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Abstract

To create the conceptual space to analyze the evident and structural similarities between the art experience, the (new) media experience, and the media art experience, the author approaches the “medium” as “techniques” which make “the seen” strange.” A disruption of the perceptual process, a destabilization of the cognitive routines, a sudden sensitivity to the medium and an instant emotional response are at the heart of these (art) experiences. The author argues that the (well-studied) experience of the grotesque provides a model for the analysis of these (unstudied) medium-sensitive experiences of the “strange” or “unnatural,” for which the grotesque experience is emblematic.

Key words: art experience, new media experience, media art experience, medium-sensitive experience, grotesque experience, perceptual process, cognitive routines, (de)automatization, (de)stabilization, (de)naturalization, (de)sensitization, aesthetic category, embodied cognitions.

In his contribution to an anthology on the grotesque from 2003, Noël Carroll wrote that from “a merely statistic point of view, the grotesque is one of the leading forms of mass art today. […] [T]he grotesque seems omnipresent. Thus it appears timely to address it theoretically.” Carroll’s approach of the grotesque is interesting in many ways. He analyzes Homer Simpson, Edward Scissorhands, self portraits by Cindy Sherman and other “grotesques” (see a Renaissance example in Fig. 1) as structurally similar in that they all mix grotesque is interesting in many ways. He analyzes Homer Simpson, Edward Scissorhands, self portraits by Cindy Sherman and other “grotesques” (see a Renaissance example in Fig. 1) as “medium” as “techniques” which make “the seen” strange.” A disruption of the perceptual process, a destabilization of the cognitive routines, a sudden sensitivity to the medium and an instant emotional response are at the heart of these (art) experiences. The author argues that the (well-studied) experience of the grotesque provides a model for the analysis of these (unstudied) medium-sensitive experiences of the “strange” or “unnatural,” for which the grotesque experience is emblematic.

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In other words, overlooking the medium is a predictable and almost inevitable consequence of the process of automatization: once techniques become second nature, we lose sight of them. Everyday percepts may find this adequate, as automatization enhances action as needed in everyday life. Researchers, however, may argue that research does not necessarily benefit from quick shifts from input to cognition, and that automatization facilitates a “dormative”

use of an ambiguous

under-researched and basically primitive, magical or mythical cognition, and that automatization from quick shifts from input to research does not necessarily benefit action as needed in everyday life. Adequate, as automatization enhances everyday percipients may find this second nature, we lose sight of them. Automatization: once techniques become the consequence of the process of identification of real and mediated. (full) identification of real and mediated. A second phenomenon which should be mentioned here is what I would refer to as the modernist fallacy. Some artists and artist-researchers, sensitized by new media (e.g., avant-gardists; new media enthusiasts), do not overlook the medium’s impact but tend to take the disruptive effects of new techniques to be “auretic” (to use Benjamin’s words): powerful and highly appreciated evocative effects which are then framed in research as artistic techniques, purposefully used and shaped as part of an art work. Yet I would argue that the really interesting phenomenon with regard to (new media and) medium sensitivity - which should make researchers want to reconsider the problem altogether - is that all new techniques working on the senses evidently possess a destabilizing potential, which easily materializes and becomes manifest, inside or outside artistic practices: new techniques notably “distort” the seen or heard, thus also typically triggering a discourse on the “new” as a confrontation with the “distorted” or “unnatural,” as discourses over time have testified – which brings me back to the grotesque. Memorable examples are to be found in art history and the history of the cinema, including the recent IMAX cinema experiences of a (computer generated) close-up of an Avatar on a wide screen of 200 square meters: such technical novelties in their moment of introduction, easily create a confrontational experience with something distinctly “unnatural,” “grotesque,” and “monstrous,” as is stressed in discourses under these terms. Phenomena like these not only point in the direction of the existence of (embodied) cognitions of natural proportions, but also clearly indicate that the perceptual-cognitive system is highly sensitive to the distorting powers of new (optical) techniques, as they destabilize the cognitive routines instantly and notably, yet only momentarily, as the destabilizing effects will be smoothed away over time in the process of automatization. Interestingly, this suggests that the twin mechanisms of deautomatization and automatization are constitutive of the fields of art and media respectively, and that the two are inherently connected.

Findings

In addition to the standard works on the grotesque, I would argue that the very experience of the destabilization of the perceptual-cognitive routines by the use of new techniques creating a distinct experience of distortion of the natural order is constitutive of the category of the grotesque understood as an aesthetic category (Kayser, Kant). This should remind us that an aesthetic category is not merely or in the first place a class of objects (frescoes, paintings, pictures, statues, collages) produced in the course of history, but rather a class of aesthetic experiences. It should also remind us that the existence of this experiential category points in the direction of a highly sensitive cognitive “apparatus,” which clearly signals the use of new techniques: by marking the seen/heard as “unnatural.” Lastly, this should remind us that the relatively short intervals in history in which the grotesque bloomed need to be reconceptualized as medium-sensitive intervals in history, which typically destabilize the ontological stability of mimetic tradition and produce new art, new insights and a new episteme in their wake.

I cordially thank Ed Tan for his comments on my article.

References and Notes


9. Shklovsky: “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic […] The process of ‘algebraization,’ the over-automatization of [the routines of perception of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature—a number, for example—or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition.” Shklovsky [8] pp.11-12.

10. One may argue that automatization puts the critical function in researchers to sleep. On “conceptual fog” and its “dormative” function, see: Gregory Bateson’s Introduction to his Steps to an Ecology of Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

11. Understood as mediated / real (not mediated) at the same time.


15. Renaissance, romanticism, early and late 20th century – see Kayser [6].