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## **The Genealogical Perspective in the Creation of European Literary Discourse in the Transgeneric Era. Theatre and the Grotesque**

The issues concerning the grotesque as a twentieth century dramatic genre divides literary critics across Europe. This discrepancy is primarily due to the polymorphous nature of the concept. I will start with a brief overview of the concept's history – from its origins following the discovery of the Roman frescoes to its use as a literary term – while also mentioning its evolution as a critical term in such widely diverging fields as the decorative arts, dance and the fine arts. The various uses of the term in such a wide diversity of domains partly explains the lack of critical consensus on an exact definition, not to mention the scepticism regarding the idea of a grotesque genre that would incorporate all of its characteristics. Despite the opposition of certain critics, others have indeed supported the theory of a grotesque genre in drama. For someone like Philippe Wellnitz, for instance, the study of the grotesque as a dramatic genre constitutes a “huge area which offers itself to us” (230). I will try to evaluate the conditions in which the grotesque might be considered as a separate genre, thereby questioning the very concept of the literary genre. Indeed, the concept of genre in itself creates both terminological and functional problems. What does one understand under genre? The terminological question was examined by Karl Vietör, who attempted to untangle the various lexical knots ensnaring the term. However, once the conceptual framework has been established, the question of sense arises. For what sense is there in considering a “new” genre

(although not entirely new in the criticism of Eastern Europe), especially at a time where writers play with genre boundaries, and critics find themselves in the embarrassing situation of no longer knowing which way to turn when attempting to classify their plays. The solution to this conundrum might consist of finding a conception of genre that is more attuned to contemporary playwriting, which might allow one to identify the genre characteristics of the grotesque, or simply consider the grotesque out of the distinction by genre.

### The difficulty of defining the grotesque

In the opening paragraphs of their publications, most critics systematically remind their readers that the concept of the grotesque is a hard one to define, to the extent that some scholars have altogether abandoned the idea of ever being able to provide a single definition. One simply needs to consider the carefully selected titles and subtitles, whose various nuances reflect the problem faced by any study of the grotesque: “In search of the grotesque” (Gorceix), “Concerning the concept of the grotesque” (Sidoruk 13), “Attempt at a definition” (Silhouette 23), “Elements for an attempted definition” (Astruc, 2010: 25). Or, one might consider the definite and decisive tone of certain opening statements, in spite of the vast number of publications on the subject, such as: “the grotesque cannot be defined, at least not in any satisfactory manner” (Rosen 5). Indeed, defining the concept of the grotesque is a delicate matter, since it involves various dimensions of human behaviour, but also because its use has evolved throughout the ages. Following his research on the grotesque, Rémi Astruc suggested a radical alternative in order to put an end to this imprecision, namely to “refrain from using this category or define it *within the field of literature* using external tools”<sup>1</sup> (Astruc, 2012: 194).

From its earliest origins, the term has transgressed artistic borders – from the decorative arts to fine arts to literature – and has been extended to the point that it is currently used in the field of aesthetics to designate very different works of art, and to cover a number of possibly divergent meanings. In this respect,

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<sup>1</sup> “renoncer à utiliser cette catégorie ou la définir *pour la littérature* à partir d’outils extérieurs” (translation mine).

one should mention the now classical works of Bakhtin and Kayser, who, at first glance, seem to follow opposite directions, with the former tending towards a carnivalesque dimension, while the latter gravitates towards a more demonic side of the grotesque. As has been specified by Isabelle Ost, this is “perhaps not so much due to the historical whims and quirks of Art and Literature, or to a lack of rigor on behalf of those who have attempted to identify the grotesque, as it is due to the constitutive principle of the concept itself”<sup>2</sup> (Ost 7). Indeed, theoreticians have emphasized the grotesque’s profoundly ambivalent nature, as well as the continuous tension it generates, prompting researchers to wonder whether the core of this aesthetic category does not, in fact, coincide with this need for permanent transformation. In this case, the grotesque would affirm itself in order to better challenge and question its own nature, leading to a conception of the term which takes into account both its polymorphous and its evolutionary aspect.

