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On the Rhetorical Grotesque: A Mode for Strange Times

Richard Benjamin Crosby

ABSTRACT
This essay argues that the successful political careers of certain populist leaders rhetorically enact what scholars have long recognized in art, literature, and entertainment as the grotesque. The grotesque provides a theoretically rich means for describing the vulgar and chaotic public behaviors that take strong hold among anti-elite audiences at certain points in history. By closely reading comments from political leaders cast in the grotesque mold, including Silvio Berlusconi, Hugo Chavez, and Donald Trump, this essay explains not only what the grotesque is, but also when and how it is likely to find traction in a political culture ripe for change. The essay concludes that while the grotesque may be ideologically neutral, it shows an unsettling complaisance to twenty-first-century demagoguery and may be a defining mode for our time.

KEYWORDS
Demagoguery; Donald Trump; grotesque; Hugo Chavez; Silvio Berlusconi

For critics who believe that President Donald Trump emerged as some sort of political monster sui generis, his success has been as disorienting as it has been irritating. How could it have happened? It doesn't make sense! “The world,” goes the refrain, “has been turned upside down” (e.g., Thornhill). But Donald Trump is no aberration. Take the graceless Rob Ford of Canada, the bawdy Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, or the prurient Silvio Berlusconi of Italy. They all predate Trump by several years, and they all compete from a rhetorical playbook that celebrates the indecorous and vulgar; Berlusconi is actually credited with authoring that playbook (Donadio). Nor is Trump the end of the line; Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil has been called the “Trump of the Tropics” (“Jair Bolsonaro”). Each of these leaders is known for flouting decorum, skirting laws, ridiculing opponents, playing the martyr, inflating his own ego, and reveling in raunchiness. Each also embraces opportunities to debase himself and others in an appeal to the cruder impulses of audiences that were largely overlooked by competitors. In other words, vulgar populism is neither new nor isolated to the US presidential election of 2016.

Leaders in this mold enact the rhetorical grotesque, a term I propose as a conceptual frame that captures the strange times that have taken root in early twenty-first-century Western politics. Specifically, I argue that such leaders enact in rhetoric the kinds of incongruous combinations, comic distortions, and corporeal excesses that scholars in art and literature have long associated with grotesquerie. Such leaders willfully unsettle or even horrify their audiences in ways that would destroy a conventional politician. Ferri’s description of Berlusconi as “domineering,” but also “childish and infantile and comic, with a grotesque quality” could be applied to any of these leaders (qtd. in Sussman). Trump, too, has been called “grotesque” a number of times (e.g., Kreps; Sugarman). What are rhetorical critics to make of this label?

A number of rhetorical scholars have pointed to related concepts, such as “doubling” (Gunn 161), “disorder” (Stuckey 669), “abjection” (Shugart 1), and the “carnivalesque” (Ivie 708). I argue that such concepts unite around a theoretically and historically rich notion of grotesquerie that seems to be surging in Western politics. In this essay, I outline a theory of the grotesque that informs the excesses of leaders cast in this mold. I then perform rhetorical analysis of some key artifacts from
these leaders, including an extended reading of a signature moment from Donald Trump’s primary campaign. Finally, I discuss some implications for a broader examination of grotesquerie in twenty-first-century political rhetoric. Because my aim is to build a theory of the grotesque qua rhetoric, I elaborate how critics might recognize a grotesque kairos—that is, how we might read historical moments in which a grotesque rhetoric finds its opportunity. I also use the concluding discussion to account for the complex ideological implications of grotesquerie. I note that the concept is essentially neutral when it comes to moral interests, because it allows actors from across the Left-Right spectrum to enlist its powers. However, given present circumstances, I also observe the concept’s unsettling complaisance to demagogues, who would appropriate grotesque rhetoric in order to blunt the progress of vulnerable populations.

The Grotesque

As a named concept, the grotesque dates back to the discovery of paintings in ancient Roman grottoes that depicted human and animal forms meshed together (e.g., “Domus Fresco”). The blending of unlike things remains essential to the grotesque, because it captures the concept’s rich sense of transgression (Barusch 95). But because it is characterized by its deviation from natural forms, it eludes easy definitions. It “can never be locked into any one meaning or form, historical period, or political function . . . ,” Edwards and Grauland note. “For if there is any one thing that defines ‘the’ grotesque it is precisely that it is hybrid, transgressive and always in motion” (15). Given this inherent slipperiness, it is useful to establish some reliable, if flexible, features of the grotesque, which will help organize the analysis below. Incongruous combination, ridiculous mockery, and corporeal excess are three features worth highlighting.

By pairing unlike things in a state of hybridity, juxtaposition, or metamorphosis, the grotesque celebrates incongruity. Familiar is paired with strange, natural with alien, high with low, tragic with comic. Importantly, these terms are relative; what may be strange to one is familiar to another. But however “normal” or “natural” may be defined by a given community at a given time, the grotesque would subvert it. For instance, grotesques often indulge in fantastical anthropomorphisms—objects, animals, and humans combined into single bodies, as can be found on the towers of medieval cathedrals or in the contemporary art of Liu Xue (Barnes). Such examples reveal the grotesque as both a form of imitation and deviation. The concept has roots in the natural world, but it bends or breaks the boundaries of that world, such that what seems natural takes on unsettling new possibilities. Rather than serving as just a fantastical diversion from everyday life, the grotesque confronts everyday life with a latent strangeness and introduces what Adams and Yates call “a truth that our canons deny us” (2; also see Kuryluk 301–07).

