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Stanley Kubrick and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque

IN THE ANALYSIS of film style, how can we account for such things as tone, mood, and complex emotional affect, all of which are subjectively perceived and describable only with impoverished adjectives?¹ I raise the question because it has special relevance for the study of a director like Stanley Kubrick, whose films are often said to have a “cool” or “cold” emotional tone, presumably expressive of his personality. Kubrick’s public image may have contributed something to this reaction. To the world at large he was an intellectual Mr. Cool who seemed to have adopted Stephen Dedalus’ strategy—“silence, exile, and cunning”—as a way of dealing with the movie industry and his own celebrity. Some of those who worked with him believed he was misanthropic; for example, one of his early collaborators, the gifted novelist Calder Willingham, wrote that Kubrick’s major deficiency in directing *Paths of Glory* (1957) was his “near psychopathic indifference to and coldness toward the human beings in the story. . . . [H]e doesn’t like people much; they interest him mainly when they do unspeakably hideous things or when their idiocy is so malignant as to be horrifyingly amusing.”²

Remarks such as these, plus the many critical references to what Pauline Kael called the “arctic spirit” of Kubrick’s films, eventually prompted his friends to come to his defense, assuring us of his love for his family and his deep affection for stray animals and household pets. “I know from dozens of articles and a few too many books that Stanley was considered to be cold,” Michael Herr writes in his touching memoir of working with Kubrick on *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), “although this would have to be among people who never knew him.”³ Herr paints a picture of a “gregarious” and convivial man, although he also notes that Kubrick’s personality resembled Lenny Bruce’s and that he often leavened conversation with sick humor. Where Kubrick’s films are concerned, Herr goes to some length to refute charges that the director’s reputed coldness eventuated in sterility or lack of feeling—and in fact it does seem

odd that anyone who has seen *Lolita* (1961) or *Barry Lyndon* (1975) could convincingly accuse Kubrick of being emotionless.

Herr’s arguments aside, several features of Kubrick’s style, most of them discussed in the ever-increasing library of books about him, may be said to create an impression of coolness or at least an air of perfectionism and aesthetic detachment. First among these is what *Time* magazine once called the “lapidary” quality of his photographic imagery,⁴ which relies upon visibly motivated and rather hard light sources, and which usually favors a deep-focus, crystal-clear resolution, like the world seen through the ground glass of a fine optical instrument such as a Mitchell viewfinder.⁵ Kubrick also had a fondness for the wide-angle lens, which he employed in the manner of Orson Welles, to create an eerie, dynamic, sometimes caricatured sense of space. Like Welles and Max Ophuls, he was a virtuoso of the moving camera, except that he usually created a more rigidly geometrical feeling; his tracking movements follow the characters in a lateral direction, traveling past objects in the foreground, or they advance remorselessly down a fearsome corridor toward impending doom, rather like the inexorable march of a military maneuver. Set over against this technique is his repeated use of handheld shots, often positioned at bizarre angles, which usually depict violent combat. The radical shifts between geometrical tracking and skittish, handheld movements are in some ways echoed in the performances of his actors, who depart from cinematic naturalism in two ways: through a slow, sometimes absurdist playing of dialogue, in which equal weight is given to every line, no matter how banal (see the exchanges between astronauts in *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968] and almost all the conversations in *Eyes Wide Shut* [1999]); and through an over-the-top display of mugging (see George C. Scott in *Dr. Strangelove* [1963] and Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange* [1971]). Both techniques have the effect of slightly alienating the audience



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Stanley Kubrick with "Weegee" (Arthur H. Fellig) on the set of *Dr. Strangelove* (1963)

and this alienation is consistent with Kubrick's tendency to eschew melodrama or sentiment. Most of his films are obviously satiric and are focused on flawed, criminal, or even monstrous protagonists.

And yet these important formal and thematic traits strike me as insufficient to explain the effects of certain typical scenes in Kubrick. For instance, exactly what kind of response is appropriate to *Dr. Strangelove* when he rises from his wheelchair, takes a twisted step, and shouts "Mein Führer, I can walk" with such resonating theatrical ecstasy? Or to Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* when he smashes the Cat Lady's head with a huge ceramic penis? Or to the paralytic Sir Charles Lyndon in *Barry Lyndon* when his gleeful laughter turns into a diseased cough and then into a heart attack? Or to Jack in *The Shining* (1980) when he loudly complains about

"the old sperm bank" he has married? To be sure, these moments are blackly humorous, but they also provoke other kinds of emotion—shock, disgust, horror, obscene amusement, and perhaps even sadistic pleasure. To understand their effects and their bearing on Kubrick's so-called coolness, I would argue that we need to examine them in light of what might be called the aesthetics of the grotesque, a term that appears often in literary and art criticism but seldom in film studies. First, however, since in ordinary parlance "grotesque" means simply "hideously ugly," it may be useful if we briefly consider the term's cultural history and implications for poetics.

