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## Grotesque Possible Worlds

### Introduction

Trying to keep pace with civilizational change, a variety of worldviews, rapid information exchange in the world of culture, and a multitude of ways of thinking about humanity in art and philosophy, contemporary research yields to the temptation of specialization and selection. To make such a functionalization possible, it is necessary to make precise divisions. However, there is a certain category of notions that resists such a biopsy, and they have to be analyzed against a broader background, the epistemic horizon of which outlines humanity. The grotesque is an illustrative example. There is no general consensus about its etiology or status in various works of art. It is difficult, indeed, to determine what is and what is not grotesque, if we lack agreement about the nature of "grotesqueness"<sup>1</sup>. Is it a comic phenomenon, a philosophical approach, or, perhaps, a representation of subconscious fear?

Some humanist notions are worth special attention, and, as they are based on specialized techniques, e.g. those drawn from literary studies, they need special treatment. Such a holistic approach, connecting the knowledge, devices, and experience of aesthetics, cultural anthropology, philosophy of language, art history, theory of literature etc., appears an appropriate and justified way of thinking in humanist research. Ernst Cassirer once said:

"No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. His situation is the same in the theoretical as in the practical sphere"(43).

<sup>1</sup> A connotation with an ancient Greek *hiereus* comes to my mind. The *hiereus* functioned as a priest responsible for slaughtering sacrificial animals. First, he removed the liver and decided if the animal was healthy or not. Only then did the meat reach the market or become a sacrifice. Not all the parts were suitable for eating: the posterior parts (unclean, unworthy) were unfit for eating because a residue of posthumous contractions suggested that the rest of life strives for survival. They were basted with fat and burnt as a sacrifice. The institution of *hiereus* – consolidated in all Greek *oikumena* – has survived in a perfect shape, but nowadays it manifests itself in other spheres (e.g. in scientific attitudes).

However, in order to confront this reality, one has to first scrutinize oneself, submit oneself to self-integration in various spheres – let us say – of one's inner life (which a postmodern human constantly suppresses), and then search for a direct attitude towards reality. Self-cognition and exegesis of so-called long-term units, but also encountering the Other would be, in my opinion, the most effective weapon against the dispossession of human subjectivity during the battle with contemporary reality, which offers us culture-like, extracted preparations, instead of a positive plan.

## **Laughter Accused – Judgements and Intuitions<sup>2</sup>**

According to Wolfgang Kayser, the grotesque can be approached from three different angles: from the perspective of the creative process, of the work itself, and of its reception. Kayser takes up the third one, as, in his opinion, it best captures the essence of the grotesque. The whole picture of the phenomenon becomes apparent only on the level of reception (on the basis of both individual and cultural competences). The dominant features of a grotesque work are: monstrosity, its fairy-tale character, abruptness, surprise, and mystery. Its essence is the fear of life, not death. A contemporary version of those features is the fear of destruction of civilization and culture, the disintegration of the notion of subjectivity, the devastation of characteristics of the categories of subjects and objects, and their final aberration in the artistic concept. Such a destructive world is the world of undermined corporeality and absurdity; in short, the world alienated ("an alien and inhuman spirit [which] had entered the soul") (Kayser 184) to such an extent that the author of a grotesque text should not try to make it meaningful. Every direction would weaken the effect of the shock present on numerous levels, e.g. in the individual, in the historical perspective, in philosophical inquiries – mainly concerning metaphysics and ontology. The unfamiliar world is supposed to be the state of insensibility, a quasi-narcotic projection from a nightmare, which is the more frightening the more it imitates half-sleep and reality.

The grotesque, understood in this way, becomes a weapon in the human battle with anything that is inhuman. Apart from its fantastic character, it gains a pragmatic aspect – it breaks the spell of the unfamiliar world; all human fears (both existential and eschatological) become ridiculed because they are forced into the world of objects. The aim of the grotesque is not to care about its recipient's good humor. On the contrary, it is about the "effect of a secret liberation" which could inspire the receiver to search for the answer to questions of a deeply philosophical nature. Any artistic work following

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<sup>2</sup> In the following essay, I refer to three already classic texts (W. Kayser's, J. Onimus', and B. McElroy's) for pragmatic reasons. They include the most common opinions on the grotesque; in a cross-sectional sense, they are a representative source of assumptions and try to establish a theoretical consensus within the contemporary humanities. They are used as a starting point for a typological and poetological discussion.

such a poetics (or strategy) is therefore – according to Kayser – the art of maieutics (a dialectic challenge issued to the audience). That is the reason why in a grotesque work of art the author should strike a balance between a dream and reality, between madness and probability.