A famous modern example of grotesque incongruity is Duchamp’s Fountain, a urinal separated from its normal—read: natural—context, relabeled as a fountain, and placed in a museum as a piece of art (Stieglitz). The pairing jars the viewer. It is tempting to interpret the piece as a statement on the inherent beauty of everyday objects; but philosopher Stephen Hicks and other commentators on Duchamp’s Fountain have a different perspective. Rather than elevating the vulgar to the status of art, such a piece underscores the decrepitude of widely accepted ideals. That is, the vulgar is not transformed by the exalted. The exalted is debased by the vulgar. As Bakhtin puts it, “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract . . . ” (Rabelais 19). Or, to use Hicks’s summation of the fountain: “Art is something you piss on” (196). The incongruous conflation of human waste and high culture suggests a new reality in which even our most precious presumptions are turned upside down.

Because the grotesque indulges in deviant incongruities, it embraces mockery as another key feature. Like grotesque incongruity, mockery trades in misrepresentations of the conventional or natural world. Farce, parody, caricature, and ridicule become means of undisciplining the existing order of things. To mock something is to strip it of its specialness. For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival is a celebration of mockery, a public ritual that clears the way for ridiculous behaviors that would be
barred from conventional life. Jesters replace kings, clergy prank pontiffs, slaves rule masters. In this way, mockery would seem to subvert normative hierarchies, thus becoming a useful means of social critique (Martin and Reneger). On the other hand, as Pollack argues, mockery can “obscure behavior that should cause outrage” (177). Mockery becomes grotesque, for instance, when it elicits laughter that points “uneasily and provokingly and guiltily at unreasonable and absurd class, gender, and race violence and vulnerability” (178). In other words, mockery can be used as a means to undermine or reinscribe power differentials. Mockery takes on moral valuations only in its application to rhetorical ends.

A famous example of mockery comes from scripture, with the false crowning of Jesus as “King of the Jews.” In the midst of his torture and in the lead-up to his crucifixion, the poor, itinerant mystic is fitted with a crown of thorns, handed a reed as a mock scepter, and paid obeisance in a parody of the ruler/subject relationship. He is then paraded among the people to be enthroned on the cross. The laughter elicited by such ridicule is not affirming. Depending on one’s perspective, it can be interpreted as a critique of Christ’s pretense and deception, or as a reaffirmation of an oppressive Roman regime. Either way, it is laced with contempt, and it elicits a heterogenous reaction from the audience—some onlookers reveling in the scorn, others moved to mercy for the victim, while still others, we can presume, remain ambivalent. The example of Jesus captures Bakhtin’s description of a mocking laughter as something that is hesitant and ambiguous and even inspired by death; Bakhtin calls it a “gay death” (Rabelais 51). Regardless of one’s moral stance, someone or something is being neutralized.

A favorite object of grotesque incongruity and mockery is the human body. Not only is the grotesque rooted in exaggerations and transmutations of the human form, but bodily functions play an important role as well. The female body is a particular touchstone of corporeal excess, largely because its functions are thought to be more copious. Mary Russo argues that an acceptable bodily norm needed to be created in order to establish a standard for “deviation from the norm” (11). For her, the notion of the feminine body as a deviation is tantamount to rendering it a grotesque. Biressi and Nunn add that, within this problematic frame, the masculine body is “sealed and elevated, a classical ideal that celebrates the rational and authoritative, whereas the female body—rendered grounded, open, split”—represents a transgression of that ideal (141). Bakhtin implies what may be a less negative explanation for the female body as grotesque. Each body, male or female, is grotesque in that it “exceeds its own limits,” whether in copulating, eating, defecating, or even dying (Rabelais 26), but the female body can become more grotesque by virtue of its ability to become pregnant and give birth (Gunn and Vavrus 126–27; Rabelais 240).

Russo points out that this association with grotesquerie gives the female body a powerful connection to primal notions of the earth, which suggests a kind of empowerment. Still, this distinction of being “more” grotesque is potentially problematic on several levels, since it renders the female body as inherently more deviant than the male body, which in turn justifies greater efforts to control and domesticate the female body. This distinction also makes the female body more spectacular, which enables it to be more “cruelly observed” in the public gaze (6). These points become essential to the analysis below, because the rhetors I study exhibit such fondness for highlighting female corporeality. When someone like Berlusconi or Trump discusses political opponents, but especially women, there is a marked impulse to describe some bodily act or feature. Doing so suggests not merely that the speaker has a curious eye for such things, but that the speaker has an impulse to limit the latitude of that body and to diminish its speaking voice. These critical points are further grounded in the analysis that follows. For now, it is sufficient to note that the grotesque makes strategic use of corporeal excess.

Take this single line from Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” as a poetic example of grotesque, corporeal excess:

who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness
The excess is palpable both in the ejaculatory description of the body and the gush of parataxis—phrases bleeding into each other with virtually no punctuation to clot them. The grotesque highlights the scatological. Bodily expulsion symbolizes the removal of constraints, pushing “toward a place where meaning collapses” and “identity, system, order” are lost (Kristeva 2). The excretion of fluids is a standard symbol of the grotesque because just as such fluids serve as vectors for transmission, they also symbolize excess, mixing, and the breakdown of structure.

No single feature of the grotesque, including any of the three I have identified here, can be “isolated in its chemical purity,” to use Burke’s phrasing (Attitudes 57). These categories are spongy. They overlap and absorb one another. More broadly, they absorb a variety of other features that are often associated with grotesquerie, such as distortion, exaggeration, ridiculousness, and excess. The key terms I have identified function simply to establish a vocabulary that will guide the analysis below. My terms might be replaced with other terms, perhaps terms that function more descriptively and narrowly than I have allowed here. The larger point is simply this: the grotesque’s only true allegiance is to transgression of the presumed order of things. By trading in incongruity, mockery, and corporeal excess it enacts—or, at least, symbolizes—the inherent decrepitude of that order, such that the percipient may be alarmed, frightened, or disgusted, but also potentially consoled, emboldened, or seduced by the possibility of a new reality—all of which raises the question of the rhetorical potential of grotesquerie.