Unlike many important categories in the history of art, "grotesque" has a fairly specific birth date. It originates sometime around 1500, when excavations

beneath the city of Rome unearthed a series of ornamental wall paintings in which animal, vegetable, and mineral imagery mingled in bizarre fashion, deliberately confusing the animate with the inanimate: human heads grew from trees, the faces of animals were appended to human bodies, garlands of flowers sprang from candelabra, and so forth. The paintings, which had been denounced as “monstrous” and “bastard” by the classical author Vitruvius in the age of Augustus, were discovered in *grotte* or caves, and from this “underground” source derived the adjective *grottesco* and the noun *la grottesca*. Initially the two words referred solely to the ancient style of ornamentation, but not long afterward, the French author Rabelais used “grotesque” to describe deformed or “lower” aspects of the human body. By the eighteenth century in England and Germany, the term had become associated with artistic caricature and it took on purely pejorative or critical connotations. Finally, during the Victorian period, British art historian John Ruskin gave it an important definition that has influenced virtually all subsequent uses. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), Ruskin describes a series of “monstrous” heads, “leering in bestial degradation,” which are carved on the Bridge of Sighs and other Venetian landmarks; and from these sculptures, all of them conceived in a “spirit of idiotic mockery,” he develops the following theory:

[I]t seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or the other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements: there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest.⁶

In typical Victorian fashion, Ruskin moralizes the grotesque, admiring the types that belong to the festive, “wayside” culture of medieval peasants and criticizing those produced by the decadent Venetian aristocrats of the renaissance, who created masked carnivals and played “unnecessarily,” engaging in “restless and dissatisfied indulgence.”⁷ He nevertheless finds examples of “noble” grotesque in Dante’s *Inferno* and in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *King Lear*. Ultimately, he argues that “there is no test of greatness in periods, nations, or men, more sure than the development, among them or

in them, of a noble grotesque; and no test of comparative smallness or limitation . . . more sure than the absence of grotesque invention.”⁸

The most elaborate scholarly attempt to explore the full implication of the grotesque can be found in Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, translated into English in 1968, which arrives at the notion (first articulated by G. K. Chesterton) that the form constitutes a psychological strategy aimed at defamiliarizing the everyday world and thereby controlling or exorcizing the absurdities and terrors of life.⁹ Another influential theory is developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*, also translated into English in 1968. Bakhtin confines himself almost entirely to the “exuberant” or “carnavalesque” features of medieval Billingsgate and lower-body comedy, which he explains as a popular social ritual devoted to various bodily excesses and directed against “superior powers of the sun, the earth, the king, the military leader.”¹⁰ For virtually all later writers, the grotesque is a somewhat broader category associated with both the carnivalesque and the terrifying—at one extreme with gross-out comedy and at the other with the monstrous, the uncanny, or the supernatural. In all its visual and verbal manifestations, however, the grotesque is structured by a dual implication and therefore has something in common with such rhetorical figures as ambiguity, irony, and paradox. Its defining feature is what Philip Thompson describes as an “unresolved” tension between laughter and some unpleasant emotion such as disgust or fear.¹¹ In effect, it fuses laughing and screaming impulses, leaving the viewer or reader balanced between conflicting feelings, slightly unsure how to react.

The problem with such definitions is of course that individual viewers can react differently. In the last analysis, the grotesque is always to some extent in the eye of the beholder and because it involves discordant effects, people sometimes disagree about what things it should include. Exactly what mixture of laughter, fear, and disgust is needed to make something grotesque? To what degree is the grotesque a style or a subject matter? (To Victor Hugo, the grotesque was something that occurred in nature and not simply in art.) Is it an artistic mode, and if so, how does it contribute to such related modes as satire, caricature, and black comedy? In my opinion nobody has given completely satisfactory answers to these questions, although reasonably convincing arguments have been made that the grotesque depends upon a more extreme style of exaggeration than simple caricature and that unlike some types of black comedy, it is exclusively preoccupied with monstrous or repulsive images of the human body. Even so,

satire and caricature frequently employ grotesque imagery and at least one theorist has argued that the grotesque should be understood as a subcategory of black humor.¹²

For most writers on the subject, it would seem that the grotesque is exclusively visual, rendered through pictures or descriptive language. By this account there is no such thing as grotesque music, although when Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* accompanies an evening of rape and “ultraviolence” with his rendition of “Singin’ in the Rain,” one could argue that the conjunction is grotesque. Some writers, chief among them Thomas Mann, have claimed that modernist literature’s tendency to mix genres and tones is essentially a grotesque practice. The most common understanding of the term, however, involves deformed and disgusting representations of the body—especially when they place exaggerated emphasis on the anus, the vagina, or other orifices, or when they depict bodily secretions or fluids. The same could be said of images that mix the human anatomy with something alien—the head of an animal, the legs of a puppet, and so forth. In the cinema, the grotesque can be created with masks, makeup, wide-angle close ups, or simply with the casting of actors who seem grossly fat, emaciated, or ugly in ways that make their faces potentially both comic and frightening.¹³