An additional difficulty in reaching a definition is related to the fact that the study of grotesque works, motifs, and situations in literature, and hence the classification of genres, is primarily based (and perhaps more so than for other categories) on the subjectivity of the researcher. Many publications have criticized Wolfgang Kayser’s famous study (*Das Groteske. Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, 1957) for its subjective and intuitive approach in establishing a selection of works for supporting its definition of the grotesque. According to Rémi Astruc, this also constitutes one of the criteria that add to the impurity of the grotesque as a literary concept (Astruc, 2012: 185).

### **The unstoppable rise of the grotesque or the conquest through impure form**

The term “grotesque” was coined in Renaissance Italy to designate the decorative art which had been discovered in Rome at the end of the fifteenth century, namely in a series of underground rooms and corridors which were

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<sup>2</sup> “ce n’est peut-être pas tant en raison des caprices de l’histoire des Arts et des Lettres, ou encore d’un manque de rigueur de la part de ceux qui se sont essayés à le cerner précisément, que d’un principe constitutif de la notion elle-même” (translation mine).

mistakenly taken for caverns or “grottos”. The term, derived from Italian, resulted from the metonymy between the discovery of the ornaments and their underground location, which actually contained the remains of Nero’s *Domus Aurea* and the baths which were later erected by Titus and Trajan on part of the site of Nero’s palace.

As a form constructed outside a fixed set of rules, the grotesque is marked by its departure from the norm. As such, it deviates from the aesthetic norm in favour of a free mode of painting, operating outside the rules of aestheticism, and varies from the physical norm due to its propensity for deformity and hybridity. The grotesque thus combines heterogeneous elements, organised according to a logic that opposes nature in its defiance of the laws of both gravity and perspective.

This very idea of hybridity and departure from the norm was claimed by Montaigne in 1580 to justify the free form of his *Essays*, which did not correspond to any of the literary forms of his era. By way of analogy, Montaigne introduces the concept in literary discourse. In order to define the nature of his essays, the French author resorts to a comparison with grotesque ornaments used by painters to frame their portraits. Like the grotesque nature of these strange and fantastic paintings, Montaigne’s essays are indeed “monstrous”, “possessing only a fortuitous sense of order and proportion” (Montaigne 181). Using a visual analogy, the comparison with grotesque ornaments exemplifies those works which do not conform to the accepted literary norms, and which, merging various styles, do not conform to any of the genre categories that had been established at the time. It is therefore significant, that the concept under current examination was previously used to designate occurrences of genre transgressions.

The painted or sculpted arabesques, figures and fantastic subjects of the original *grotesques* were copied and adapted by various Renaissance artists. The success of the grotesque was such that the term was adopted by all European languages, in accordance with its geographical and aesthetical distribution. One of the artists commissioned to produce grotesque works was Raphael, who executed the frescoes adorning the reception rooms of the Vatican Palace in 1515. This style of decoration was hugely successful and became tremendously fashionable, to the point that the word, which was originally restricted to the

artistic domain, entered the common language as an adjective designating something strange, ridiculous and monstrous.

The grotesque iconography that was subsequently developed, notably during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, was mainly based on the idea of deformity and monstrosity. By extension, as regards the decorative arts, the term “grotesque” was applied to painting to qualify capricious ornamentation, fantastic figures, as well as bizarre forms and characters. The bizarre is that which distances itself from the usual order of things, that which is difficult to understand, precisely because of its strangeness. By analogy with this idea of strangeness, the term was further used to refer to anything that induces laughter due to its unlikely, eccentric or extravagant nature. This resulted in a play of analogies, namely the interplay between *a posteriori* associations with the concept of the grotesque. Varying representations of the grotesque were thus assimilated, but which nevertheless had a number of general point in common, a “family trait”, so to speak. Themes such as the Dance of Death or the Temptation of Saint Anthony present two such examples. In this context, the works of Bosch, Brueghel, Goya, and Dürer, which are said to possess a taste for the deformed, and are understood as capricious, strange or monstrous, are also associated with the aesthetics of the grotesque. Indeed, all works inspired by, referring to, or adhering to the thematic and iconographic network which is said to be grotesque, may be associated with the aesthetics of the grotesque.

From the field of decorative arts, fine arts and architecture, the term “grotesque” has found its way into the theatrical arts and hence into literature. The word passed from the field of pictorial art into that of theatre, notably into the areas of comedy and dance, where it primarily referred to a theatre costume or to the figure of a dancing jester. Thus, the meaning of the term was once again extended by way of analogy, passing from the figurative to the performative. Synonymous for clown, the “grotesque” designated a dancing jester performing strange moves and exaggerated gestures to liven up the intermissions of certain plays. Indeed, these grotesque dancers inspired the engravings of Jacques Callot (1592–1635), which feature strange décors populated by actors with extravagant clothing and disproportionate bodies, whose facial expressions and gestures exude an air of parody.