The Grotesque as Rhetoric

Whereas the above section outlines key features of the grotesque, it remains to be clarified how the grotesque behaves as political rhetoric. In Attitudes Toward History, Kenneth Burke approaches the concept with an ostensibly literary lens, but he manages to bring literature, philosophy, and politics into a fluid union. For him, poetic frames have political consequences, and they can be classified into three categories: those tending toward acceptance and reinforcement of the social order, those tending toward rejection and destruction of the social order, and those that emerge during periods of transition between the first two categories (57). This third category, the transitional, “belongs to periods marked by great confusion of the cultural frame, requiring a radical shift in people’s allegiance to symbols of authority” (Attitudes 57–58). The grotesque frame is transitional, because in transit from one frame to another, that which is familiar becomes destabilized, laying bare a “forensic superstructure” that has become “less firm” (Attitudes 60). In other words, the grotesque takes political hold when the social order has become ripe for disruption.

In Permanence and Change, Burke provides examples of this phenomenon. He argues that formal expressions, what he calls “verbal linkages,” can grow weak with repetition and overuse (91). They then become vulnerable to a grotesque mischief. Perhaps the profoundest innovation of the age, Burke claims, came from Darwin, whose incongruous formulation of “man as anthropoid” belied his culture’s outworn pieties (Permanence 91). Ultimately, Burke’s point is simple: the grotesque sees “beyond the structure of a given vocabulary when that structure is no longer firm” (Permanence 117). Burke recognizes the grotesque as more than a literary motif; it can be a political cutlass used to mangle the civic body, or a mirror that reflects that mangling.

Burke is not alone in his grasp of the political implications of grotesquerie. In his 1975–76 lectures on the Abnormal, Michel Foucault recognizes the grotesque as a mechanism of power built from the “odious, despicable, or ridiculous, characteristics that should intrinsically disqualify it from power but that do not (11–12). When the grotesque finds traction, the intrinsic structures of life-as-usual must be weak and are susceptible to further weakening. For this reason, Philip Thomson writes that “it is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation” (11). Christina R. Foust similarly identifies grotesque symbols as a means of resisting the dogmas of the established order by challenging the “singular, simple, and prefabricated meanings … that maintain power” (11; see also Martin and Reneger).
This conclusion reinforces Burke’s argument noted above: recognizing when the accepted structures have grown weak from vain, orderly repetition is key to the rhetorical success of grotesque symbols. One need not see politicians like Donald Trump as noble in order to recognize that they are leading a grotesque assault on—or, at the very least, pranking—a certain political inertia. Whereas piety, reverence, and etiquette are markers of an established, “classical” order, impiety, pranking, and rudeness become political strategies that assume a perverse sort of sense (Burke, Permanence 117). Grotesquerie assumes political power when a rhetor captures a historical moment in which the political establishment has reached a certain threshold of ridiculousness, what might be called a grotesque kairos. Upon this threshold, the grotesque rhetor seizes the opportunity to break, in a lavish performance of transgression, all of the weakened norms that establishment characters foolishly continue to take for granted.

The grotesque is a mode of communicating, the essence of which is transgression of or deviation from and degradation of that which is presumed to be normal. Three key features (incongruity, mockery, and corporeality) are linked to grotesquerie in art and literature, but this link is under-theorized in rhetorical studies. That the grotesque, including its key features, can behave as political rhetoric is premised on cultural instability, such as when there are massive transitions, upheavals, or rampant cynicism with respect to the political institutions and traditions of a given community. Under these circumstances, grotesquerie becomes a means of revealing the inherent decrepitude of “politics as usual.”

**Examples and Analysis of Grotesque Political Rhetoric**

It would be impossible to capture all of the grotesquerie of the twenty-first-century political stage. Donald Trump alone has produced such a number of grotesque artifacts that even to curate a representative variety would call for a project of much larger scope. His public mockery of a physically disabled reporter comes to mind, as does his ridicule of the appearance and behavior of his opponents, including Marco Rubio’s sweating (Berenson; Spaid). Given the constraints of space, I have selected a single, representative artifact from each of three world leaders who communicate in the grotesque mode, beginning with Silvio Berlusconi, whom The Atlantic referred to as “Trump before Trump” was President (Donadio). I perform analytical vignettes of the first two leaders, then perform an extended close reading of a key moment from Donald Trump’s Primary campaign. In each case, I consider how the three features of the grotesque I described above function rhetorically.

**Silvio Berlusconi and the Bunga-Bunga**

In 2015, Silvio Berlusconi was facing trial for allegedly paying for sex with an underage girl and for abusing his office as Italian prime minister. As prosecutors looked closely into his private affairs, they uncovered a strange history of orgiastic soirees that took place at his personal mansion outside Milan. Known privately—and, later, publicly—as “Bunga Bunga” parties, these events had an explicit carnival quality, where rules and laws were suspended, and a revelry of “unbridled consumption” ensued (qtd. in Sussman). In this carnival, men remained the rulers, having their way with younger women in parodic caricature, whether wittingly or not, of the colonized peoples to their south. Italian linguist Cecilia Robustelli speculates that the term “Bunga Bunga” is likely an imitation of African dialect, and that it could have made its way into Italian popular discourse via a mid-twentieth-century song that includes the lyrics “Bongo, bongo, bongo, I don’t wanna leave the Congo.” Robustelli also cites a popular joke about an African tribal chief who forces his captors to submit to “bunga bunga,” which implies something sodomitic (qtd. in Sussman). Finally, Karima el Mahroug, the exotic dancer who publicly accused Berlusconi, reported that Berlusconi claimed to have learned the expression from Muammar Gaddafi, who imposed “Bunga Bunga” as a rite of his harem (qtd. in Sussman).

