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Grotesque in Use
**Shakespearean Grotesques in German Theatre
Performances**

Thesis Booklet

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Objectives

The aim of this dissertation is to show how the grotesque appears in contemporary theatre practice. If one reads a report on a theatre performance, the word grotesque may have different connotations. It could either mean good or bad, sensational or absurd, horrible or funny. This paper is going to undertake a research on how the word grotesque is used by critics of postmodern Shakespeare performances in Germany. These concrete examples are going to show how complex the use of this word is but also that it is not a term for everything but that it has a concrete pattern of use typical for the postmodern theatre.

It is difficult to describe the grotesque, especially in the postmodern where anything and thus nothing seems to be grotesque.¹ One aim of this dissertation is to find out how the word grotesque is defined in the postmodern. My hypothesis is that Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin have a major influence on what the grotesque has become in the postmodern. Kayser describes the grotesque in visual arts and argues that it shows the observer an estranged world, because the structures the observer relies on are questioned. The lack of well-known structures evokes fear in the observer.² Bakhtin describes the grotesque as an essential element of the carnival in the Middle Ages. He claims that the carnival used laughter as a weapon to defeat fears of everyday life (fear of death, fear of God, etc.) by mocking, debasing and materializing the spiritual (God, Christ or the Saints) and secular order.³ Before coming to theatre practice, a research on the Shakespearean grotesque has to be done as no director touches the dramas of Shakespeare without making sure they know the critical history of the dramas. To find the grotesque in Shakespeare criticism is an additional aim of this dissertation.

The final and major aim of this dissertation is to describe the use of the word grotesque in postdramatic theatres. The expression “postdramatic theatre” stems from Hans-Thies Lehmann and basically stands for the performances of the postmodern, where theatre and performance art influence each other in such an extent that Lehmann sees no sense in separating the two and names them postdramatic theatre.⁴ Postdramatic theatre performances

¹ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Culturas-in-extremis: performing against the cultural backdrop of the mainstream bizarre,” in Henry Bial ed., *The Performance Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 287-288.

² Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963), 184-187.

³ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1968), 66, 74, 90 and 256.

⁴ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 23-24.

aim to unsettle and confuse theatre audiences, whereby the grotesque as an artistic tool seems to be a useful one.

An additional question emerges when I open up the perspective of the dissertation. The discrepancy between theatre practice and current theories of the poststructuralist subject concerning its passivity becomes obvious because this passivity is one of the most criticized points of the poststructuralist subject and at the same time postdramatic theatres aim at audience agency.⁵ Since Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, German theatre practice aims at audience participation.⁶ Is it simply an emphasis on the Brechtian theatre tradition, when postdramatic theatre practice focuses on audience agency? This dissertation searches for a plausible reason for such an obvious opposition between theatre practice and current ways to describe subject positions.

Methodology and Structure

The thesis of this paper moves within theatre and performance studies. Its claim has a practical and a theoretical aspect. The focus of the thesis is on the practical use of the notion grotesque in postdramatic theatres. The thesis emphasizes the essential role of the grotesque in postdramatic theatre and that this grotesque, as well as postdramatic theatre in general focuses on audience productivity. The reason for this focus, and the theoretical aspect of the thesis, is interpreted as a practical reaction within postdramatic theatres on the passivity of the subject in poststructuralist subject theories. The following paragraphs show the methodology and structure of this dissertation which support the line of argumentation.

In Chapter 1 *Grotesques* I undertake a research on the postmodern grotesque. The aim of this chapter is to describe the grotesque in the postmodern. First, I consider the way the term is defined as a product of a historical development. For an accurate description of this development I sum up and compare major theories on the grotesque from the 1960s on. Here an essential role is given to the descriptions of Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser as I want to find out the reason why these theoreticians are still so influential in the postmodern descriptions of the grotesque. As a second step I go through examples of grotesque definitions

⁵ Althusser argues that the subject is suppressed by ideology, while Foucault argues that the subject is suppressed by power. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 155-6, 173 and 182.

Michael Foucault, "Afterword. The Subject and Power," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208, 212 and 216.

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*. John Willet ed. and transl. (London: Methuen, 1994), 181-191.

of three postmodern media with the aim to find contemporary trend(s) of how the grotesque is defined today. I compare contemporary literary, visual and performative grotesque definitions and draw conclusions on their structure and effect.

