

The Grotesque Will Save the World¹

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Abstract

This essay is part of a larger project that argues that the holy is a transcendental divine name, which stands in a hierarchical relationship to the other five transcendentals, as their culmination or concentration. Holiness is the transcendental *of* the transcendentals (namely being, one, truth, goodness, and beauty), and adds the aspect of *reverence* to existence. If the holy is the transcendental *of* the transcendentals, then everything must be seen as participating in holiness. Thus, we might ask, in what sense can we consider obscene atrocities and insidious horrors to be holy? This essay will argue that sanctity is the basis of horror, and thus even the most grotesque realities revere the holy. Moreover, the grotesque has a qualitative affinity to the holy, and thus the latter half of this essay will offer an *apologia* for a committed retrieval of the grotesque as an aesthetic genre or mood.

“That Name rings like the cry of a bird of prey. Never speak it aloud.”²

The Book of the Vampires

“Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.”

PSALM 2:11

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2 Quoted in *Nosferatu*, 14:15.

Introduction

This essay is part of a larger project that argues that the holy is a transcendental divine name, which stands in a hierarchical relationship to the other five transcendentials as their culmination or concentration. Holiness is the transcendental *of* the transcendentials (namely being, one, truth, goodness, and beauty) and adds the aspect of *reverence* to existence. If the holy is the transcendental *of* the transcendentials, then everything must be seen as participating in holiness. Of the many possible issues with this thesis, perhaps the most precarious is what to do with the nefarious, the horrifying, and the grotesque. Recent theological discussion has well understood how holiness permeates the “mundane” and socio-political sciences, among other things. While this thesis might give way to further work in such areas, they are not *theoretically* problematic to the very idea of the holy as the transcendental *of* the transcendentials. Thus, because of the limited space, I would like to skip to what might be the greatest problem for this thesis, namely in what sense can we consider obscene atrocities and insidious horrors to be holy?

This essay will argue that sanctity is the basis of horror, and thus even the most grotesque realities revere the holy. Moreover, the grotesque has a qualitative affinity to the holy, and thus the latter half of this essay will offer an *apologia* for a committed retrieval of the grotesque as an aesthetic genre or mood.

The Play of the Absurd

In his essay “The Corpse of Beauty,” Sergei Bulgakov says that “when one enters the room where Pablo Picasso’s works are collected, one is surrounded by an atmosphere of mystical fear amounting to terror.”³ This darkness, he says, is the “Night” of Tyutchev’s poem “Day and Night”: “the abyss is laid bare before us with its fears and mists, and there are no more barriers between us and it. This is why night is fearful to us.”⁴ Bulgakov sees in Picasso’s work a disincarnate, sterile, and ultimately evacuated view of human flesh. Picasso depicts femininity as unutterably hideous, heavy, shapeless, and the very “corpse of beauty.”⁵ Though amazed, Bulgakov remains mostly hostile towards Picasso’s artwork.⁶ For him, art

3 This essay was written after visiting a Picasso exhibition. Sergius Bulgakov, “The Corpse of Beauty,” in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. Nicolas Zernov and James Pain (London: SPCK, 1976), 67.

4 Tyutchev, “Day and Night.” Quoted in Bulgakov, “Corpse,” 67.

5 Bulgakov, “Corpse,” 69. Bulgakov gives the following examples: this is seen in “God-defying cynicism (*Nude in a Landscape*), in diabolical malice (*After the Dance*), as a decaying astral corpse (*Seated Woman*), or with the snake-like leer of a witch (*Woman with a Fan*).”

6 David Borgmeyer addresses Bulgakov’s hostility towards Picasso, who is otherwise praised by art critics, and says it is understandable in light of “Russian Orthodox culture, in which the image is (or at least can be) not merely an image, but an icon: a direct reflection of a spiritual, transcendental reality. To the extent that there is something profoundly disturbing about the *zeitgeist* of the first half of the twentieth century, and to the extent that these paintings really are icons of their times, both as representatives and influences, then Bulgakov might not be so wrong . . . Bulgakov saw in Picasso’s artwork something masterful, but still a herald of something both seminal and terrible:

is the most subtle form of “Luciferian infection” in the human spirit. Additionally, Picasso’s art is a religious trial to be exorcised by the sobriety of faith and the togetherness of the church, although Picasso remains a trial that the church must willingly face.⁷

Even in Bulgakov’s analysis we see something altogether spiritual about Picasso; the spiritual content of his artwork is permeated from beginning to end by one feeling, the ever-increasing horror of life.⁸ He is frightening because he is demonically genuine, which is why after one views Picasso everything else in the gallery falls flat and seems insipid.⁹ His artwork is “mystical throughout.”¹⁰ It is spiritual, Bulgakov says, but has the “spirituality of a vampire or a demon.”¹¹ Because an “uncanny” power flows from them, Picasso’s pieces are like miracle-working icons of a demonic nature.¹² Even ordinary objects bear the same “mystic dread and anguish.”¹³ The dark force that one feels emanating from these works is almost “tangibly felt,” as if coming from black icons.¹⁴