The term Bunga Bunga, along with the orgies and ideologies behind it, is rife with grotesque incongruities, mockeries, and corporeal excesses. Ferri characterizes Bunga Bunga as “a combination
of geriatric infantilization and racism … ” (qtd. in Sussman). That is, the concept has the quality of a phrase a parent might use with an infant, but it is employed by elite power brokers in the interest of exploiting a vulnerable population. This incongruity is underscored by the term’s use of mockery. With origins in African caricature, Bunga Bunga becomes a parody of an out-group. Its use is no homage; it is ridicule. Finally, that the term trades in corporeal excess is obvious. An orgy is a means of bodily mixing; and, as established above, the female body is an object of intense interest in a grotesque world. Indeed, like Trump, Berlusconi is fond of talking about female bodies (Benini).

On first glance, it may seem difficult to identify how the private orgies of a political leader might qualify as public rhetoric. But in describing the role of vulgar display in an upcoming film on the story of Berlusconi, Stephanie Bunbury made the link: “Pleasure, spectacle, and the currency of the female body were essential operating tools in a political culture of tissue-thin superficiality; running the state was just another game show.” Berlusconi, like Trump after him, launched his political career after becoming a billionaire real-estate tycoon and media mogul who trades in popular—often vulgar—entertainment. Bunbury’s point is that the separation between Bunga Bunga and Italian political culture is nominal at best. By controlling 90% of the airwaves in Italy, Berlusconi was able to carnivalize Italian culture itself, normalizing racism, female objectification, cultural frivolity, and intellectual distraction well before he rose to power. By the time he left office, Bunga Bunga was practically a metonym for political culture. As Marco Ventoruzzo, a law professor at Bocconi University in Milan, puts it: “It’s a government of lawlessness, and bunga bunga is just the cherry on the pie” (qtd. in Sussman).

**Hugo Chavez and the Imperialist Devils**

Lest one infer that grotesque rhetorics are strictly the realm of right-wing populism, there are abundant examples of it on the Left. As the leader of socialist Venezuela, Hugo Chavez framed himself as a radical reformer with a contempt for the status quo. In pursuing this ethos, he not only made populist appeals to the masses, he also used language that deliberately undermined notions of a generic, dignified head of state. As Charlie Devereux explains, Chavez’s trademark vulgarity “helps explain the socialist’s enduring popularity with followers who related to his humble roots.” His use of sexual jargon, slang, and crudity in public and even in open reference to other world leaders became essential to the achievement and maintenance of his success.

Chavez made something of a career out of attacking his US counterpart, President George W. Bush, and the United States more generally. He was fond of using nicknames, comparisons, and mocking insults in an effort to undermine US domination of global politics. He framed himself as a righteous fighter against the US global empire and its allies, which he perceived to be evil. “You are an imperialist pawn who attempts to curry favor with Danger Bush-Hitler, the number one mass murderer and assassin there is on the planet. Go straight to hell, Mr. Blair,” he once declared in apostrophe to the British prime minister. On another occasion, during a visit from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, he insisted, “Go to hell, gringos! Go home! … What does the empire want?” He had particular aspersions for Bush himself: “You are a donkey, Mr. Danger … . You are a coward, a killer, a [perpetrator of] genocide, an alcoholic, a drunk, a liar, an immoral person, Mr. Danger. You are the worst, Mr. Danger. The worst on this planet … ” Perhaps his most famous characterization was of Bush as the Devil himself, when, in reference to the US president, he reported to the United Nations: “Yesterday the Devil came here. Right here. And it smells of sulphur still today” (“Endlessly Quotable”).

Hugo Chavez’s ideology is reflected in a rhetoric that is filled not only with hyperbolic superlatives, but also “with mythical and religious references” (Nahon-Serfaty 654). He imagines a world in which good and evil are at war, and the means of battle are political systems. In this world, the veil between mortality and spirit is porously thin, allowing devils like the US president to run roughshod over smaller, more virtuous countries like Venezuela. This world is also populated by chimeras. Bush is debased as a donkey. The “empire” comprises “barking dogs” ("Aljazeera"). And, of course, other
heads of state are characterized as personifications or caricatures: Bush is repeatedly called “Danger,” Blair is a “pawn”; President Obama is called a “clown” (“Endlessly Quotable”). One of his domestic political opponents is lambasted thus: “You have a pig’s tail, a pig’s ears, you snort like a pig, you’re a low-life pig. You’re a pig, don’t try to hide it” (qtd. in Naranjo).

In addition to these incongruous comparisons, Chavez’s rhetoric enacts grotesque blending in its very style and structure. Isaac Nahon-Serfaty observes in Chavez’s rhetoric a strange alloy of “political, religious, comical, dramatic” styles that “disrupts established meanings, formalities, and conventions” (663). Chavez flits from religious homily to homespun tale to soaring encomium within the same text, changing tack and persona without any notice. This shape-shifting disrupts generic political templates and suggests new possibilities for political leadership—namely, that it can draw from the “real” motivations and identities of the speaker, warts and all. Nahon-Serfaty calls it “deformative disclosure” (653). In its bare-all complexity, it liberates both speaker and listener from their pretended roles in the public.