No matter how the grotesque is achieved, it is not quite identical with the “absurd,” at least if we take that term to mean “opposed to reason.” Nor is it quite identical with the “bizarre,” the “macabre,” or the “uncanny,” which are usually taken to mean “very strange,” “associated with death,” and “apparently supernatural.” It nevertheless belongs to a family of these and other emotionally laden words with which it can sometimes blend and become confused. Grotesque figures often appear in the theater of the absurd and in ghost stories, and all artistic uses of the grotesque might be said to imply a deep-seated anxiety. One thing is certain: although the grotesque has a long history, artistic modernism, or what the general public once thought of as “modern art,” is strongly marked by grotesque effects. Consider, as only a few examples from the literary sphere, Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” the “Circe” episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, and Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*. Where modern painting is concerned, grotesque effects can be seen in the “Exquisite Corpse” drawings of the Surrealists (which are in some ways analogous to the “bastard” forms of the ancient Italian cave paintings) and in numerous images by Picasso and Francis Bacon. The list

could be expanded considerably, to the point where the grotesque functions almost as a guarantee of artistic seriousness and authenticity during the first half of the twentieth century. As in previous eras, it has its “sportive” and “terrible” branches, but the terrible dominates. Even so, in high-modernist grotesque we seldom encounter the pure supernatural. Modernism remains at bottom a secular aesthetic, rebelling against genteel beauty, bourgeois realism, and classical decorum; its uses of the grotesque are usually aimed at showing that this is in some sense the way the world actually is or ought to be understood. Its hideous ghosts and monsters therefore tend to be given psychoanalytic explanations or they occupy what Tzvetan Todorov calls the “fantastic” mode, in which events are poised ambiguously between fantasy and reality.¹⁴

The twentieth century’s most influential art form, the cinema, is filled with instances of the grotesque—in slapstick comedies from *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (1933) to *Stuck on You* (2003) and in monster movies from *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) to *Hellboy* (2004). At a more overtly “artistic” level, similar effects can be seen in many celebrated films from Weimar Germany, among them Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), which was influenced by the grotesque caricatures of George Grosz. Indeed the grotesque is important to the entire history of international art cinema; we need only think of Eisenstein,¹⁵ Buñuel, Kurosawa, Polanski, and above all Fellini. (More recent examples are Maddin, Lynch, Cronenberg, and the Coen brothers.) For roughly similar reasons, the modernist-inflected film noir of the 1940s and 50s made use of the grotesque, as did several of the American directors who worked slightly against the grain of classic Hollywood—consider Von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1924), Sternberg’s *Blonde Venus* (1932) and *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and especially Welles’s *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), *Mr. Arkadin* (1954), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *The Trial* (1962).

All of which brings us back to Kubrick, whose work is shaped by the artistic modernism he absorbed in New York during the late 1940s and 50s, at the very moment when black humor and the theater of the absurd were profoundly influencing American culture. As a young photographer for *Look* magazine, Kubrick not only took pictures of George Grosz but also worked alongside and effectively became a member of the cutting-edge, “New York School” photographic artists of the period, including two specialists in the grotesque: Arthur Felig, aka “Weegee,” the first American street photographer to have his work displayed at the Museum of Modern Art, and Diane Arbus, whose career transition from *Harper’s Bazaar* to art photography followed

close on the heels of Kubrick's move from *Look* to the cinema. Weegee is often described by art historians as a populist and a documentary realist, but the unsettling force of much of his imagery derives from the way he makes New Yorkers, whether opera-goers or Bowery bums, look like participants in a carnival freak show. Arbus's more sharply disturbing pictures are devoted to people she herself described as "freaks." Susan Sontag, who intensely disliked the "cool dejection" and apparent lack of "compassionate purpose" in Arbus's work, accurately described the bewildered emotions it can produce. "[The] mystery of Arbus's photographs," Sontag wrote, "lies in what they suggest about how her subjects felt. . . . Do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like *that*? Do they know how grotesque they are?"¹⁶ Similar questions are raised by Kubrick's 1949 magazine study of Greenwich Village boxer Walter Cartier and his twin brother Vincent—a noir-like and vaguely freakish "human interest" project that became a template for Kubrick's early documentary, *Day of the Fight* (1951) and for his second feature film, *Killer's Kiss* (1955). Significantly, Kubrick later hired the aging Weegee as a still photographer for *Dr. Strangelove* and in *The Shining* he quoted Arbus's famously creepy photograph of twin girls.