In Chapter 2 *Shakespearean Grotesques* I approach Shakespeare criticism with focus on the grotesque. The aim of this chapter is to find out which plays and characters of Shakespeare are most typically grotesque according to the critics. I study Shakespeare criticism and focus on writings where the grotesque is described. I assume that great theories of the grotesque, like that of Bakhtin and Kayser, have an essential effect on the interpretation of the grotesques in Shakespeare criticism. I search for common points of the descriptions of the grotesque in Shakespeare criticism and I especially focus on socio-political contexts where the grotesque appears in connection to the subject. I also compare the grotesques found in Shakespeare criticism to the grotesques described in the postmodern in the first chapter. The aim of this chapter is to describe the Shakespearean grotesque. It is a necessary pre-research in order to deal with Shakespeare performances in the third chapter.

In Chapter 3 *Shakespearean Grotesques in German Theatre Performances* those Shakespeare performances in Germany are reported on that are named grotesque by theatre critics between 2005 and 2015. In order to provide as objective a description of the theatre performances as possible, I undertake a research on what theatre critics wrote in theatre reviews about the grotesque in contemporary German performances. A professional theatre critic is multifunctional: s/he knows previous performances of the actual play, as well as literary criticism of that play, s/he can compare how an actress plays a role to other roles she has played in other plays, critics know about theatre politics and see national or international politics in the actual play, they are also aware of certain trends of direction or of certain style of a director and they are also aware of socio-political as well as theoretical discussions. This means that the theatre critic is in a position to connect theoretical discussions with theatre practice. In this paper the theatre critic has an important role, not only because I rely on theatre reviews to find out what the grotesque means in a postmodern theatrical context, but also because the theatre critic is able to see theatre practice as a response to more abstract theoretical problems, such as the passivity of the poststructuralist subject. The method of the last part of my research is to collect theatre reviews where the word grotesque appears. I discuss a *Hamlet* and a *Richard III* directed by Thomas Ostermeier, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the co-direction of Thomas Ostermeier and Constanza Macras, and a *King Lear* in

the direction of Karin Beier.⁷ I interpret theatre reviews where elements of the performance were called grotesque and compare these elements to the grotesques described in the previous chapters, as well as to techniques used in postdramatic theatres. My hypothesis is that there are similarities within the logic of postdramatic theatres and the logic of postmodern grotesques in use. In case this hypothesis is proved in practice, a question on its theoretical effects opens up and offers a critique on the passivity of poststructuralist subjects.

Results

The main thesis of this paper is the following: The *blurring grotesque*, one of the two types of definitions of the grotesque existing in the postmodern, becomes the multiple presence of different strategies of direction with focus on audience agency in postdramatic theatre, which presence I understand as a practical reaction to the theoretical passivity of the poststructuralist subject within the field of theatre and performance studies. I claim that the logic of the postmodern *blurring grotesque* is similar to the logic of the postdramatic theatre and that this similarity in practice is an answer to and a critique of the theoretical discussion on the passivity of the poststructuralist subject.

In the very first chapter I claim that definitions of the grotesque from the 60s are imported into contemporary definitions, giving them a postmodern touch. I argue that though there were newer definitions of the grotesque in the 70s and 80s, postmodern theoreticians adapted the definitions of Kayser and Bakhtin when they described the postmodern grotesque. Kayser and Bakhtin are considered to have opposing definitions on the grotesque and later theoreticians could not deal with this split within the term, so contemporary theoreticians chose either Kayser or Bakhtin as the basis of their grotesque definitions. This is a result of my research in the fields of visual art and in literature. However, in theatre and performance studies I have only found Remshardt's description which is based on Bakhtin.⁸ This illogical uneven representation led to the hypothesis that also the theatre and performance genres should show definitions of the grotesque based on Kayser. This hypothesis is proved with my research in chapter three, where I read theatre critiques of four postdramatic performances, three out of which showed a grotesque definition which was based on the ideas of Kayser.

⁷ Thomas Ostermeier is the director of the Schaubühne theatre in Berlin. Constanza Macras is the leader of the DorkyPark, a company of dancers, actors and musicians. Karin Beier is the director of the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg.

⁸ Remshardt calls those performances grotesque which use violence in order to provoke moral reactions within the audience. Ralf Remshardt, *Staging the Savage God: the Grotesque in Performance* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 50 and 260.