**Donald Trump and the Jester-Statesman**

Donald Trump performs and inhabits a world of excesses, exaggerations, incongruities, corporealities—in short, a grotesque world, a carnival teeming with bewildering mixtures. Even his infamously longish tie may work as a grotesque appeal, if one takes seriously the role of ill-fitting clothes in tragic literature (Spurgeon 325). Trump is a billionaire raised in a wealthy family, but he has the ethos of a street peddler. He is a graduate of one of the world’s most elite universities, but he is known for a boorish communication style and a distaste for books. He is at once a ruling class paragon and a raffish punk bent on disruption. He embodies the collapse between high and low, the incongruous conflation of form and chaos.

Rhetoricians have certainly done their part to study the Trump phenomenon. Mary Stuckey regards Trump “less as coherent exponent of a new political order and more as a symptom of the lack of rhetorical order that characterizes our present moment, a harbinger of political change to come” (669). Josh Gunn contests the notion that Trump can be reduced to labels that fail to capture the “double character of his appeal” (161). Helene A. Shugart observes that “abject corporeality” has become a fetish of so-called political authenticity; she specifically cites Chris Christie’s body as an enactment of the “unruly: excessive, protruding … authentic insofar that he rejects civility and order” (7). Similarly, Shugart points to images of Trump’s buttocks (e.g., as he boarded Air Force One, as he played golf) that went viral because of their unflattering quality.¹ Like the stories of his sexual exploits, these images became symbols of an abject corporeality that activates primitivist notions of authenticity (8). Trump is real, because he is uncontained. As I read them, these scholars are triangulating a theory of grotesque political rhetoric. Notions of disorder, doubling, excess, and abject corporeality call for a thoroughgoing examination of the grotesque and its historical functions; they also call for an expanded perspective on the various modalities and contexts of grotesquerie. My reading of Trump highlights how grotesque rhetoric operates at the textual and audio level. While his body is certainly an enactment of abjection, the style and structure of his speech, particularly as it interacts with an audience, are also telling markers of his grotesque appeal.

The exchange in question takes place early in the Republican Primary campaign, when Trump’s brand of rhetoric is being imprinted on the US public. Megyn Kelly confronts Trump about his persistent sexism. To back her claims, Kelly cites Trump’s own language about women he has encountered. In response, Trump jokes that he was referring only to Rosie O’Donnell, his pop

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¹Given these examples, it is important to guard against fat-phobia. As I read it, the abject, corporeal excess Shugart describes is morally agnostic. Whateve critical point she is making about the political culture activated by Trump, Christie, and others, she is not suggesting that body difference is an inherently bad thing, just as rejection of any presumed order is not an inherently bad thing. The body positivity/fat acceptance movement is a perfect example. Its intention is to subvert an exclusionary order (the cult of thinness) that is ripe for disruption. Its whole purpose is to be “unruly.” In its effort to render diverse bodies acceptable, it must first enact a transition in cultural norms; and periods of transition in cultural norms, as Burke argues, are where the grotesque prefers to make its home (Attitudes 57). For a history of the fat acceptance movement, see Charlotte Cooper.
culture rival. The crowd erupts in applause. When Kelly states that Trump has used sexist language to refer to more women than just O’Donnell, his countenance changes and the hall grows silent. Showing neither remorse for nor evidence against the accusation, Trump assumes a serious posture and pivots into a critique of political correctness. Even though it is an obvious red herring, the tactic works. The crowd applauds enthusiastically. The incident received an enormous amount of coverage, almost more than any other incident in his Primary campaign (Borchers; Sides). The incident is also modally rich, making use of text, image, and sound, not to mention the real-time interaction it provides between Trump, Kelly, and the breath-bated audience.

1. KELLY: Mr. Trump, one of the things people love about you is you speak your mind and you don’t use a politician’s filter. However, that is not without its downsides, in particular, when it comes to women.
You’ve called women you don’t like “fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals.”
(LAUGHTER)
2. Your Twitter account …
(LAUGHTER)
4. KELLY: No, it wasn’t.
(APPLAUSE)
5. Your Twitter account …
(APPLAUSE)
6. TRUMP: Thank you.
7. KELLY: For the record, it was well beyond Rosie O’Donnell.
8. TRUMP: Yes, I’m sure it was.
9. KELLY: Your Twitter account has several disparaging comments about women’s looks. You once told a contestant on Celebrity Apprentice it would be a pretty picture to see her on her knees. Does that sound to you like the temperament of a man we should elect as president, and how will you answer the charge from Hillary Clinton, who was [sic] likely to be the Democratic nominee, that you are part of the war on women?
10. TRUMP: I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct.
(APPLAUSE)
11. I’ve been challenged by so many people, and I don’t frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time either. This country is in big trouble. We don’t win anymore. We lose to China. We lose to Mexico both in trade and at the border. We lose to everybody. And frankly, what I say, and oftentimes it’s fun, it’s kidding. We have a good time. What I say is what I say. And honestly Megyn, if you don’t like it, I’m sorry. I’ve been very nice to you, although I could probably maybe not be, based on the way you have treated me. But I wouldn’t do that.
(APPLAUSE)
12. But you know what, we—we need strength, we need energy, we need quickness and we need brain in this country to turn it around. That, I can tell you right now.²

My interest in this exchange presumes there is more going on than a campaigning politician who wants to change the subject. Bakhtin argues that to understand the grotesque in literature, one must note the way incongruous voices interrupt each other, often within a single comment from a single person. Using Dostoevsky as an example, Bakhtin cites a moment in “Bobok” when the narrator is suddenly interrupted by the author without any explicit signal for the interruption. The narration is temporarily collapsed by the “clear words and intonations of a completely different voice” (Problems 141). But almost as soon as the author’s words take over, they are broken off, and the narrator

²The transcript comes from Time; I have added section numbers for analytical reference (“Transcript”). For a clip of the exchange, see “Donald Trump and Megyn Kelly.”
returns. Similarly, in Trump’s movement from statesman voice to jester voice, we see a generic politician, but we do not wait long before we see an insolent joker who would as soon break the rules of convention as mimic them. I chart this movement through a close reading and listening of the above exchange.