In this regard, we should also note that Kubrick was the first American director to contribute to the post-war boom in art cinema. *Fear and Desire* (1953), his initial effort at a feature-length project, was distributed by New York promoter Joseph Burstyn, the creator of the U.S. market for Italian neorealism, and it played in the "sure-seater" urban theaters that Barbara Willinsky has identified with the proliferation of art-houses during the same period.¹⁷ A heavily allegorical drama, *Fear and Desire* contains a great many signs of "modern art-ness," including Soviet-style montage, wide-angle photography, internal monologues, and a sex scene involving bondage and attempted rape. As in most of his subsequent work, Kubrick also employs many of the formal strategies that David Bordwell has shown to be characteristic of the art cinema as a "mode of film practice"—especially the use of actual locations and the sort of expressive "realism" that depends on ambiguity, alienation, angst, and absurdity.¹⁸ What makes the film "artistic" in a specifically Kubrickian sense, however, is its fascination with the grotesque. Its most effective sequence involves a nocturnal military raid in which a group of enemy soldiers are taken by surprise as they eat dinner. Kubrick shows a dying hand convulsively flexing in a bowl of greasy stew and squeezing a wet clump of bread through its fingers. The bodies of the dead, framed from the waist down, are dragged across the

floor, their legs splayed at an angle that makes them look like puppets. At the end of the sequence, in an image designed to evoke both disgust and sardonic amusement, we see a large close up of one of the victors as he gulps down a bowl of cold gruel from the dinner table, wipes off his slimy chin, and grins with satisfaction.

Kubrick's next film, the low-budget thriller *Killer's Kiss*, makes this tendency even more evident, particularly when it climaxes with a clumsy duel between a hero named Davy and a villain named Vince in a loft filled with naked department store mannequins. The two men, rivals for a dance-hall girl named Gloria, are armed respectively with a spear and a fire ax, but in the midst of their quasi-gliatorial combat they pick up female mannequins and begin throwing body parts at one another. At one point Davy tosses the entire body of a woman at Vince, who chops it in half with his ax. Later, Davy pushes Vince down on a pile of female bodies and tries to spear him, in the process getting the weapon caught in the lower half of a woman; as Davy waves the truncated torso around to shake it loose, Vince swings wildly with his ax and shatters the mannequin to pieces. Throughout, the suspense is charged with humor, partly because Kubrick's editing makes it difficult for us to distinguish the real figures from the mannequins, and partly because several of the wide or master shots run for a fairly long time, allowing us to see the sweaty, dusty combatants stumbling, floundering, falling, and growing weary. Whenever I have shown the sequence to students, a few of them break into laughter. Their response seems to me perfectly in keeping with at least part of the effect Kubrick is trying to achieve, in which the horrific, the uncanny, and the sadistically amusing are suspended in an awkward, uncertain equilibrium.

In the history of art photography there are many instances where similar effects are achieved by confounding the animate with the inanimate. Kubrick's idea for the climax of *Killer's Kiss* almost certainly derives from a tradition of surrealist-inspired photos involving department-store mannequins, much of which has recently been documented in a museum catalog, *Puppen, Körper, Automaten: Phantasmen der Moderne*, edited by Pia Müller-Tamm and Katharina Sykora.¹⁹ (Famous practitioners of such photography in the period between 1920 and 1945 include Eugene Atget, Umbo, Hans Bellmer, and especially Werner Rohde, whose images bear a strong resemblance to the ones in the Kubrick film.) There are even older scenes of the type in literature—for example, E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, in which the protagonist, Nathaniel, has fallen in love with an automaton named Olympia, who

is constructed by a Professor Spalanzani. Entering the Professor's house one day, he finds the Professor and an Italian named Coppola battling with one another for possession of the body of a woman:

Nathaniel recoiled in horror on recognizing that the figure was Olympia. Boiling with rage, he was about to tear his beloved from the grip of the madmen, when Coppola by an extraordinary exertion of strength twisted the figure out of the Professor's hands and gave him such a terrible blow with her, that Spalanzani reeled backwards and fell over the table among the phials and retorts . . . Coppola threw the figure across his shoulder and, laughing shrilly and horribly, ran hastily down the stair, the figure's ugly feet hanging down and banging like wood against the steps.

In his useful monograph on the theory of the grotesque, Philip Thompson quotes these lines to illustrate the way in which something "disconcerting, perhaps even frightening" can also seem "irresistibly comic, not least because of the slapstick nature of the brawl."²⁰ The comic feeling depends as well on the way the human body is reduced to a clattering stick figure or mechanical object—an image that preoccupied Kubrick throughout his career, most notably in *Dr. Strangelove*, in which the mad scientist is part man and part puppet, in *A Clockwork Orange*, whose very title indicates a grotesque combination of the organic and the mechanical, and in *2001*, in which black comedy arises from a computer with an uncannily human voice and personality.