In chapter one I also give names to the two trends of definitions of the grotesque I have found in the postmodern. I do so because Kayser and Bakhtin were only used as starting points of these new postmodern definitions, and as such it would be misleading to use the names of these scholars. Instead, I use essential elements of their grotesque descriptions. Basically, the grotesque in the postmodern is something that disrespects norms/rules/conventions. Both types of postmodern grotesques are described as a process and that postmodern grotesques include an effect which becomes an essential part of the definition itself. I differentiated between two grotesques on the basis of how successful they are in actually destroying these norms/rules/conventions. The *transgressive grotesque* is a grotesque which transgresses existing structures without harming them. I called it transgressive after Bakhtin's idea of the carnival. The carnival is a safety valve of the society, but it (more often than not) returns to the old structure after the carnival is over. The *blurring grotesque* is described after Kayser. The *blurring grotesque* is a successful attempt to make existing structures alien and thus this grotesque requires the creation of new structures. The *blurring grotesque* holds a potential for real change in itself and this makes it more interesting for my study than the *transgressive grotesque*.

In the second chapter I turn to a more specific grotesque, which has also had to be researched first: the Shakespearean grotesque. I undertake a research on how the word 'antic' was used in Shakespeare's time as instead of the word 'grotesque' the word 'antic' was used with its meaning 'grotesque'. The word 'grotesque' is only used from the seventeenth century on, while in the beginning of the sixteenth century the word 'antic' is used with its meaning 'old' as well as with the meaning 'grotesque.'⁹ I see the shift from the Middle Ages into an early modern England as a context where the word grotesque as a special form of indecorum was welcomed and slowly integrated into the English language. It was a term commonly used for something exaggeratedly inappropriate or even evil.

The major part of chapter two, however, is an account on how grotesques appear in Shakespeare criticism. Here I focus on characters and plays described as grotesques. The character Falstaff with his fatness and low moral standards becomes the ultimate example for the Bakhtinian carnivalesque grotesque. The grotesqueness of the character Hamlet is seen in his double role of being a prince as well as a clown. The grotesque in the play *King Lear* is in the cruel humour which neither lets the play become a pure comedy nor a pure tragedy. Lear himself is also described to be grotesque because he is a ridiculous character who experiences

⁹ Frances K. Barasch, *The Grotesque. A Study in Meanings* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971).40-41.

cruelty. The character of the Vice is also seen as grotesque because it unites funny and frightening elements. The figure of the Vice, the clown and madmen are roles which embody the grotesque in Shakespeare criticism. These roles are also positions outside the social structure as both the clown and madmen had a freedom of speech in the time of Shakespeare. The figure of the Vice is a successor of the clown and the Devil and its typical characteristic feature is that this role stands above the rules which normally apply for all roles in the play. The Vice, the clown and madmen are excellent positions for criticizing social structures without being punished for it. Also, they are marked subject positions. These positions may criticize ideology without being part of it. I argue that the uncertainties concerning multiple layers of every lives in the early modern England contributed to the increased usage of the word 'antic' in the sense of the grotesque and later the word 'grotesque'. Not only the early modern England but the postmodern can also be called as an age of uncertainty, only that today not Vices and clowns but postcolonial subjects and feminists belong to the marked subjects. One similarity lies in the outsider positions they occupy.

In the third chapter I argue for the thesis that the grotesque plays an essential part in postdramatic theatres. The proof of this thesis is demonstrated on four examples from postdramatic theatre practice. I look at four Shakespeare performances in Germany that were described as 'grotesques' in theatre critiques. First, I looked at the textual context of the word 'grotesque' within the critiques and interpreted what critics meant under 'grotesque'. Later I compared the grotesque described in the theatre reviews with the *blurring grotesque* and the *transgressive grotesque*, as well as the grotesques found in Shakespeare criticism. There were in most cases common points between the postmodern grotesques or the Shakespearean grotesques and those grotesques the critics described in postdramatic theatre performances. However, a more interesting fact is that most of the phenomena described as grotesque are also typical theatre techniques of the postdramatic theatre. For example, *physicality* is present in all four performances and in all four performances it was called grotesque. Lehmann describes *physicality* as the emphasized presence of the body of actors which cease to be a representation.¹⁰ In the case of *Hamlet*, *physicality* means the over-presence of the actor playing Hamlet. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all performers take part in the intense *physicality* when they produce energy during their movements which express either love or hate. Here body language even takes the place of spoken language. *Physicality* appears in

¹⁰ Lehmann, op. cit., 95-97.

Richard's awkwardly over-emphasized disabilities which make him into an outsider, while in *King Lear* the softness and cruelty of naked female bodies are called grotesque.