**Donald Trump’s Incongruous Combinations**

Trump displays grotesque incongruity not merely by joking about O’Donnell or critiquing political correctness alone but by quickly moving from one persona to the next, rendering the head of a jester on the body of a serious politician. First, one sees the joke and its context (sections 3–9). Here Trump is the sexist prankster who often labels women in incongruous and distorted ways to elicit laughs, using exaggerations to compare them to offensive animals or place them in physical contexts unnatural to their public identities (“on her knees”). However, when challenged, Trump becomes an indignant, statesman-like crusader against the scourge of political correctness (sections 10–11). This movement in and out of identities repeats itself in sections 11 and 12. By the second half of section 11, Trump morphs back into a prankster, but, at this stage, his pranking, his “kidding,” has taken on a dark undertone; it seems to be deployed as a threat against Kelly (“I could … maybe not be [nice]”). Then he quickly returns to the composed statesman in section 12 (“we need strength, we need energy, we need quickness”).

Even syntactically, his style changes, from meandering conversation (end of section 11) with its first- and second-person familiarity and cryptic dissembling to clear anaphoric directness with its decisive, first-person plural declarations (section 12). This stepping into and out of conflicting identities enacts the grotesque doubling, mixing, and hybridizing that characterize grotesque incongruity. Bakhtin calls it a “multi-styled and heterovoiced” discourse that “parodies on the high genres …, and various authorial masks make their appearance” (*Problems* 108). With each shift in identity, from ridiculous jester to discerning statesman, Trump creates incongruities that become progressively more destabilizing. By the last two sections, the playful joker we knew in the first section has become a legitimate threat who wields his popularity with a dark wink, and whose presentation as a dignified politician looks more and more like a favorite mask he wears. By repeatedly unveiling, then veiling, the persona of a prefabricated political candidate, Trump belies the stability of the persona itself.

**Donald Trump’s Ridiculous Mockeries**

It should already be evident from the above analysis that tactics of ridicule and humor play an essential role in Trump’s rhetoric. His deft use of this tactic and the corresponding audience response captures the grotesque quality of mocking laughter. Consider the audience reaction, for instance. A close listening indicates a mixed audience response initially; audience members are not entirely sure how to react to the unusual nature of Trump’s language. After Kelly’s first comment, in which she quotes Trump as labeling certain women “disgusting animals,” the transcript indicates “LAUGHTER.” What the transcript does not reveal is the mitigated, nervous quality of the laughter, which comes from relatively few audience members and is offset by a handful of barely audible groans. Perhaps more tellingly, it competes with and throws into relief the pregnant silence filling the rest of the room. A total capture of the “LAUGHTER” reveals something far more complicated than what the transcript reads. This laughter is mixed, even inverted, because it paradoxically highlights the lack of laughter in the muted distress shared by most of the audience members. Not until Trump interjects his joke about Rosie O’Donnell does the tension in the room burst; but, again, contrary to what the transcript initially reads, it does not burst in the form of “LAUGHTER.” Instead, the stifled laughter that precedes the joke is overwhelmed by a wash of applause. What laughter does occur during this exchange is hardly something that can be identified simply as laughter. As the camera pans the audience, it reveals that only a minority of audience members are laughing, or even applauding. Most keep their hands in their laps; many cover their mouths in what seems like surprise and incredulity. Others, rather than applaud or laugh, turn to
their neighbors in whispered chatter. And, of course, some can be seen throwing their heads back in full delight. It is impossible to characterize the entire audience as if it were a unitary organism. No single interpretation can suffice. For this reason, the grotesque is a fitting descriptor; it is multivalenced, incongruous, impossible to categorize, and shot through with a kind of disquiet. As Megyn Kelly continues to confront Trump with his demeaning comments about women, the laughter becomes even more isolated, until, with the tension mounting, it disappears altogether. To use Philip Thomson’s characterization of grotesque laughter, “The guffaw becomes the grimace” (27). So, too, with Trump. As the laughter and mockery subside, the dark undertones of his misogyny emerge more fully into view. As noted above, he successfully breaks the tension with his response, but a full reading, listening, and viewing of the interchange charts a grotesque process—from corporeal excess and mockery to a truncated and nervous laughter to a tense silence and, finally, to an ambiguous threat. Trump’s mockery of women takes the form of humor and lades it with something unsettling. His amusement has a foreboding quality.

Burke refers to the grotesque as “the cult of incongruity without the laughter,” by which he means an absence of affirming laughter (Attitudes 58). This incongruity, in which laughter seems to be a nervous reaction to unsettling encounters, nicely defines Trump’s appeal throughout this debate and his campaign. There are moments, to be sure, when Trump is granted a full outpouring of applause and sometimes, rarely, affirming laughter. But a full listening of the first debate reveals an audience that is far more likely to react to him in fragmented ways, some with nervous laughter, some with disapproval, some with applause, some with ambivalent silence—all in the same fraught moment, all in thrall to the strange political hydra before them.