According to Jean Onimus, any example of the grotesque exhibits a deeply critical state of consciousness, a specific way of perceiving reality, in which there is no space for idealism or *a priori* authorities. If, for Kayser, the grotesque meant breaking the spell cast on the immaterial world, for Onimus it is a device used to expose reality; it is a way to discover the essence itself. The grotesque is a state of reflection upon human life, but also a state of artistic contemplation. Onimus presents precisely the essence of the grotesque, and defines it as a counterpoint to consciousness, which has a “metaphysical vocation”.

In his opinion, the reasons behind the grotesque may originate in states of primeval consciousness and perception or religiousness – then they are apotropaic structures, and they connect various motifs, drawings, symbolic pictures constructed to scare demons off. Those could be artistically disinterested emblems, e.g. mascarons or caricatural highlights used to expose “the commonplace”. Grotesque laughter is – according to Onimus – detached, cynical, cruel, and terrorizing. Onimus makes a distinction different from Kayser’s: the fantastic puts us into the state of a daydream and visionary melancholy, whereas the grotesque amuses, transfixes, and provokes distance in our consciousness.

The state of the grotesque (we are still setting out Onimus’s beliefs) is the kingdom of chaos, the most accurate image of which is the persona of the jester. He has the power of free speech, is spontaneous, and for philosophers he is the embodiment of wisdom. However, the freedom is only apparent. His outfit is a uniform and his spontaneity is a banishment to the margins. He is a stranger outside the community. He is situated beyond social relations and hierarchy. The wise man and the king’s adviser becomes a toy. A similar position is occupied by the clown. He embodies the tragicomedy of being, and he personifies life on the border of various states. His existence is a stage gesture, an echo in the vacuum. The clown’s aim is to amuse the audience, but the more successful he is, the more tragic his fate becomes: he is the personification of this ambivalence. As a destroyer, he becomes the expression of the life force and good fun. He illustrates the battle between nothingness and the absolute. Instead of amusing us, the jester destroys our everyday life, our social masks, our being in the world; by his existence, he deconstructs his Me-functioning in Us-circulation.

Bernard McElroy, in turn, finds the origins of the grotesque (which evolved in culture, in tandem with general changes in worldview) in a “fascination in the monstrous”. He also realizes a series of methodological complications connected with using

the grotesque. It is, strictly speaking, a type of ornamental art using the link between human and animal features; in other words, it is inappropriateness, disproportion, bad taste. What is more, it is defined as something bizarre, macabre, fantastic, uncanny, gothic, which further complicates attempts at establishing terminological distinctions. According to McElroy, the grotesque is a certain continuum or a quality which affects various works of art regardless of their subject matter. The grotesque is, in his opinion, a device used in art with varying expressive intensity.

McElroy offers a classification of opinions on the grotesque<sup>3</sup>. In his view, associating it with a game (the former in carnivalesque, the latter in a game with the absurd), Bakhtin and Kayser are wrong. He synthesizes two main concepts revolving around fear: (1) Ruskin's claim that fear originates in the realization of the destructive powers and the existence of death, and (2) Freud's concept of fear as a reaction to the feedback of primary awareness. According to the first theory, the grotesque is a state of the human condition in general; according to the other, it is a state of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) induced by human "vestiges of animistic mental activity". Freud means blurred boundaries between "infantilism" and "primeval nature", and between what is animistic and what is human. As a result of the fusion of reality and primeval perception, the grotesque and our reaction to it in life and art lead to the feeling of the uncanny.

The context for the grotesque is the magical world or the world of our hidden fears. The real world is the reference point or the centre of tensions between rationalism and primeval nature. The grotesque has a visual, evocative character; therefore, physicalization is one of the main ways in which it is expressed. It demonstrates the "animalism and corporeal degradation" of any physicality, tells the story of the existential experience of human, animal, and anthropomorphic form; it is determined by a fear of the mysterious and opposed to nature.