Kubrick's third film and first true Hollywood production, *The Killing* (1956), differs from its most important predecessor and clear influence, John Huston's

The Asphalt Jungle (1950), chiefly by virtue of the fact that Kubrick gives us a veritable festival of grotesque imagery, much of it prompted by screenwriter Jim Thompson's sadistic humor and by the large cast of pug-ugly veterans of film noir. Among the players are a couple of newer, even more eccentric personalities. Maurice, the philosophical strong man hired to distract police during a race-track robbery, is Kola Kwariani, a real-life chess player and ex-wrestler Kubrick had known in New York; and Nikki, the sniper who shoots a horse, is Timothy Carey, a Method-trained actor who had previously worked with Elia Kazan. Kwariani has a cauliflower ear, a shaved head, a fat belly, a hairy torso, and an almost impenetrable accent. The ruckus he starts in the racetrack bar is truly carnivalistic—a cross between a Three Stooges slapstick routine, a monster movie, and a wrestling match on 1950s TV. For his part, Carey has a reptilian grin, a habit of talking through his teeth, and the dreamy attitude of the sort of hipster we might encounter in a Jim Jarmusch movie. He seems especially strange in an early sequence involving a conversation with Sterling Hayden at a shooting range somewhere outside the city. The first image in this sequence, accompanied by three rapid explosions of gunfire, is of three identical targets in the shape of comic-book gangsters who frown and point their pistols directly at us. The camera tilts over the targets and we see Carey and Hayden walking forward. As their conversation develops, we become aware of bizarre visual juxtapositions: parked in front of a ramshackle house in the background is an MG sports car and cradled in Carey's arms is a loveable puppy. The three menacing targets in the foreground seem both uncanny and vaguely comical, like the mannequins in *Killer's Kiss*. Hayden launches into a rapid-fire monologue that explains his plans for the heist and at one point during



Killer's Kiss (Stanley Kubrick, 1955): the fight among the mannequins



The Killing (Stanley Kubrick, 1956): Timothy Carey, puppy, and target



The Killing: Elisha Cook, Jr. and Marie Windsor



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his long exposition, Kubrick cuts to a dramatic, low-angle close up of Carey, viewed from across one of the targets in the extreme foreground, so that the cute little dog he is holding is framed by two monstrous heads. Carey softly strokes the puppy and reacts to Hayden's speech by leaning thoughtfully over the target and spitting on the ground.

The Killing has often been interpreted as a sort of existentialist parable or as a philosophical commentary on what Thomas Allen Nelson calls the conflict between rational order and contingency.²¹ But the film's immediate effect on audiences is emotional rather than philosophical or intellectual. The stolid (and sometimes inaccurate) voice-over narration that provides a time scheme is in ironic contrast to the bizarre imagery, functioning rather like what T. S. Eliot once described as "meaning" in poetry: in the guise of offering rational information, it helps to keep the viewer's mind "diverted and quiet . . . much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog."²² Meanwhile, the complex temporal disposition of the plot transforms a hyper-rational plan for a robbery into a splintered montage of lurid details or local situations. Consider Sterling Hayden's rubber clown mask—the first of several grotesque disguises in Kubrick, foreshadowing the adolescent thugs who wear phallic noses in *A Clockwork Orange*, the ghostly figure who performs fellatio while wearing a pig mask in *The Shining*, and the orgiastic revelers who wear Venetian carnival masks in *Eyes Wide Shut*. Consider also the more general features of staging and performance in the scenes between Elisha Cook, Jr. and Marie Windsor, in the first of which a little man is posed at the feet of a hugely voluptuous, heavily made-up woman whose size is exaggerated by the wide-angle lens and the placement of her body in the frame. Everything here is caricatured,

but at the same time played in a measured style and photographed in a smooth series of mesmerizing long takes that somehow heighten the feeling of a cruel burlesque.

One could go on in this vein, proceeding film by film and noting elements of the grotesque that recur in Kubrick's work: the leering hotel keeper named "Swine" in *Lolita*, the metallicly wiggled and mini-skirted "Mom" in *A Clockwork Orange*, the grossly made-up "Chevalier de Balibari" in *Barry Lyndon*, the pudgy Japanese men in bikini underwear in *Eyes Wide Shut*, and so forth. The list would reveal that, like Rabelais, Kubrick is interested in scatology; hence his fondness for staging scenes in bathrooms, as in *Lolita*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Shining*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Eyes Wide Shut*, and even *2001*. By the same logic he is drawn to coarse bodily images, such as the female statuary or "furnishings" of the Korova Milk Bar in *A Clockwork Orange* and the Rabelaisian architectural designs of giant open mouths and other orifices that he commissioned from Chris Baker for *A.I., Artificial Intelligence*. The point to be emphasized is that although Kubrick is normally treated as an artist who deals in big, important ideas, one of the keys to his style lies in his anxious fascination with the human body and his ability, which he shares with all black humorists and artists of the grotesque, to yoke together conflicting emotions, so that he confuses both our intellectual and emotional responses. This aspect of his work became increasingly marked during the course of his career, as Hollywood censorship was liberalized and as he gained greater control over his productions. Again and again he uses grotesque effects to unsettle social norms, whether liberal or conservative, thereby inducing a sort of moral and emotional disequilibrium. The loss of guideposts is probably least evident in *2001*, if only because the