In the tripartite classification of dance featured in his *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* (Letters on dance and the ballets, 1760) the French ballet master Jean-Georges Noverre defines “grotesque” dance as based on “exaggerated movements, outside the noble definition of proportions”, in which the body is “thrown in the kind of acrobatic dance usually associated with the carnival” (Dils 204). Noverre’s indications elucidate three essential components of the grotesque dance. Firstly, it is opposed to classicism and to the proportions of the French noble style. Secondly, like the ornamental grotesque, it is defined, by the transgression of norms, achieved through exaggeration and excess. Thirdly, it has popular roots and thus relies heavily on pantomime. Interestingly, these elements can also be found in the grotesque theatre of the twentieth century.

As mentioned by Lech Sokół, the first appearance of the term in Polish dates from 1818, in an article of the *Gazeta Warszawska* (Warsaw Journal) devoted to “grotesque dance”, which was very much in vogue at the time. One author, critical of the article and showing little appreciation for this dance of “ridiculous” gestures and “curious” leaps, described it as “a dance of the absolute lowest level”, which had very little in common with what passed for good taste (10).

Indeed, the history of the grotesque within the literary discourse of Europe is a heavy and burdened one. After its extension into different fields of art, the concept was implemented in the field of literature. Due to its analogy with the *signifier*; its subsequent analogy with the grotesque *signified*, and finally through its contamination with grotesque iconography, it was turned into a literary concept, which is itself defined by a broad thematic network. As part of the Romantic reflection on modern art, the concept of the grotesque also occupies an important place in the nineteenth century, where it was viewed as an aesthetic category. The Romantics used it in their theory on the merging of genres, especially Victor Hugo who regarded the implementation of the grotesque in poetry as essential to Romantic literature. Anticipating the nature of modern drama as a hybrid phenomenon that oscillates between comedy and tragedy, Hugo states that “the modern genius is born from the fruitful union between the grotesque and the sublime”<sup>3</sup> (Hugo 13).

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<sup>3</sup> “C’est de la féconde union du type grotesque au type sublime que naît le génie moderne” (translation mine).

Because of the various meanings covered by the term “grotesque” in art history, from the Renaissance until today (and even since Antiquity, whose retrospective reading in the light of the grotesque has allowed critics to identify works complying to this aesthetic category), the term is currently used to describe works of a varying nature. This has resulted in the difficulty for researchers to reach a consensus on a definition of the grotesque as a literary genre in its own right. In his research on the grotesque, the Frenchman Rémi Astruc suggests resorting to anthropology in order to define this extraordinary concept, whose roots delve into art and the theory of art, as well as into everyday language.

### **The theory of the grotesque as a theatrical genre**

The theory of the grotesque as a theatrical genre in Europe during the twentieth century is based on three elements. On the one hand, a number of European authors have classified their plays as belonging to the genre category of the grotesque. On the other hand, certain other authors have theorized about the role of the grotesque in the process of renewing their theatrical writing. And, finally, there is the grotesque reading of theatrical works by literary critics. Consequently, one is faced with three generic processes, presenting two different angles. To use the distinction made by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, there is *genre* as a retrospective classification and *genericity* as a textual function – expressed in authorial texts, paratexts and metatexts (Schaeffer 198).

In some European languages, the term “grotesque” functions as a generic term, on the same level as the literary farce or tragedy. This is the case in Polish, where the female noun *groteska* designates grotesque works of a literary, musical or plastic nature, as well as a literary category. In drama, it designates a theatrical work where the grotesque is not reduced to a process, but constitutes an actual system, relating to the construction of the play, the language it uses, and the world it represents. Certain critics specifically reserve the term *groteska* for twentieth century drama. These critics will designate the grotesque in other periods of literary history, which they also perceive as belonging to separate literary genres, by using the noun *groteskowość*, hereby supporting the idea of the existence of the *groteska* genre. The same phenomenon occurs in other Slavic languages, including Czech and Slovak, where *groteska* designates a grotesque

literary genre, as opposed to English or French, for instance, where the term grotesque does not cover a genre meaning specifically related to drama. This terminological difference can be explained by the strong presence of the grotesque in the countries of Eastern Europe, the “land of choice” for grotesque aesthetics, as mentioned by Stanisław Fiszer (17). One could therefore explain the lack of a generic function of the grotesque in France by the minor use of this category in this country, in comparison to the central and east-European dramatic writings.