According to this opinion, grotesque art is a synthesis of magic, animalism, and play that originates from the intuitive perception of the world as something fearsome. That world is foreign, oppressive; it stifles the individual; it manipulates values and dehumanizes. That is the reason why the contemporary grotesque first disposes of the conflict between the individual and the institution (understood as the scientific-technological or social-economic system), and why the most frequent theme of such representations is dominance/submissiveness (using caricature, satire, allegoric unmasking). According to McElroy, the centre of the contemporary grotesque is occupied by the human being not alienated, but humiliated; that is why it is not of an infernal nature.

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<sup>3</sup> A point of reference for this claim is Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, in which he states that an excited mind verges on horror.

There is no established consensus as to the comic provenance of the grotesque: does it belong to the comic? Or is it its primeval category? Or should we treat these two as totally separate notions? In my opinion, mixing the grotesque and terror is a mistake, as mixing the comic with the absurd and irony is. Such measures are taken in various fields of art or in literary genres such as mysteries (*tremendum*) or *commedia dell'arte* and in cabaret. Mixing means of expression, the existence of which in a work of art was based on a variational method of changing dominant features, was used deliberately to achieve the "surprise-reflection" effect. However, we can invariably assume that humour is an extreme notion; therefore, it connects various states of human condition as a light beam combines primary colours, which can be seen only after decomposition. The balance between polarization and focal interests me in particular<sup>4</sup>.

### Topography of the Grotesque

The grotesque evolved and expanded in tandem with the sublimation of modes of illustration, improved semantic means of expression and the increase in conventions: from phantasmagoric drawings, which situated it in caves, to its contemporary multi-conventional version (a combination of various aspects of art: aesthetic, ideological, etc.) occurring in different forms of art (film, literature, theater, music). For the sake of this essay, the literary grotesque will be the most interesting, as – according to Głowiński – the grotesque is not only "a peculiar artistic solution or artistic procedure", but "a more or less distinctive conception of the world and a set of values" (7).

The difficulties with the theory and functionality of the grotesque in a literary work come from a terminological instability. As I have mentioned before, the grotesque belongs to an interdisciplinary field of the humanities, and it will be treated so. Therefore, in order to combat methodological impasse, the grotesque will be divided in terms of motivations and thematic spheres: (1) mythic-chthonic; (2) pragmatic-metaphysical; (3) epistropheic; (4) catastrophic; and on account of its structure and composition: aleatoric and syncretic.

Firstly, we can talk about a (1) mythic-chthonic grotesque, or its most primeval form, which includes plant-animal pictures or motifs. Its roots, its attitude towards nature,

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<sup>4</sup> Although humor has acquired a generic tissue, it has retained its primary and pre-notional, exuberant character. It is based on an existential experience; it refers to emotions, feelings, sensitivity and imagination, which makes it a spontaneous utterance of the subject. It keeps its identity because it escapes all classifications and remains beyond formal constraints of description. At the same time, it is specifically human. A sense of humor is determined by human nature. As a critical notion, humor is a space for manifestation of the values, the primary quality of which is, first, dialectical agitation, as particles drifting in suspension, then, relative stability, but the key moment is the recognition of qualities by the perceiving subject and the assigning to it of a proper charge in the ontic, esthetic, ethical etc. sense. Participation (active) of the subject in this critical notion leads to establishing those qualities, and is given as a kind of direct existential experience in which "fire joins water".

and its thanatic instincts (*zum Tode*) can be found in early beliefs. It is an attempt at ordering events and situations in reality, the first form of cosmogony and theogony. According to Cirlot, the grotesque is a kind of ornament used by Romans, popular from the fifteenth century onwards, especially in the Plateresque style. Some elements of that style originate from Gnosticism, often using symbolic pictures (e.g. in emblems). Thus, whatever expresses existence in its entangled richness is grotesque<sup>5</sup>.