human beings in that film are dwarfed by the immensity of space; but even at the opposite extreme, when his satire is at its most overt and might be taken as a kind of humanism, he creates a troubling emotional ambiguity. The montage of exploding nuclear bombs at the end of *Dr. Strangelove* may not be a grotesque moment, but it works according to a similar principle, so that horror mingles with a sort of detached appreciation of the sublime beauty of sun, sky, and bursting clouds.

In my own view Kubrick's films can be distinguished from those of other directors who make similar uses of the grotesque. For example, he and Orson Welles share not only certain technical mannerisms—especially the wide-angle lens and the long take—but also a love of exaggerated performances and caricatured faces and bodies. The difference between the two is largely a matter of tone or emotional effect. In Welles, the grotesque is Shakespearian, inflected with affectionate, sentimental, and even tragic emotions. When the fat, rumped Captain Quinlan chews a candy bar in Tana's parlor in *Touch of Evil*, he seems childlike, pathetic, and oddly noble. In *Mr. Arkadin*, when the title character looks down on the grubby, dying Jacob Zouk and chuckles to himself, Zouk asks what he is laughing at. "Old age," Arkadin says, in a tone redolent of *King Lear*. Especially in *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), Welles delights in the earthy, festive pleasures that interested Ruskin and Bakhtin. Kubrick almost never ventures into that territory. For him, it is as if the body is the source of a horror that can be held in check only with a kind of radical, derisive humor (which may explain why his work has always had a strong appeal for adolescent and college-age males who have artistic interests).

Perhaps I can best illustrate and summarize my argument by looking more closely at a single, representative scene. For my purposes, the best choice is the

opening sequence of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)—not because it is the most powerful moment I could select, but because the word "grotesque" appears in the dialogue. Viewers will recall that this sequence begins with a wide-angle traveling shot that retreats in front of Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (Lee Ermey) as he walks 360 degrees around the Marine barrack at Parris Island and inspects the new recruits, all of whom are shaved bald and standing at rigid attention in front of their bunks. Many things about the shot are typical of Kubrick: the long take; the deep focus; the realist lighting that seems to spill from the barrack windows; and above all the dynamically forced perspective and tunnel-like effect created by the wide-angle lens as Hartman moves down the column of men. We are also in a familiar Kubrick world—masculine, militarized, filled with warriors. The photography emphasizes the spit-and-polish cleanliness of the room, in which reflected light shimmers off the bare floor; the clarity, symmetry, and aura of discipline, however, are in uneasy conflict with the slightly weird exaggeration of space, and with Hartman's loud, hyperbolic performance.

Holding himself ramrod straight, Hartman paces forward and glares at the troops, his eyes bulging as he yells out an angry speech filled with curses, obscenity, racist epithets, and vivid scatological imagery. As the sequence develops, things become even stranger. Just when it looks as if Hartman could not get more abusive, we cut to closer views in which he confronts individual soldiers, giving them cartoonish nicknames ("Snowball," "Joker," "Cowboy," and "Gomer Pyle") and terrorizing them with threats, insults, and physical violence. Most of us know from previous Hollywood movies about Marine training that Drill Instructors are supposed to be intimidating disciplinarians, but this one is so shocking that it is not clear how we are



The opening sequence of *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987)



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supposed to take him. (For instructive comparison, see the first ten minutes of *Take the High Ground*, a Cold-War movie about the Marines directed by Richard Brooks and photographed by John Alton at MGM in 1953, which shows the same physical and emotional harassment, the same clichéd character types, and even the same jokes about the difference between a rifle and a gun, but which seems utterly benign. See also Jack Webb's *The D. I.* [1957], which is an important intertext for *Full Metal Jacket*.) Is Hartman completely serious? Is he nuts? Is this the way Marine sergeants really behave, or are we in the realm of satiric stylization, as with *Dr. Strangelove*? Everything the Drill Instructor says is outrageously offensive, but delivered with such theatrical flair and poetic talent for disgusting metaphors that it invites laughter. The movie seems to be hovering somewhere between realism and caricature, and throughout the sequence Hartman throws us off balance because he is revolting, scary, and funny at the same time.

