generates the other. At the beginning of his study, Bakhtin especially focuses on the carnival and its subversive rituals, because this is one of the most important features in Rabelais's works. This feature he defines with the term “carnavalesque”.

Carnival festivities played an important role in the life of medieval European men because they were in contrast with the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political cult forms and ceremonials. For Bakhtin carnival embodies the community since it is not

---

<sup>169</sup> Thomson, Philip, *The Grotesque*, cit., p. 59.

<sup>170</sup> Casson, Andrew, *Funny Bodies: Transgression and Grotesque Humour in English Children's Literature*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>171</sup> Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, cit., p. 185.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>174</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, Translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1984, (*Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable*, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1965), p. 5.

“a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.”<sup>175</sup> Moreover,

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the mediaeval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The Utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival a special type of communication impossible in everyday life.<sup>176</sup>

Carnival, with its ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various forms of rude language, is characterised by grotesque realism, whose essential principle is “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal and abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”<sup>177</sup> For this reason, grotesque realism is connected with the grotesque body, which is “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and

---

<sup>175</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world.”<sup>178</sup> Consequently, also in Bakhtin we find the idea of the grotesque as a continuum. To conclude this overview of Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque, it is possible to state that during the Carnival period the world is turned upside down, thus becoming an estranged world. The difference between Bakhtin's grotesque and Casson and Kayser's grotesque is that the alienated world conceived by Bakhtin does not arouse fear because during the Carnival “people play with terror and laugh at it.”<sup>179</sup>

I conclude by suggesting that all the definitions and the descriptions of the grotesque so far analysed show that, as stated by Frances Connelly,

the grotesque is best understood by what it does, not what it is. It is an action, not a thing – more like a verb than a noun. [...] Grotesques come into being by rupturing cultural boundaries, compromising and contradicting what is “known” or what is “proper” or “normal”.<sup>180</sup>

Thus, having compared different definitions and descriptions of the grotesque, and having tried to identify its most important features, I shall now proceed to the detailed analysis of the Gothic.

---

<sup>178</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 317.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>180</sup> Connelly, Frances S., *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*, cit., p. 2.