In my view, Cirlot's opinion simplifies the issue and needs further elaboration. The grotesque that is based upon myths and beliefs, is a source of the grotesque or, in other words, a *fons iuventutis* of its other types. Its aim was indeed to record beliefs, fears, speculations, and perceptions of primitive people. Thus this type of grotesque can be analyzed as a certain base or a testimony: the first signature in a pictographic code<sup>6</sup>. This type of grotesque could be also analyzed in terms of recording the beginnings of religious systems and forming basic rules prevailing in primitive communities.

The second register of the grotesque is (2) a pragmatic-metaphysical sphere. If the aim of the first type was to record beliefs and social rules in a certain sign system, the pragmatic-metaphysical refers to the qualities of a certain way of thinking or believing: a ready philosophical, ethical, or religious system. Its dominant features are visionariness, impressiveness, symbolic character, and the language of the strangest metaphors using terror, contrast, and conscious kitsch. In lyric, it is the poetics of the mask, animalization, anthropomorphism, the gradual build-up of suspense through gradation, inversions, intonation, stress, accumulation of onomatopoeic words, and consonantal clusters.

It was Józef Baka who excelled at this type of grotesque, especially using syncretic composition. The quality of his discourse was polemic passion (also with regard to the genres of the epoch) and the very specific kind of preaching that he devoted himself to.

Such late Baroque Jesuit poetry continues the rich grotesque tradition of "black carnival" deeply rooted in the medieval "culture of laughter"<sup>7</sup> and is a detailed recording of culture and customs (dresses, aphorisms). The poet consequently follows

<sup>5</sup> See Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, 1971. Entries: grotesque, jester, symbol, chaos, orgy, Saturn, dummy, demons of chthonian cults, evolution and involution, bizarreness. It is an intriguing version of a dictionary, as apart from the interest in cultural anthropology, religious studies and philosophy, the author is also an author).

<sup>6</sup> According to Harold Bayley, in the grotesque the following motifs, characters, symbols, and props have appeared: phoenixes, swans, rams, winged snakes, dragons, gardens, flowers and plants, creepers, grapevines, trees, crosses, lilies, caduceuses, studs, masks, ladders, trophies, plaitings and knots, shields, white weapon, cups, twins, goddesses of fertility, and caryatids. We can add to this list a number of mythological and supernatural animals and creatures, such as tritons, hydras, scyllas, chimeras, furies, lamias, sea devils, phantoms, vampires, zombies, owls, bats, wizards, witches, devils, water nymphs, ruins, tombs, worms, dolls, skeletons, parts of the body, Zodiac signs, runes, etc. The list could be longer, but let us stop at this point.

<sup>7</sup> The term was coined by Bakhtin in his famous work on Rabelais.

the *teatrum mundi* topos, in which characters, regardless of their social status and wealth, face death, old age, illnesses, solitude, and hopelessness. It is a poetry of a high order: its linguistic uniqueness is immediately recognizable. It is compulsive, monotonous, and emblematic of experiment and innovation; the poetry irritates with its mechanicalness, ambivalence, perfection, and obsession.

Antoni Czyż defines Baka's poems as a parody of rhetoric. It is not only a parody of rhetoric, but also a rhetoric that dispenses with the luxury and the pleasure of words. In order to be effective, it strives after an economy of language. The model of paraenetic literature has been reversed: the aesthetic shock is still didactic; it is a specific kind of morality art (Czyż 92).

Contrary to appearances, it is not catastrophe poetry either. Its images are supposed to induce a sense of excessive atrocity, which means transporting the audience from ugliness to beauty, and from beauty to God and salvation. Baka created a poetics of excess and self-conscious kitsch, thus satisfying the necessities of his times. As Antoni Czyż notices, the poet creates the image of a "totalitarian world" to shock the world, which constantly turns to evil, whether out of sheer contrariness or for meagre benefit. Thanks to the specific *negative* theology, it takes us to an examination of conscience and expiation. This internal dynamism is consequently covered by the "mechanics of existence" and the theatre of conventions, which evolve into convulsive jiggling, sardonic laughter, and panic fear. Dread is supposed to liberate us from who we are on the outside (for the world and towards it) and to save our souls.