A good deal might be said (and has been) about the sexual implications of Hartman's harangue: his tendency to call his troops "ladies," "queers," or "peter puffers," his reference to the typical soldier's girlfriend as "Mary Ellen Rotten Crotch," and his promise that Marines under his control will have their sexuality channeled into a love for their rifles. Granting the importance of such matters (which *Dr. Strangelove* treats in similar fashion), we should also notice that Hartman subordinates sexuality to an intense preoccupation with bodily secretions, especially shit, which is the prime source of his grotesque verbal humor. His discourse could easily be analyzed in the same fashion as Klaus Theweleit has analyzed the writings of the proto-fascist German *Freicorps* in the first volume of his disturbing study, *Male Fantasies*, where we repeatedly encounter frightening images of mud, feces, and menstrual blood set over against the hard bodies of patriotic soldiers.²³ The whole of *Full Metal Jacket* is constructed by such imagery, culminating in Vietnam's "world of shit," which might seem the binary opposite of the immaculate cleanliness, obsessive order, and tightened buttocks in the opening scene; significantly, however, the first half of the movie comes to a bloody climax in a toilet that Hartman, in inimitable fashion, orders two of his men to clean. ("I want you two turds to clean the head. I want that head so sanitary and squared away that the Virgin Mary herself would be proud to go in there and take a dump!")

From the opening moments, shit is never far from Hartman's mind. As he strides around the barrack room, his veins distending and his face turning red, he tells the recruits that they are "nothing but amphibious,

grabastic pieces of shit" and threatens to punish them until their "assholes are sucking buttermilk." An equally important feature of his raging disquisition has to do with the psychology he uses to transform his men into cold killers. One of his tricks is to elicit an amused and frightened response—which is to say, the response elicited by the grotesque—and then to punish anyone who reacts. When Private Joker (Matthew Modine) mutters a derisive comment in imitation of John Wayne, Hartman races across the room to find the "slimy little twinkle-toed shit Communist cocksucker" that made the remark. "I like you," he sneers when he discovers Joker. "You can come over to my house and fuck my sister!" Almost as soon as this sick joke registers, he punches Joker hard in the solar plexus and drops him to the floor. Kubrick cuts to a fantastically distorted wide-angle close up from Joker's subjective point of view, showing Hartman bending down, pointing his finger, and shouting: "You will not laugh! You will not cry!" When Joker stands up and resumes his rigid position, Hartman warns: "You had best unfuck yourself or I will unscrew your head and shit down your neck!" He then demands: "Lemme see your war face!" Joker wildly contorts his features and tries to give a fearsome yell, but behind his round, scholarly eyeglasses he looks somewhat comical and afraid. As far as Hartman is concerned the effect is insufficiently grotesque. "You don't scare me," he says as he turns away. "Work on it."

Moving down the row, Hartman stops in front of Cowboy (Arless Howard) and asks: "Are you shook up? Are you nervous?" Cowboy stares straight ahead and shouts, "Sir, no sir!" Scowling contemptuously because "Cowboy" is shorter than the other men, Hartman yells: "I didn't know they stacked shit that high. . . . It looks to me like the best part of you ran down the crack of your mama's ass and ended up as a brown stain on the mattress!" The *pièce de résistance* of Hartman's performance, however, is his sadistic confrontation with the next figure—the tall, fat soldier he dubs "Private Gomer Pyle" (Vincent D'Onofrio). An innocent hick who tries to maintain the rigid posture and blank, straight-ahead stare demanded of the troops, Pyle can't help smiling at Hartman's colorful rhetoric. Hartman looks him up and down, asking: "Did your parents have any children that lived? I bet they were grotesque. You're so ugly you look like a modern-art masterpiece!"

The more insulting Hartman becomes, the more difficult it is for Pyle to stop grinning. "Do you think I'm cute, Private Pyle?" Hartman asks in hysterical rage. "Do you think I'm funny?" Pyle says no, and Hartman yells: "Then wipe that disgusting grin off your face!" Pyle struggles to keep his composure. "I'm going to give



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Full Metal Jacket: brutalizing obscenities

you three seconds, exactly three seconds, to wipe that stupid looking grin off your face,” Hartman screams, “or I will gouge out your eyeballs and skull fuck you!” The image of Hartman having intercourse with a skull is so horrible yet so ridiculous that Pyle cannot control himself and he begins to exhibit a kind of panicked amusement. “Get on your knees, scumbag!” Holding his hand at waist level, Hartman commands Pyle to lean forward, place his neck in Hartman’s palm and be choked. “Are you through grinning?” he asks as he squeezes the recruit’s windpipe. Pyle’s grin disappears and his face changes color. “Yes, sir,” he gasps. “Bullshit!” Hartman replies. “I can’t hear you. Sound off like you got a pair!” When Pyle manages to say “yes” a second time, Hartman releases him. As Pyle returns to his feet, his eyes wild with terror, Hartman warns: “You had best square your ass away and start shitting me Tiffany cufflinks!”