However, *physicality* alone is not enough to call these performances *blurring grotesque*. According to Lehmann, postdramatic performances should be seen as a unity where the physical appearance of the actors is only one element.¹¹ Directors can only achieve the coinage 'grotesque' if they use a combination of *physicality* with other elements of postdramatic theatre. This combination was different by each performance I discuss. While I have found one example for the *transgressive grotesque* in the performance of *Richard III*, all the other examples were *blurring grotesques*. The humiliated nakedness in *Richard III* was of a very different kind than the *physicality* which appeared in the other three performances. The grotesques described in the critiques of this performance had little to do with each other, they were minor parts of the performance which I saw as *transgressive grotesques*, a kind of indecorum with not much effect on the critics. The example of Richard as *transgressive grotesque* is used as a contrast to the other three examples of the *blurring grotesque*.

The postdramatic theatre technique *plethora* has in itself a description that reminds one of the *blurring grotesque* definition. *Plethora* is incoherency, lack of logic and structure and those driven to the extreme within a theatre performance.¹² Both in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in *King Lear* the biggest confusion was reported on by the exchangeability of genders and roles. This technique creates a vacuum, a lack of structure, which cannot be held by the audience so it is forced to create new structures of interpretation. I claim that examples of the grotesque critics found in these two performances are *blurring grotesques*. These examples also emphasize the nature of the grotesque as process to which belongs the effect of the grotesque in the form of destroyed structures. In this example it appears in form of the destroyed connection between role and gender. *Plethora* is the most obvious theatre technique of postdramatic theatre which can also be related to the *blurring grotesque* without any examples. The emphasis on *plethora* is different in the two performances. While in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there is no list of actors and roles which could show who plays which character, in *King Lear* it is obviously stated which roles (even if there are up to three roles for one actress) belong to which actress. While in the first example a chaos is staged, in the second those who know the text well can most of the time follow the performance.

¹¹ Lehmann, op. cit., 85.

¹² Lehmann, op. cit., 90-91.

From the point of view of German theatre history, *plethora*, the idea of erasing one structure in order to produce one new is as old as Brecht's epic theatre. I see the postmodern form of Brecht's 'alienation effect' in Fischer-Lichte's 'liminal experience'. Fischer-Lichte's *Schwellenerfahrung* is an experience of the audience during an innovative theatre performance when usual ways of interpretation are blocked.¹³ The audience has to establish new interpretive strategies, just like during Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, where the alien circumstances of the theatrical context make the audience get rid of their old thinking patterns.¹⁴ In both effects/experiences the audience is deprived of his/her usual thinking patterns, so the production of new ways of thinking is promoted by such effects/experiences.

The *blurring grotesque* is a result of a combination of different postdramatic theatre techniques with an effect that promotes audience agency. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performance next to *physicality* and *plethora*, *parataxis* is also described as grotesque. *Parataxis*, or *non-hierarchy* makes sure the play-text is only as important as other elements of the performance text (for example visual or vocal elements).¹⁵ In this performance the play-text was even less important than body language. I claim that the combination of these three theatre techniques are *blurring grotesque* as they evoke critic (re)action. The critic reaction is described with the help of Fischer-Lichte's concept of *radical presence*, which claims that in case the audience feels the energy produced by the bodily presence of the actors, audience members are going to react on this energy and co-produce it during the performance.¹⁶ I argue that the result of the *blurring grotesque* is the agency of the critics, more precisely, their activity within the process of energy production during the performance.

In the *King Lear* performance next to *physicality* and *plethora*, the way I interpret the theatre technique *event/situation* was also called grotesque by the critics. Lehmann understands the theatre as a communication process. He claims that the result of this communication is the self-exploration of the audience. Lehmann understands the role of postdramatic theatre not as a producer of representations but as a trigger, an inspiration for audience self-reflection.¹⁷ I interpreted the way Barabara Nüsse played Lear as the trigger of self-reflections described in the critiques. The way Nüsse played Lear was called grotesque, absurd, existentialist, it touched the existence of some critics and made them philosophical.

¹³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Ästhetische Erfahrung als Schwellenerfahrung," in Joachim Küpper and Christoph Menke eds. *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2003), 146.

¹⁴ Brecht, op. cit., 190.

¹⁵ Lehmann, op. cit., 86-87.

¹⁶ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft* (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2010), 47-48.

¹⁷ Lehmann, op. cit., 104-107.