Hence, the grotesque is not dependent on dread, which is only one device used to turn our reflections to the perception of the world and ourselves. Other techniques are conscious kitsch, pure nonsense, irony and contrast. The difficulty in making a clear distinction between the grotesque and dread, in my opinion, consists in insufficient definitions of notions such as the atmosphere or tone of a piece of art (which Emil Staiger called for in his art of interpretation). The grotesque juxtaposes in our memory and imagination the worlds from Roland Topor's *The Tenant*, *The Hermit* by Eugène Ionesco, images from Musil's and Kafka's works (the worlds of intimate privacy and claustrophobia, the sadomasochism of the characters from *The Confusions of Young Törless*), and Elfride Jelinek's gutted heroes; it also brings to mind the enlargements and reduced size of the world on different levels from paintings by Magritte and literature by Gombrowicz.

The third sphere of influence is (3) an epistrophaic sphere (from Greek *epistrophe* – "turning about"). The main aim of the second form was to turn to consolidated worldview systems. The aim of the epistrophaic grotesque, in turn, was the individual

and a revolution in the way of thinking about values, which we could express by *parte contra totum*. This is the field of an activating subject that consciously distances itself from great cultural factors such as society, institutions, religions etc.; it entails a renewed interest in the self-perception of the subject. The contrastive and key reference point is the subject/individual and his opposition to oppression by “social institutions”. Thus, a representative for this type of grotesque attitude in literature will be a new fresh approach to language, conceptualism, deconstruction of the culture-forming myth, symbol, topoi, and attitudes (understood as an oppressive device constraining an individual or as a cultural “script”, which is unintentionally carried out as a pattern). Such a withdrawal from the order of reality is based on a revision of the world image undertaken by the subject. I understand the revision not as an introverted withdrawal into oneself, but as a sort of *epochē* (ἐποχή). To the grotesque world, this would mean the suspension of judgement, a sceptical and critical attitude towards reality, treated as something given, in reference to its “transparency”; also, towards the rules governing the world, institutions, social relations, etc. Thus, it would mean the disapproval of perceptive passiveness.

The negative reception of the grotesque might be compared to agoraphobia understood here as the lack of framework for humanity, or a dismissal not only from an ordered and consolidated world, but also from humanity. In the long run, such an observation leads to a shock – at the moment when the paradox of being is realized – facing a life image whose meaning would be to fill oneself with schematic content, imposed on us, the necessity of constant making sense, playing roles, filling oneself with the world; all this in view of the final truth of death<sup>8</sup>.

Notions of chaos and paradox, which form a negative image of this type of grotesque, are a part of a dialectic and dramatic cognitive process; they are directed by despair, understood in a Kierkegaardian fashion, to hypostasis in a metaphysical sense (which leads to the contemplation of the subject) or to transcendence-oriented hypostasis. The latter is a kind of structuralization or balancing and merging of *scientia* (rational approach) and *sapientia* (wisdom approach).

“Despair, just because it is wholly dialectical, is in fact the sickness of which it holds that it is the greatest misfortune not to have had it – the true good hap to get it, although it is the most dangerous sickness of all, if one does not wish to be healed of it” (Kierkegaard 20).

I understand this Kierkegaardian despair as a figure of hypostasis because it is a critical one, and so sums up the most ambiguous of human experiences. Thus, the abovementioned notions are formally a device used to develop the *contrafactum*

<sup>8</sup> The recurrent motif of a mother giving birth in a grave perfectly well exemplifies the paradox of life-energy and hopelessness in the face of death. This topos is created by the reduction or destruction of the temporal relation of human life to birth or death.



of a literary text. The greatest examples of this technique are Witold Gombrowicz's *Porografia* and *Ferdynand*, Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Szewcy*, *Nienasycenie*, and *Nowe Wyzwoleńie*, Bruno Schulz's *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydrą*, and Sławomir Mrożek's *Emigranci* and *Tango*.

One of compositional strategies used in the epistropheic grotesque is the so-called aleatoric style, which in music denotes a consciously indeterminate element of a composition that is left to chance or a random order of musical segments, as in a dice game. Both the former (polyphonic-variational) and the latter (aleatoric) methods of composing texts seem very productive, e.g. in morphological research into the structure of the grotesque – a specific system that is independent of generic conventions and that is a structurally open form carrying various semantic versions. Such a writing strategy – “multifaceted singularities” of form and content – can be found in Gombrowicz. His techniques are echoed in the language, which becomes, we might say, a polytropic quality and passion<sup>9</sup>.