Whether or not the opening sequence of *Full Metal Jacket* is what Hartman would call a “modern-art masterpiece,” it probably aspires to that condition. All its visual and verbal techniques are aimed at maintaining an

exact style and a convincing picture of military life while at the same time making us cringe and laugh uncomfortably, feeling uncertain about the film’s ultimate purpose. In the last analysis, it can be understood both as a meta-commentary on Kubrick’s art and as a systematic demonstration of how the grotesque, whether in life or in movies, messes with our minds. The chief irony of the sequence is that even though Pyle’s reaction to Hartman seems slow-witted, it resembles the reaction most viewers are likely to have: a bewildered mingling of amusement, fear, and disgust that turns suddenly into outright shock. In contrast with the stony looks on the faces of the other recruits, Pyle’s reaction is sensible and sane; only when forced to deny his feelings does he later turn into a murderer and a suicide. His confusion and bewilderment, moreover, are built into the very structure and texture of the film, which is designed to create a world that is both absurd and verisimilar.

This is the world Kubrick repeatedly tried to represent. If some people regard him as cold, it may be because he seldom allows us the comfort of secure

responses. The emotions he elicits are primal but mixed; the fear is charged with humor and the laughter is both liberating and defensive. His control of photography, découpage, and performance creates a sense of authorial understanding without immersion, as if volcanic, almost infantile feelings were being observed in a lucid, rational manner. As in Franz Kafka's fiction, the most bizarre effects emerge from the very clarity with which the imagery is rendered. The result is a clash of emotion—a charged atmosphere that may not be the only virtue an artist can have, but that gives Kubrick's work a good deal of its motivating energy and consistency of purpose. Kubrick's style is therefore more than the sum of his technical propensities and more than his choices of subject matter; it grows out of a unified attitude toward such different issues as war, science, sexuality, European history, and family life. At his best, like many other practitioners of the grotesque, he aims to show a paradoxical and potentially disturbing truth: at the farthest reaches of our experience, extremes meet and transform themselves. The coldest temperatures burn like fire. Especially where the human body is concerned, there is always something potentially comic about horror and horrible about comedy.

NOTES

1. This essay was written for the "Film Style in Question" symposium honoring David Bordwell at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2005. I thank David, the organizers of the Symposium, and the audience in Madison for providing me with an occasion to work through the problems posed by the paper.
2. Calder Willingham quoted in Robert Polito, *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 406.
3. Michael Herr, *Kubrick* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 36. See also Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 50.
4. "The New Pictures," *Time* 67 (4 June 1956): 106.
5. See Alexander Singer's comments on Kubrick's love of the Mitchell viewfinder, quoted in Vincent LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1999), 127.
6. "Grotesque Renaissance," in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, ed. John D. Rosenberg (New York: George Brazillier, 1963), 207.
7. *Ibid.*, 208.
8. *Ibid.*, 204.
9. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).
10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 352.
11. Philip Thompson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), 21.
12. See Mathew Winston, "Humour noir and Black Humor," in *Veins of Humor*, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 269–84.
13. For a concise survey of different ideas of the grotesque, including those of Victor Hugo and Thomas Mann, see Thompson's book.
14. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973).
15. I am grateful to Yuri Tsivian for informing me that Eisenstein once wrote an essay about the grotesque, which has never been translated into English. Eisenstein's remarks on the subject occur in a lecture on Dimitri Shostakovich's opera, *Katarina Izmailova*, and they seem quite similar to those of Thomas Mann and other writers who argue that the grotesque is a "mixed" form, involving the tragic and the comic, the low and the high. (By this definition, nearly all of Shakespeare and many films by John Ford could be described as grotesque.) When I say that Eisenstein's films are marked by the grotesque, I am referring to a style of caricature that can be found in his work everywhere from *Strike* (1925) to *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958). See Eisenstein's lecture on *Katarina Ismailova* and *La Dame aux Camélias* in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v Shesti tomakh* (selected work in six volumes), vol. 4 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), pp. 536–604.
16. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 36.
17. Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Wilinsky suggests that *Lost Boundaries* (1949), produced by Louis de Rochement and directed by Alfred L. Werker, might be considered an American art film, but in qualified fashion; it was originally developed at MGM but ultimately distributed by an independent company.
18. David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5th edn, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 716–24.
19. *Puppen, Körper, Automaten: Pantasmen der Moderne*, ed. Pia Müller-Tamm and Katharina Sykora (Düsseldorf, Kunst-sammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen: Oktagon, 2004).
20. Thompson, 52.
21. Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 32–9.
22. T. S. Eliot, "'Difficult' Poetry," in *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1963), 88.
23. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Volume I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

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ABSTRACT "The grotesque," which became a stylistic term in the Italian renaissance and later contributed significantly to all forms of modernist art, can help us better understand the so-called "coldness" often attributed to Stanley Kubrick's films. The whole of Kubrick's art is designed to produce a grotesque clash of emotions, an unstable blending of humor and terror that derives ultimately from anxieties about the human body.

KEYWORDS Kubrick, grotesque, modernism, film style, body anxiety