That the critics as well as the director reached back to existentialism in this performance is not only because Lear's existence is in danger but I also see it as a recourse, or re-use of formulas poststructuralist subject theories lack (and existentialism focuses on), such as the freedom or responsibility of the individual.¹⁸

In Ostermeier's *Hamlet* next to *physicality*, the theatre technique *irruption of the real* was called grotesque. Lars Eidinger, the actor playing Hamlet, is not only over-present during the whole performance, he often enters the space of the audience and thus enters their reality. As postdramatic theatre has no aim to show representations, the technique *irruption of the real* is important as it plays with the borders of reality and fiction. Its effect is that the audience has no idea whether an action belongs to the fiction or it happens in reality.¹⁹ Especially the way Eidinger addressed audience members with direct questions evoked the grotesque according to the critics. The critics also noted that there were moments when they could not tell whether Eidinger or only Hamlet went mad. I further argue that the *blurring grotesque* in this *Hamlet* performance is a combination of *physicality* and *irruption of the real*, as well as the fact that Hamlet acts out a mad clown. The social position of this role allows him to act in an ab-normal way and to provoke with this action a (re)action from the audience. I also argue that this open provocation is not enough to evoke audience reaction but a combination of provocation, physical closeness and the encounter with Eidinger's face (after Levinas) force the audience to (re)action. Levinas argues in his ethics that we cannot not respond to a face of an other.²⁰ The presence of *physicality* and the presence of the face makes the critic respond.

Although the roles of the Vice, the clown and madman were called grotesques in Shakespeare criticism I discuss in the second chapter, in postdramatic theatre practice it is only in the *Hamlet* performance where this role played an essential part in achieving critic (re)action. In *Richard III* we see a Shakespearean evil who is not typical of Shakespeare criticism and who was not expected from Eidinger after his Hamlet interpretation. Richard as a childish, disabled figure who takes what he sincerely believes to be his is not a typical Vice. In *King Lear* the madness of the king becomes an internal madness which is seen as a part of the philosophical grotesque, as a necessity of the absurd, as a starting point of existentialism. However, the idea of being an other, an outcast connects Richard, Hamlet and Lear. All the

¹⁸ Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 107.

¹⁹ Lehmann, op. cit., 99-104.

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86-88.

three suffer a kind of identity crisis, all search for their new places in society. As others they have a kind of exotic freedom unmarked subjects fear and envy.

I also claim that the focus on audience agency in postdramatic theatre practice is a reaction to the poststructuralist subject passivity within theatre and performance discourse. The agency of the critics is discovered as a result of the direct pressure Eiding as Hamlet acts out on his audience, in the subtle pressure produced by the excessive energy use of eleven actors and dancers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in the introverted philosophy about one's existence the critics described as an effect of Nüsse's *Lear*. I see all three forms of audience provocation as the *blurring grotesque*, one of the two types of grotesque definitions in the postmodern. This *blurring grotesque* differs from the other type, the *transgressive grotesque* in its outcome. The *blurring grotesque* is capable of blurring, erasing existing structures and thus it is capable of making room for the creation of new ones. The *blurring grotesque* is not only a type of grotesque definition, but it becomes a more general term for the combination of some postdramatic theatre techniques in the examples I discussed above. The aim of postdramatic theatre is the same as the aim of the *blurring grotesque*: to enhance audience productivity. The answer to the question why it is so should be searched in the discrepancy between the theory of poststructuralist subject passivity and the focus on audience productivity in theatre practice.

Postmodern subject theories repress the subject, so s/he has no room for action outside ideology. Enikő Bollobás claims that only marked subjects not belonging to the ideology may act outside ideology.²¹ The Vice, the clown and madmen are marked subjects and they are also the embodiments of Shakespearean grotesques. In the discussed postdramatic theatre performances the source of the grotesque becomes an uncertainty of the main characters about which roles they should acted out. The *blurring grotesque* I found in the critiques has an effect which requires audience action. This action is described as an oral response in *Hamlet*, as a co-production of energy with the actors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and as a philosophical self-reflection in *King Lear*. These are (re)actions of the critics on the performances discussed above. I claim that audience productivity within postdramatic theatre and the appearance of the *blurring grotesque* there is not simply a postmodern form of the Brechtian tradition of 'alienation effect' but it becomes a reaction within theatre practice to the passivity of the subject in poststructuralist subject theories.

²¹ Enikő Bollobás, *They Aren't Until I Call Them. Performing the Subject in American Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 81-88.

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