A philosopher whose way of thinking about the world might be similar to Gombrowicz's is Max Stirner. Both writers are marked by individualism, critical mistrust, not to say anarchy. Stirner was looking for the human natural habitat beyond the republic. Any social structures, which incapacitate an individual, are unnatural, harmful and should be annihilated. It is generally believed among philosophers that Stirner's strong aspiration to self-creation and his struggle for over identity foreshadowed existentialism. In his works, we can find harbingers of the consciousness we see in Gombrowicz:

“I on my part start from a presupposition in presupposing myself; but my presupposition does not struggle for its perfection like “Man struggling for his perfection”, but only serves me to enjoy it and consume it. I consume my presupposition, and nothing else, and exist only in consuming it (...) I do not presuppose myself, because I am every moment just positing or creating myself, and I am only by being not presupposed but posited, and, again, posited only in the moment when I posit myself; i.e., I am creator and creature in one” (Stirner 83).

Another aspect of the grotesque world is the concept of the artist as an anti-artist. It is a well-known fact that Gombrowicz highly valued polemics, especially polemics with form:

“I attack Polish form because it is my form, because all of my works desire to be... a revision of the modern man in relation to form, to form which is not a result of him but which is formed “between” people... I feel that art should maintain a distance from slogans and look for its own, more personal, paths” (Gombrowicz 16).

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<sup>9</sup> Polytropos – multifacedness – is a word frequently used to describe Odysseus.

The artistic attitude Gombrowicz used to fight with “Polishness”, artists, Europeanism, customs, might be compared to that of another contemporary artist Yves Klein. If Gombrowicz aimed at “exploding the situation”, “compromising form”, and “liberating cacophony”, Klein’s obsession was the relationships between the material and immaterial world. They both tended to theorize their works: e.g. he used to say that his works are only “the ashes of his art”. By means of cosmic symbols and elements (fire, water, and wind), other experiments with image (in the *Anthropométries* series, he used human bodies to paint: the mechanical act of painting is skipped, which makes the work and the act of creation almost a sterile artistic gesture), and experiments with sound (“Monotone Symphony” – a 40-minute piece constituted of a single sound), he tried to “materialize what was immaterial” and vice versa, or to catch time.

Gombrowicz’s inclination to scandalize and to shock aesthetically brings to mind other artists contesting the common concept of man and the artist: John Cage, Sachy Guitry, Jean Dubuffet, who made a “ready unfinished”<sup>10</sup> out of their works.

Because of the evident advantages it draws from language, the epistropheic grotesque (expressive, full of associations – probably that is the reason why it is so difficult to grasp and describe it) is in Gombrowicz’s works both a game with the audience, which is a pretext for a specific, dialectical discussion and for an inner dialogue, and it is a teasing manifesto of freedom.

The fourth and last sphere of influence is (4) the catastrophic one. The point of reference here is an artistic vision of society and history – a cross section of the history of humanity and its achievements. As a diagnosis of the anthroposphere, this type of grotesque brackets social values and tries to assess them. Therefore, it is a figure of crisis against the world, where the world has been deprived of humanity, hope, prospects for transcendence, and rules. Symbolism, visionariness, creation, impressiveness, which give the impression of being a magnifying glass, are elements of such a style.

In the epistropheic sphere, there was a specific “revolution in thinking” towards individuality understood as finding subjectivity in the artist’s consciousness, which is the centre of the represented world. The catastrophic sphere<sup>11</sup> (Greek catastrophe – turning point) suggests a different layout of features. It is understood as “a big number” of humanity,

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<sup>10</sup> Maria Golaszewska discusses some of these opposite tendencies as “the balancing between an unrestrained expression of identity and the myth of the anonymous artist”, and “a predilection for mysticism” and self-ridicule (91–95).