In Italy, the first use of “grotesque” to designate a theatrical genre occurred as part of the subtitle of a play entitled *La Maschera e il volto* (The Mask and the Face, 1916) by Luigi Chiarelli, which read: “a grotesque in three acts”. In Poland, Roman Jaworski supplemented the title of his play *Hamlet drugi, królewicz Polski* (The Second Hamlet, Prince of Poland, 1921) with the mention: “Three acts of contemporary grotesque”. The Austrian Arthur Schnitzler also classified his play *Der grüne Kakadu* (The Green Parrot, 1899) as “grotesque”. In Spain, finally, the plays of Ramón del Valle-Inclán carry the subtitle *esperpento*, a term invented by the author to describe his work, whose characteristics match those of the grotesque, both as regards the author’s theatrical specificities and his desire to renew the theatre.

However, the authors with a propensity for grotesque aesthetics do not all use subtitles that generically classify their work as grotesque, yet most of them do include their plays as part of a genericity which uses one of the grotesque’s predominant characteristics, namely the cross-pollination between the tragic and the comic. As a result, their subtitles often revert to the genre of the farce (De Ghelderode, Ionesco, Mrożek), to the association of the tragic and the comic (“saddening vaudeville”, De Ghelderode, “tragic farce”, Ionesco, “tragi-comedy”, Beckett and Dürrenmatt), or to processes related to the grotesque (“burlesque cantate”, Ghelderode).

As indicated by Lech Sokół, Polish authors who used the term *groteska* in the twentieth century did so either in the sense related to “farce”, or as a genre concept. The use of the term grotesque in the sense of a specific type of play is used in the work of Witkiewicz who, in his essays on the theatre, used the term to designate a complex aesthetical problem which he linked to the caricature.

We believe that, using this method to seriously write a play and staging it properly, one could create things of an unprecedented beauty; it could be a drama, a tragedy, a farce, or a *grotesque*, the whole in a single style unlike anything that has ever been done before<sup>4</sup> (Witkiewicz 30).

The same desire to renew the theatre through a new way of playwriting can be found in the propositions of the Spanish Ramón del Valle-Inclán, who devised a particular term to designate his grotesque work, i.e. the *esperpento*. Spanish criticism, which has adopted the term, raises the question of the grotesque in literature and culture by resorting to a term which is certainly different, but which also shares the same reality as the grotesque. In Spain, works described as “esperpentiques” are works that are considered grotesque:

In Europe, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, saw the development of the artistic and literary current of *esperpentism*: aspects of pictorial and theatrical Spanish Expressionism, the jokes, parodies and grotesque antics of the Italian Futurists, the ferocity of French Dadaism, the farces of Alfred Jarry (*Ubu Roi*), the sarcastic comedy of Pirandello, the stories of Kafka...<sup>5</sup> (Risco 88–89).

The first play to carry the generic subtitle “esperpento” was *Luces de Bohemia* (Lights of Bohemia, 1920), in which the protagonists define the *esperpento* as a grotesque deformation of classical norms. Deformation is one of the traits, along with the contrasting of heterogeneous elements, which may be described as generic.

Based on the various elements shared by the theatrical writing of these playwrights, one could advance the hypothesis of the grotesque as a literary genre. Whether the current be referred to as *esperpentic* or grotesque, the fact is that the phenomenon is European, even though it is not called by the same name in all European countries. The term is, for instance, strongly established

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<sup>4</sup> „Twierdzimy, że tą metodą można, pisząc sztukę na serio i wystawiając ją odpowiednio, stworzyć rzeczy niebywalej dotąd piękności; może to być dramat, tragedia, farsa lub groteska, wszystko w tym samym stylu, nieprzypominającym niczego, co dotąd było” (translation mine).