Bakhtin argues that the central characteristic of grotesque life, what he calls the carnivalesque, is this sort of “ambivalence”; it does not permit an “absolutized response” (Problems 164; Rabelais 38). Note again the end of section 11: Trump takes his swipe at Kelly veiled within a context of “fun.” The moment is opaque with ambiguity. What does Trump mean, exactly, when he says to Kelly, “I could probably maybe not be”? And what does one make of his claim that his comments are “fun” or “kidding,” especially in light of the threat that follows? The “kidding” Trump enacts here is inherently grotesque because it is charged with the impulse to knock down. Familiar terms like “fun,” “kidding,” “good time,” “I’m sorry,” and “nice” are inverted to communicate just the opposite of their dictionary meaning. To a decorous audience, Trump’s language is anything but “fun” or a “good time.” Likewise, when he says, “I’m sorry,” he seems to mean that he is not at all sorry. He ultimately comes off not as “nice” but as mean. Finally, when Trump says, “I wouldn’t do that,” one gets the sense he would be willing to attack Kelly. In the grotesque world, just as a clown may become king, so fun may be spiked with malice and apologies with threats.

**Donald Trump’s Corporeal Excesses**

It is no coincidence that the incongruous and ridiculous dialog above revolves around the topic of human bodies, specifically female human bodies. It will likely come as no surprise that the tiff between Trump and Kelly did not end with the debate or the tweets. During subsequent tweets and a CNN interview, Trump followed through on his veiled threat, painting Kelly as being hysterical with anger during their debate exchange, even though the footage shows she was well composed. Trump reported, “You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her … wherever” (qtd. in Rojas). In attacking Kelly, Trump chose to focus on her appearance, and he laced his critique with the image of a bodily fluid. Trump repeatedly judge’s the female body through a grotesque frame, such as in his later comments about Hillary Clinton’s bathroom use, Carly Fiorina’s face, or Mika Brzezinski’s plastic surgery, and the list could go on (Lange; White). His fixation on women, body parts, and bodily fluids reveals a rhetoric that operates within the grotesque mode. By presenting his opponents in monstrous terms, he undercuts their static authority as composed commentators; and by saturating his descriptions of them with references to bodily fluids, he further symbolizes the breakdown of their orderly professional and personal selfhood.
Trump’s incongruous doubling between statesman and jester, his humorless laughter at the expense of political opposition, and his corporeal preoccupations all point to a rhetorical strategy designed to exceed the boundaries of conventional politics. The old orders—the once stable myths and monovocal institutions of control—no longer hold. It would be naïve to presume that when the old orders no longer hold, a brighter, more equitable reality will fill the vacuum. As Foust puts it, this is a discourse that “simultaneously (and indiscriminately) destroys as it creates” (149). Such discourse is neither methodical nor altruistic in its action. For an audience who wants change that ultimately destroys the generic mask, this action is especially satisfying. Richard North Patterson calls Trump “a political mutation” come to “rip the party’s mask off” (see paras. 32–37). The mask in question is that of the political class Trump so despises—the same mask he dons merely to remove it again, to make known its effete transparency.

**Discussion**

We inhabit a *mundus inversus*, a political cosmos thrown upside down that calls for analytical language, not just visceral epithets. Although I have not supplied this language comprehensively, I have endeavored to contribute to that end. I have proposed that rhetoricians ought to know what a grotesque rhetoric is and how it functions politically. By engaging in strategic incongruities, ridiculous mockeries, and corporeal excesses, the grotesque undisciplines a social order in which an embittered public has lost trust. But the success or lack of success of this undisciplining raises a number of questions that call for discussion.

First, how does one know at which point political orders have grown so stale and generic as to become vulnerable to grotesque rhetoric? In other words, how does one recognize a grotesque kairos? On the one hand, it is tempting to cherry-pick data that support notions of a world in strife and transition, then to correlate those data with rhetorically grotesque artifacts. There is always going to be something extraordinary to which scholars may point in order to back a post-hoc argument. On the other hand, when unprecedented or demonstrably rare data prove to be more than isolated incidents—but rather can be shown to prove historical trends—then correlations become less facile. A number of such trends suggest some provisional conclusions worth noting.

For instance, distrust in political institutions has recently approached a troubling threshold. Polls from 2018 in both the United States and Europe show that most “average people” distrust their democratic institutions, and that among these people a significant percentage would support rule by a strong leader who is less constrained by parliaments and the courts (Stokes). On the eve of the 2018 US midterm elections, Axios released a poll showing that barely half of US Americans have faith in democracy as a form of government (Hart). Another speculation points to the inherently grotesque mixing, doubling, and incoherence of social media discourse. As Venna Das argues, “what is at issue is perhaps not so much direct censorship as the excess of speech that almost succeeds in silencing thought …, [which] is novel in the crises of democracies that characterize many polities of the world today” (para. 1). A related speculation is that Western democracies have become, in Nahon-Serfaty’s view, mostly “ocular” in their performances, leading to a “condition of spectatorship” that undermines discursive rationality (654; see also Ivie 710). Still another speculation, related uniquely to US Americans, is that the office of the presidency has grossly exceeded its constitutional limits in an orgy of neoliberal overreach. The authority of the Oval Office now resembles but far outstrips its former constraints (Ivie 714). In other words, there are viable reasons to believe we have reached a grotesque kairos in Western politics, such that the old institutional and discursive orders are not only facing criticism, but that, by virtue of their inertia and excess, they are beyond criticism and merit our mockery.

Second, in exploring the relationship between a grotesque kairos and a grotesque rhetoric, how is one to know whether political decrepitude precedes grotesque rhetoric or grotesque rhetoric brings about political decrepitude? This question calls to mind the famous debate surrounding the rhetorical situation as a concept. Whereas Lloyd Bitzer regarded historical context as the objective, controlling factor in the production of rhetorical discourse, Richard Vatz argued the contrary—namely, that rhetors dictate rhetorical situations. Barbara Biesecker famously took both perspectives
to task by suggesting that each was a side of the same oversimplified coin. She regarded rhetorical situations as both constructing and being constructed by the process of rhetorical transaction (113, 121). In other words, participants in the situation freely negotiate and shift their identities, even as historical circumstances are altered, and historical circumstances are altered as participants renegotiate their identities. Neither brings the other into being, but both rhetor and situation emerge out of the interchange itself.