<sup>11</sup> Catastrophism (*ex definitione*) is a vague term. Views about the oncoming end of the world are as commonly accepted as opinions about the impending doom of culture, values, and civilization. This powerful message – discussing a new era that could be born out of the breakthrough, with all the evil and regression inherent in it – became an inspiring subject for literature, art, philosophy, cinema, etc. Its beginnings can be traced back to medieval dark beliefs, baroque sensualism, gothic-phrenetic Romanticism, and it can be seen in contemporary fictional images of machine Armageddons.

especially fertile because of the multitude of images evoked, and its opposition, with semantic roots reaching deep existential, cultural, civilization, and social consciousness, which is visionary-prophetic, evaluative, and which mythologizes language.

The main topos of these reflections is the mad ship, the symbolic rudderless ship and its captain sailing in random directions on open waters, with a peculiar bunch of women, men, and animals constantly feasting, with orgiastic grimaces on their faces. This is an allegoric vision of the world leading nowhere, which provokes a feeling of tension and anticipation, or perhaps a feeling that the surfeit and aimlessness of this cruise will end in a catastrophe.

Polish artists using this type of grotesque can be found mainly in the interwar period. Catastrophic issues are clearly present as an anticipation of the coming crisis<sup>12</sup>. According to Jerzy Kwiatkowski, features of the interwar period were not only thanatic symbols, visionariness, archetypical war images, but also the mass subject, temporal games (the tension between past and present), and the dominance of the imperative. Stress put on strong images resulted in a sharp fictionalization of poetry, which, in fact, became a story about a quasi-mythical disaster coming.

Prose with features of the catastrophic grotesque was dominated by deformation and hyperbole. The presented world shown as the real world faces a catastrophe (*Nienasylenie* by Witkacy) or is about to fall (e.g. in Mroźek's *Ten, który spada*, in which the world, presented as limited to falling, becomes a grand metaphor of ideological reality): "Hooked into each other, ironed and stuck one into the other, they made a homogeneous creature with a regular shape, the shape of a ball. A kind of small planet" (Mroźek 175).

Other means of this specific historiosophy, with its roots in the modernist period (that was the time when the revolution in artistic expression took place – a strong turn into a philosophical essay) revolved around historical and cultural processes as a holistic fatalistic vision of the Western crisis. Ubiquitous crime, insanity, and chaos, which lead to a catastrophe, start speaking once the subject's disintegration occurs in the place where culture and civilization meet during social and political change. Such a crisis was not new in human history, but it was the first time when, as a result of Hegel's philosophy, the shift from individual to public sphere took place; therefore, the "masses" gained ontological status:

"When masses become a subject with their own will and history, the epoch of idealistic protectionism, when the form thought it could shape the content at its own discretion, is finished. Since

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<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, Marian Zdzichowski claimed that revolution would degrade all cultural values and devastate religion. Oswald Spengler, similarly, expected the masses to start a revolution with unprecedented consequences. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, who was an eye-witness of a revolution, believed that it would lead to the death of art, since it put at risk the very essence of metaphysical experience.

it was acknowledged that the masses are able to have their subjectivity or independence, metaphysical privileges of a man, will, knowledge and soul penetrate the sphere which seemed to be only a material and they let the subordinate and familiar part claim dignity of the other side" (Sloterdijk 7).

Unified humanity became the big number of crisis, which – using Witkacy's language – came as the result of the halt of culture, of perception, and of metaphysical feelings. The reality which is ruled by a neo-barbarism and humanity is only a faceless mass, magma and pulp is the world of common aboulia, a world incapacitated after Murti-Bing's pills. Mrozek comments on this phenomenon in the following way: "When they are hooked together, towards the center, they cannot see they are falling down. ... What is more, they are so warm and crumpled that they are half-conscious, as if in a dream. Could you hear that buzz? It deafens and calms down" (173).

Through a piercing rearrangement of the world and the subject, so through the emptiness, peculiar uprooting and alienation, systemically evoked in grotesque texts, we slowly come to the center (immediately after *Angst* and helplessness), to the *ergon* of the text. It is permeated by a strong need for values, a longing for another order beyond the chaos and horrible mechanics, a desire to come back to oneself in the *Selbst* dimension (Heidegger: selfhood, the specific character of the subject in moral feeling, not in consciousness, constant character) and *Jemeinigkeit* (Heidegger: mineness – I possess myself; changeable character) and their integration. Thus, the vision from the catastrophic grotesque becomes meaningful not in abstract apocalyptic representation, but is close to the reality of the subject through its deeply moral character (also as a kind of personal perception).