<sup>5</sup> “A fines del siglo XIX y principios del XX se desarrolla en toda Europa una corriente de esperpentismo en la literatura y el arte : aspectos del expresionismo pictórico y teatral español, las boutades, parodias y cabriolas grotescas de los futuristas Italianas, la ferocidad del dadaísmo francés, las farsas de Alfred Jarry (*Ubu Roi*), la comicidad sarcástica de Pirandello, las novelas de Kafka...” (translation mine).

in Polish, Spanish and Italian criticism, but does not occupy the same place in French criticism, which has a preference for terms such as “avant-garde,” “experimental,” or, more recently, “absurd” to describe theatrical works in a grotesque vein.

There will be no place here to list all the common traits of works that have been characterised as grotesque, either by their own authors or by literary critics. Nevertheless, they derive their legitimacy from the fact that they belong to different strata of theatrical writing, thus fulfilling Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s criterion on the relevance of generic specificities:

I think one of the essential criteria to remember is that of the co-presence of similarities at different textual levels, for example at the modal, the formal, as well as the thematic level. However, it does not seem necessary to me to require that all of these features be integrated in order to form a type of ideal text that is determined by its unity<sup>6</sup> (Schaeffer 202–203).

Therefore, since it can be considered as both the expression of a world view that veers towards the absurd – in which the comic can but be tinted by the tragic as the result of a desire to represent the world through a deformed aesthetics matching its own image – and the expression of a desire to renew the existing theatre by departing from the norm, while drawing inspiration from popular art, the grotesque could fulfil the theoretical criteria for becoming a theatrical genre.

### The “genre” of the dramatic grotesque

How then does one determine what kind of genre is covered by the term “grotesque”? The problem of terminology regarding genre has been the subject of numerous genealogical studies. Theoreticians tried to distinguish the three major genres, i.e. the epic, lyric poetry and drama from other genres such as the short story, the comedy or the ode. In 1931 Karl Vietör, rather than considering the three major genres as *genres*, proposes to reserve this

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<sup>6</sup> “Je pense qu’un des critères essentiels à retenir est celui de la coprésence de ressemblances à des niveaux textuels différents, par exemple à la fois aux niveaux modal, formel et thématique. Par contre, il ne me semble pas nécessaire d’exiger de l’ensemble de ces traits qu’ils puissent s’intégrer pour former une sorte de texte idéal déterminé dans son unité” (translation mine).

term for example the comedy and the ode, and to view the epic, lyric poetry and drama as “*fundamental attitudes towards form*” (Vietör 10). He adds that Goethe comes to the same type of distinction by opposing the ballad, the epigram, the ode or the satire, which he regards as *poetic species*, to the epic, lyric poetry and drama, which he regards as *natural forms*. These oppositions between *fundamental human attitudes* towards reality and *genres* are not without importance in view of the grotesque genre. We will use the term of *genre* in Vietör’s sense, distinguishing it from the three fundamental attitudes which are the epic, lyric poetry and drama. We may add the concept of register to this distinction, since the comic and tragic registers are also relevant to the problem. Indeed, this theory can take two directions. On the one hand, given the generic specificities common to the examined plays, one could speak of a grotesque genre which corresponds to a certain type of dramatic works, produced within a historically determined era, as is the case for the tragedy, the theatrical drama and the farce. On the other hand, by focusing on the hybridity of the grotesque as oscillating between the tragic and the comic, and even transcending this opposition which today seems obsolete, one could view the grotesque not as a genre, but as a register constituting the preferred mode of expression of twentieth century authors.

According to Tzvetan Todorov, the genre is the meeting place between the general poetic and the events of history (Todorov 52). Reverting to the theory that genres result from speech acts, Todorov emphasizes the relationship between genres and society, and affirms the necessity of two fundamental criteria for establishing a genre. The first is a historical criterion, the second a discursive one. Thus, a genre would be the historically attested codification of discursive properties. Considering the social dimension of the grotesque, particularly those convergences in a world view that result in various works of art, which can roughly be grouped as expressing a feeling of existential absurdity, one could advance the hypothesis that the historical circumstances of the twentieth century partly gave birth to this specific type of theatrical grotesque within this specific period. In a similar way, Tzvetan Todorov reminds his readers that

a society chooses and codifies those acts which most closely correspond to its own ideology; that is why the occurrence or absence of certain genres in a given society are indicative of its ideology [...]. It is no coincidence that the epic occurs

at one period in history and the novel at another, or that the individual hero of one period opposes the collective hero of another, since each of these choices depends on the ideological framework in which it operates.<sup>7</sup> (Todorov 51)

Seeing as the twentieth century provides the discursive and historical dimension necessary to define it as a genre, the grotesque could indeed be considered as such. On the condition, however, that it is viewed in its diachronic dimension, namely by taking into account its evolution from the turn of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century, thus permeating the various strata of the dramatic text across several decennia.

