

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



**Connelly, Frances S. The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture:
The Image at Play**

Jessica Maratsos

Volume 37, Number 3, Summer 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090672ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i3.22472>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Maratsos, J. (2014). Review of [Connelly, Frances S. The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 37(3), 284–286. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i3.22472>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2015

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

it evoke terror, wonder, or contemptuous laughter—and does this reaction change over the century as the figure becomes something of a commonplace itself? In this capacity, it is frustrating that Buck never returns to consider in depth the idea that it could have functioned as a mnemonic. It may have been possible to address some of these issues by placing both the Bohemian image and Melanchthon's tract within the broader context of early modern print culture in general and Reformation pamphlets in particular.

Although Buck's approach to non-English titles is inconsistent (German is generally translated while Latin is not), this is a well-produced book. It is well illustrated and rounded out with a translation of Melanchthon's 1523 text.

RICHARD RAISWELL

University of Prince Edward Island

Connelly, Frances S.

The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play.

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. x, 190 + 62 ill. ISBN 978-1-107-01125-0 (hardcover) \$100.95.

Frances S. Connelly's new study responds to a critical lacuna in art-historical scholarship, namely, the absence of a comprehensive "study of the grotesque in the modern era, despite its pervasive and insistent presence from 1500 onward" (18). In order to address this gap, the author moves away from the traditional definition of the grotesque that negatively describes this category in relation to its perversion of normative types. Connelly instead elucidates a grotesque that is shaped by what it does; it is an art that "ruptures boundaries, compromising them to the point where they admit the contradiction and ambiguity of a contrasting reality" (10). As the author readily acknowledges, such an open definition could render problematic the very notion of the grotesque as a category, yet her attention to the contextually precise iterations of this broader type make this a worthwhile and challenging contribution to scholarship.

The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture covers art from the late Quattrocento through the end of the twentieth century. To organize this vast amount of material, Connelly divides the main body of the book into five thematic chapters, each of which develops chronologically. This structure

enables her to present a cogent narrative, while simultaneously allowing for the *Spielraum* (“room to play”) that is critical to her definition of the grotesque. By locating the last decades of the fourteenth century as the origin of this category, the study underlines the importance of the discovery of Nero’s *Domus Aurea* in Rome in the 1480s, which quickly led to a new decorative motif in Italian painting referred to as *grotesche*. It is not this incident alone, however, that marks the birth of this artistic type. Rather, Connelly is careful to point out, it is at this moment that the grotesque—which one could certainly see at play in the elaborate drolleries of illuminated manuscripts and the fantastic creations in Romanesque column capitals—enters the realm of fine arts, and becomes a self-conscious expression of individuality.

Chapters 2 and 3 both address different manifestations of the improvisational grotesque: *grotesche* and arabesques. Chapter 2 elaborates upon the idea that the Cinquecento witnessed the elevation of the grotesque within the artistic canon. The influence of Horace, Cicero, Quintilian, and other classical thinkers is considered alongside new models of aesthetic theory codified by sixteenth-century writers. Of particular interest are the links Connelly highlights between nascent scientific exploration and artistic illustration, as well as the fluid boundaries between the monstrous and the marvelous that are directly dependent upon these intertwined categories. Chapter 3 is the least cohesive unit in the book, yet it presents a stimulating analysis of the permutations of the arabesque throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When restrained to the artistic margins, the arabesque provided an entry point for exoticism, resulting in sub-genres that included *chinoiserie* and *turquerie*. As a focus of intellectual debate, its combinatory imagery was embraced by figures like Giambattista Vico and Friedrich Schlegel as an expression of primitive, poetic language. Connelly presents a nuanced juxtaposition of these attitudes to the more rigid Enlightenment values of clarity and logical argument, delineating the ways in which these two opposing threads inflected artistic production during this era.

In chapter 4, “Subversion: The Carnavalesque Body,” Connelly presents a sustained exploration of this concept as delineated by Mikhail Bakhtin. She examines the appropriation of popular, folk motifs by artists from Pieter Bruegel to Domenico Tiepolo, highlighting the gradual attenuation of the social impact that such forms had, as carnival was stripped of its disruptive power by Enlightenment distrust of plebian play and superstition. At this point the

discussion shifts to the role of caricature and satire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in a provocative analysis of the intersection between primitivism and caricature as revealed by “European responses to African and Oceanic art” (110). Taking the *Demoiselle d’Avignon* as her focal point, the author argues that Picasso’s anarchist and anticolonial work simultaneously questioned the presumptions underlying European civilization while still situating this critique within a long-standing western tradition of isolating the aggressive female body as a site of grotesque disfigurement.

Chapter 5, “Trauma: The Failure of Representation,” tackles the challenges of the monstrous and the abject body. Engaging with the theories of Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva, Connelly reveals the ways in which the traumatic grotesque turns the wit of the carnivalesque into what the romantics would term “infernal laughter” and “annihilating humor” (118). Artistic depictions of the demonic from Martin Schongauer to Francisco Goya reveal a shift toward the internalization of these harbingers of madness, while representations of diabolic, wicked women—Medusa being a recurring example—remain consistent in their fearful depiction of malignant feminine sexual power. This develops an exciting new dimension when female artists of the twentieth century appropriated the aesthetic of the abject so as to challenge the objective gaze to which the body, generally the female nude, had been historically subjected.

The comparative analysis between the sublime and the revelatory grotesque in Connelly’s final chapter exemplifies the subtlety and insight that she brings to the entire project. While these two categories overlap in significant ways, the ultimate difference is that between transcendence and profundity. “The pleasure in the sublime, as Kant understood, is in our mastery of it” (160). The revelatory grotesque, on the other hand, always pulls us back into the visceral experience of the body, denying any sense of absolute boundaries and forcing the viewer to seek truth by “embracing instead the concrete realities of life as we experience it” (160).

JESSICA MARATSOS
Columbia University