## Conclusion

The grotesque is one of the most interesting ways of diagnosing changes and crisis in the anthroposphere (as a continuation of thinking about the subject from the middle of the seventeenth century through to postmodernity). According to Thomas Mann, the grotesque is one the most active notions in contemporary art (McElroy 149). In accordance with the above-mentioned reflections, its productivity results from the subject's tendency to self-fulfilment, self-cognition, and self-definition; it is an independent vision and position in the "me – the world", "me – community" relations; thus, it is a position which guarantees the possibility of judgment and the free speech of a solo singer who does not want to belong to the choir any more.

The grotesque is inseparably related to humour. Its basis refers to humour's elementary aspect: criticality. It also has its clearly established aim: because it refers to values, it is an authorial discourse of the subject which aims to persuade the audience

to undertake profound existential, religious, and ontological reflection, by means of absurd, destruction (also *kenosis*), terror, kitsch, irony, Thanatic figures, eroticism, *trompe l'oeil*, *l'art brut*, etc.

The grotesque is a strongly philosophical proposition, which bases its discourse on a conscious protest against present values and on transgressing all limiting and oppressive conventions. Therefore, the grotesque enhances the status of the subject, but it neither defends nor affirms the subject in a direct manner. It does not support the good condition of the Central-European elite based on the myth of *catharsis*, so the opportunity of expiation, purification, and individual change in relation to society. As a value-forming device, the grotesque is supposed to “enlighten” an individual subject and focus it on self-development through exposing imperfections present in itself and in the surrounding world. Therefore, the grotesque is neither a form of *catharsis* nor a form used to ridicule something, or only to relieve tension (these features are more characteristic of simple, crude ridiculousness). Quite the opposite: it makes the subject face a problem it cannot ignore. If humour is literary conscience, the grotesque is its (not only) purgatory, in accordance with Baudelaire’s words: “Laughter is satanic, and, therefore, profoundly human”.

Apart from the social dimension, the grotesque also has numerous metaphysical references, the expression of which can be found in Kierkegaardian understanding of the metaphysical crisis as despair. Facing piercing emptiness, the human being tries to find some support and resorts to anything only to make a leap into the future. Laughter is only a manifestation of *horror vacui*, a specific dialectic moment devoid of any prospect of purification or comfort, because despair is eternal and, according to Kierkegaard, you cannot outlive eternity.

What dominates a grotesque work is its open structure. The motifs which shape the spatiotemporal order do not always form a cause-and-effect system. Deliberately incoherent themes (logical coherence is not an aim) seem to be rather “deconstructors”, not constructors of the plot; they are intermittent, provoke the impression of a secret, a gleam, the absurd; they are constructed between the world presented and the world implied in the work. The next problem of grotesque fictional works are temporal issues. In most grotesque works, the chronological order of events is strongly disturbed, e.g. by using oneiric or fantasy conventions in the language of the story, which, through mediation in the subject’s consciousness, establishes its own cognitive order, strengthened by metaphors, symbols, allegories, which construct a quasi-mythical or oneiric order. Cause-and-effect relations are further disturbed by a strategy of surprise, but also by digressional expansion of episodes (as in Gombrowicz).

Sometimes the whole plot is based on such a digression, as e.g. in Mrożek's *Ona*, in which a shotgun gains human features, such as melancholy, charm, emotional states, etc. Anthropomorphism organizes the whole presented world and makes the subject a countersubject. What is more, the plot in a grotesque work is characteristic of diverse dynamics, e.g. a static state (Kafka, Orwell) might be treated as an event. The world that occurs in the character's consciousness happens to be a stream of consciousness, as in "The Pupil" by Henry James, or functions as the presented world, or is one of its cardinal elements.

The main theme, or most often a sphere of central themes, in a grotesque work becomes a pretext or a model structure. The literary concept (a structural framework) is effectively submerged in multiple meanings, images, digressions, characters, events, time and space, etc. From this mosaic, the concept must be isolated by a multifaceted reading. Structurally, formally, conventionally, and semantically, a grotesque work resembles a huge multilayered allegory.

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