Nevertheless, transgenericity being a defining feature of both contemporary and modern artistic and literary creation, it seems necessary to rethink the category of genre so as to be able to speak of a grotesque genre, even though this entails the risk of no longer being able to use it for the theatre. One should therefore need to postulate the existence of a genre, one that has been reconceptualised in view of modern (i.e. grotesque) dramatic features, in order to accommodate its fundamental diversity. In his *Poétique du drame moderne* (Poetics of modern drama) Jean-Pierre Sarrazac refers to the principle of *disorder*, used to determine the modern theatre, based on the dramaturgy of Pirandello:

With Pirandello, one moves from an Aristotelian-Hegelian logic of drama to that of the disjunction of drama. And if one had to risk coining a formula that summarized the creative attitude of Pirandello – and, on a more general scale, of the playwrights of modernity – it would be something along the lines of an *organising disorder*<sup>8</sup> (Sarrazac 24).

Thanks to the retrospective analysis of the genre issue in the light of contemporary drama, one might consider the diversity of the dramatic grotesque

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<sup>7</sup> “une société choisit et codifie les actes qui correspondent au plus près à son idéologie; c’est pourquoi l’existence de certains genres dans une société, l’absence dans une autre, sont révélatrices de cette idéologie [...]. Ce n’est pas un hasard si l’épopée est possible à une époque, le roman à une autre, le héros individuel de celui-ci s’opposant au héros collectif de celle-là: chacun de ces choix dépend du caractère idéologique au sein duquel il s’opère” (translation mine).

<sup>8</sup> “Avec Pirandello nous passons de la logique aristotélo-hégélienne du drame à celle d’une mise en pièces du drame. Et s’il fallait risquer une formule résumant l’attitude créatrice de Pirandello – et, plus généralement, des dramaturges de la modernité -, ce pourrait être celle d’un *désordre organisateur*” (translation mine).

as a premise of the heterogeneous nature of contemporary theatre, in which various modes, genres and styles combine and overlap. Creating new boundaries to a type of dramatic writing whose characteristics are fundamentally to crossover the boundaries seems inadequate.

Considering the current theatrical creation, it is obvious that the classification of literary works into genres and the subdivision of the theatrical genre into tragedy, drama or comedy no longer reflect the reality of dramatic writing today:

The stage has taken over all existing “texts”, regardless of their form and often even without consideration for their adaptation in recognized theatrical forms. As for dramatic texts, they are often situated outside the genres, turning the mixture of tones and themes into an ordinary practice, and presenting parody and derision as a principle of writing. It is harder than ever to find one’s way between the existing forms, to the point that people often talk about “dramatic writings” in the plural form<sup>9</sup> (Ryngaert 212).

The concept of grotesque dramatic writings would then become a way to account for the grotesque as the preferred mode of expression during the twentieth century and not anymore as a new genre. Because of its evolution within the field of literature, the grotesque would amount to a variation within literary evolution, as explained by Tomaševskij:

The mechanism of literary evolution develops gradually: it does not present itself as a series of forms which are substituted one for the other, but as a continuous variation of the aesthetic function of literary processes. Each work is oriented according to the literary environment, and each element is oriented according to the work in its totality. [...] The grotesque forms, which in the Classical era were regarded as a comic resource, became a resource for the tragic during the Romantic era. The true life of the elements that constitute a literary work manifests itself

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<sup>9</sup> “La scène s’est emparée de tous les «textes» existants, quels que soient leur régime et même assez souvent sans se préoccuper de leur adaptation dans des formes théâtrales reconnues. Quant aux textes dramatiques, ils se situent le plus souvent en dehors des genres, faisant du mélange des tons et des thèmes un usage ordinaire, de la parodie et du grincement un principe d’écriture. Il est moins que jamais possible de se repérer dans les formes existantes au point que l’on parle régulièrement des ‘écritures dramatiques’ au pluriel” (translation mine).

in this permanent shift between functions. Nothing is reborn in its initial form or function<sup>10</sup> (Tomaševskij 238).