This fluid relationship between rhetoric and situation mirrors what we know of the grotesque. The 2016 Donald Trump example is instructive. What gave Trump his political leverage was his ability to recognize an audience—a yet-to-be-formed coalition of interest groups—that had been overlooked by other candidates. This coalition did not consist of traditional ideological groups, such as the conservative Tea Party (Bump; Illing). Rather, Trump intuited a discontent among certain demographic groups, primarily the white, working-class (Teixeira). His rhetoric was designed to appeal to this coalition (Silver, “Trump Is”; Wilson). His rhetoric also resulted in a flood of media attention. As of mid-summer 2015, at the height of the Primary, Trump was attracting 46% of all media attention going to the Republican race. That percentage represents more attention than was granted to the next six candidates combined (Silver, “How Trump Hacked”). The more Trump set himself apart from “establishment” candidates, the more attention people seemed to pay, and the more popular he became. To put it another way, the more he framed himself and the world in grotesque terms, the more effectively he hailed followers into the carnival. Likewise, the more these followers coalesced into a public bent on disruption, the more he shed the role of a generic politician and assumed the role of a carnival impresario. In this way, he was both symptom and agent (Ivie 707).

Finally, how is one to evaluate grotesque rhetoric critically? That is, what are the moral implications with respect to political and cultural ideologies, marginalized groups, othered bodies, and so forth? Some scholarship seems to presume that grotesque disruptions will entail more equitable distributions of power, because by removing the boundaries of social order the oppressed and marginalized will be liberated (e.g., Bruner; Foust; Herder; Martin and Reneger; Munksgaard). On the other hand, demagogues like Trump belie—or, at least, qualify—this hope. Elites who manage to master the art of carnival life rarely have the intention of empowering the masses beyond the illusory performance itself. Grotesque performances (e.g., carnivals) break the tension for a time, but, as Cory Wimberly notes, the chief gains for the lower and middle classes may be psychological only (179). Once the mass’s appetite for disruption is sated and the celebration ends, the establishment is re-enthroned. As if to make this point, Jennifer Wingard argues that Trump’s rhetorical style acts as a diversion while the GOP’s power structure pursues its plutocratic legislative agenda (42). To ask whether or not the grotesque has ideological investments therefore misses the mark. The grotesque seems to lack moral allegiance to any given cause; it is a neutral tool that can be wielded by anyone skilled enough to use it, but a demagogue seems especially well prepared to do so.

What the twenty-first-century examples I have provided highlight is this apparent compatibility between grotesquerie and demagoguery. Demagoguery is designed to exploit the primal emotions and prejudices of the non-elite classes in order to gain political influence. Grotesquerie is designed to challenge oppressive social orders. The two make amicable companions. Where demagoguery casts the target audience as the victims of a social order in which other groups are entitled to make unearned gains, grotesquerie provides the means of undermining that order. Trump, for instance, emerges from a context in which a Black man has just completed two terms as president, a woman is his presumptive opponent and the likely next president, and women and other historically marginalized groups have made key strides in social access generally. The effective demagogue exploits the resentment these gains tend to entail. Indeed, the demagogue will frame such gains as evidence of an existential threat to the target audience, just as Donald Trump inspired a coalition comprising more men than women, more old people than young, more working-class people than professionals, more low-income and less formally educated people than people with high income and advanced formal
education, and far more white people than nonwhite people—in other words, demographic groups that would be more likely to believe that a new, bleeding heart establishment is squeezing them out.

When theorists of the grotesque refer to “the establishment,” they imply the question of who or what this establishment is. In the case of Donald Trump, the establishment comprises the entitled populations he would jettison—namely, women, minorities, the poor, people of foreign origin, and other populations perceived to be threats to the target audience. Grotesque symbols rely on and feed off of publics who are motivated by what Nietzsche and others term ressentiment, an unconscious, unintellectual principle of reaction to one’s own sense of disempowerment. Ressentiment tends to reassign blame for one’s weakness to scapegoats and to lay the groundwork for new moral valuations, which may help explain why some carnival groups see themselves, despite their vulgarity, as doing noble deeds (see Nietzsche 19–24). To the above factors that comprise a grotesque kairos, then, another might be added: Where minority or underserved populations make gains, thus triggering demagogic reactions from cynical political leaders, a grotesque rhetoric may be in tow. So again, while grotesquerie may not have an active moral allegiance, it does seem to be a favorite tool of the demagogue.

I have argued that the concept of the grotesque helps to capture the often mystifying circumstances of present-day Western politics. Although many questions remain to be pursued with respect to grotesque politics, scholars might reliably conclude the following: first, that the grotesque emerges during historical periods of transition and upheaval, when institutions, traditions, and other structures of social order have reached such a threshold of ridiculousness that there is a mass shift of allegiances away from the existing symbols of authority. During these historical periods, publics are not merely eager for change; they seek wreckage. Second, the grotesque is a rhetoric that draws on identifiable symbolic features, including incongruous combination, ridiculous mockery, and corporeal excess. These features have taken hold not only in the Trumpian politics of the United States, but also in several other Western nations, suggesting that the era of the generic political executive who culls policy platforms from conventional wisdom seems waning. Finally, while of itself the grotesque may be morally neutral, it seems uniquely complicit to demagogues. Far more than a knee-jerk tag commentators pin to offensive displays, rhetorical critics might adopt the grotesque as a lens into the ongoing carnival of twenty-first-century politics.

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Works Cited