The previous quote enables one to accept the idea of a variation and evolution of the grotesque as a privileged dramatic expression in the twentieth century. Moreover, the fact of considering the grotesque as a means to dramatic writing, on a par with the tragic and the comic, i.e. as a third way that is more attuned to the literary expression of the twentieth century, might lead to a greater consensus among researchers.

Indeed, the theory of the theatrical grotesque relies on the phenomenon of the crisis at the heart of tragedy. Whether one considers the tragedy to be dead, in crisis, or supplanted by the concept of the “tragic” itself, it is clear that the paradigms of the tragedy and the grotesque overlap within the critical discourse on the grotesque. In his famous study on Shakespearian theatre, Jan Kott simultaneously affirms the obsolescence of the tragic and the prevalence of the grotesque: “The grotesque is the old tragedy, rewritten in another tone” (Kott 112). He then goes on to state that “the grotesque adopts the dramatic schemes of tragedy and raises the same fundamental questions” (Kott 119). In *L’Impasse du tragique* (The impasse of the tragic), Muriel Lazzarini-Dossin attempts to read the “new theatre” of the post-war era as a “new tragedy,” the blueprint of which had already been drafted by the likes of Pirandello and Valle-Inclán. The idea of the grotesque as a reincarnation of the tragedy in accordance with the worldview of the twentieth century, i.e. tinted by the comic, thus establishes a theory which could take into account the heterogeneity of grotesque pieces that remain hard to classify, but whose oscillation between the comic and the tragic constitutes a determining feature.

In sum, considering the current theatrical creation and theory and in spite of the attempts to call it a genre, the interpretation of the grotesque as

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<sup>10</sup> “Le mécanisme de l’évolution littéraire se précis[e] de la sorte peu à peu : il se présent[e] non comme une suite de formes se substituant les unes aux autres, mais comme une variation continue de la fonction esthétique des procédés littéraires. Chaque œuvre se trouve orientée par rapport au milieu littéraire, et chaque élément par rapport à l’œuvre entière. [...] Les formes grotesques, qui étaient considérées à l’époque du classicisme comme des ressources du comique, sont devenues, à l’époque du romantisme, l’une des sources du tragique. C’est dans le changement continu de fonction que se manifeste la vraie vie des éléments de l’œuvre littéraire. Rien ne renaît dans sa forme et sa fonction primitives” (translation mine).

a theatrical genre doesn't seem the better way to approach the grotesque dramatic writings, which are based on the idea of literature and theatre as an evolution, as the constant transformation of existing forms and their frameworks, calling into question the traditional division into literary genres, whose rigidity cannot account for modern writing. We might then better consider it as a privileged mode of expression of the twentieth century – Prof. Roger D. Sell suggested the idea of “quality of mind” – whose transgeneric and transdisciplinary devices lead towards postdramatic writings. The phenomenon of transgenericity that characterizes the grotesque writings does help to understand the paradox of generic disorder at work in contemporary writing. Moreover, as we have seen, the grotesque functions as an ideal example of transgenericity, since it has constituted the transgeneric paradigm from its earliest introduction in the field of literature. The grotesque thus functions as a tool for the modern reflection on transgenericity, as well as acting as an object for study in its own right – an object about which the final word has yet to be said.

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## **The Genealogical Perspective in the Creation of European Literary Discourse in the Transgeneric Era. Theatre and the Grotesque**

### **Summary**

The article reflects on the discrepancy between the Western and Eastern European conception of the grotesque theatre and the issue of the grotesque as a dramatic genre. Indeed, it shows on the examples of Polish, French, Spanish and Italian theatre how the grotesque cannot be considered as a literary genre, but rather as a privileged mode of expression of the twentieth century. The study focuses on the difficulties of defining the grotesque and the genre and analyses what could be called a grotesque genre in the twentieth century. By examining transgeneric and transdisciplinary devices of the grotesque and the European literary discourse on the grotesque, the article underlines the function of the grotesque as a tool for the modern reflexion on transgenericity.

**Keywords:** comparative literature, grotesque, genre, theatre, European literary discourse, transgenericity, Stanisław I. Witkiewicz, Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Luigi Chiarelli

**Słowa kluczowe:** komparatystyka, groteska, gatunek literacki, teatr, europejski dyskurs literacki, transgatunkowość, Stanisław I. Witkiewicz, Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Luigi Chiarelli