Bulgakov fails to see anything redeemable about the demonic in Picasso’s work. However, from the standpoint of the Christian tradition, one must challenge such a one-sided, wholly negative reading of this darkness. Bulgakov testifies to the recognizable and overwhelming power of spiritual dread, but we must ask, with whom does this power ultimately lie? The demonic conjures within us not merely fear but dread; in the presence of the demonic, one feels not only overpowered but haunted. We recognize the demonic by a distinctly frightening quality, one which instills the sense that something astral and terrifying looms. Rudolf Otto’s work has established this distinctive as the “numinous,” which is an ominous spiritual power (*numen*).¹⁵ But is the demonic an alternative spiritual power, separate from the God of light and beauty to whom Scripture bears witness? The

and in hindsight, perhaps he was right.” David Borgmeyer, “Modernism, Orthodoxy, and Russian Identity: Pablo Picasso and Sergei Bulgakov,” in *Cultural Identity and Civil Society in Russia and Eastern Europe: Essays in Memory of Charles E. Timberlake*, ed. Andrew Kier Wise, David M. Borgmeyer, Nicole Monnier, and Byron T. Scott (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 168.

7 Bulgakov, “Corpse,” 71.

8 Ibid., 67–68.

9 Ibid., 70–71.

10 Ibid., 67. He says, “The mystical nature of art is here laid bare and made self-evident.” Ibid., 70.

11 Ibid., 68.

12 Ibid., 69.

13 Ibid., 69.

14 Ibid., 69.

15 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John Wilfred Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 7. Otto says that the gothic in Western architecture draws upon primitive magic but exceeds the power of magic: “the impression Gothic makes is one of magic; and, whatever may be said of his historical account of the matter, it is certain that in this at least he is on the right track. Gothic *does* instil [sic] a spell that is more than the effect of sublimity. But ‘magic’ is too low a word: the tower of the Cathedral of Ulm is emphatically not ‘magical,’ it is *numinous*.” Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 70.

demonic is also dazzling, majestic, and attractive, which is seen in its enduring relevance to painting, poetry, film, literature, music, and fashion. If the demonic has an independent vivacity of its own, which operates autonomously from the spiritual realm of God, then one would have to re-construe the cosmos according to absolute ontological dualism. Or, one must consider evil to be an actual, positive substance that God created. Both alternatives disrupt the participatory ontology of the Christian tradition that understands evil as pure privation and creation as brought forth out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).

Moreover, the numinous belongs properly to the holy. Nothing is more frightening than God. Therefore, in light of the incomparably ominous, awe-inspiring, dread-inducing register of the holy, it is clear that the demonic is the idolatrous distortion of numinous fear. The terror of the demonic is nothing less than a participation in the holiness of God. The demonic is not in opposition to the holy, but can only be demonic—terrifying, frightening—because of the holy.

The relative fear conjured by demons is superseded by the terror of holy angels. At the birth of Christ, angels appear to shepherds in a field: “Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified” (Luke 2:9; cf. Exod 23:27, “I will send my terror in front of you”; 15:16, “Terror and dread fell upon them”; Acts 10:4). Then at Christ’s tomb, there was an earthquake, and “an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men” (Matt 28:2–4). When a demon saw Jesus, it begged of him, “Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (Luke 4:34). When Jesus was called “Good Teacher,” he said, “No one is good but God alone,” displaying the participatory flow of all goodness back to the original Good (Luke 18:19). Christ envisions the same flow with regard to fear: “do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him” (Luke 12:4–5). Thus, this unique fear belongs properly to the holy, which also fits with the Christian *mythos* that demons are fallen angels and therefore exercise their power not because of their fallenness but in virtue of their holiness, however corrupted (Luke 10:18; cf. Matt 25:41; Rev 12:9).

The Grotesque Will Save the World

In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot*, we read those now famous words, “beauty will save the world.”¹⁶ Merely attributed to the fictitious Christ-figure, the idiotic

16 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: MacMillan, 1913), 383.

Prince Myshkin, in Dostoevsky's novel, the saying became all the more tangible when it came from the pen of Rome's Christ-figure, namely Pope John Paul II. In his *Letter to Artists*, John Paul II speaks to the timeliness of wonder: "People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us"; and thanks to this enthusiasm, humanity will be able to navigate through life's many trials by setting itself upon the right path, and thus, "In this sense it has been said with profound insight that 'beauty will save the world.'"¹⁷

If I say that the grotesque will save the world I make no attempt to counter Dostoevsky or John Paul II, but rather detail, restrict, or focus their contention. The grotesque is an aesthetic genre or mood and thus an aspect of beauty. For the grotesque is a perennial motif in all aesthetic mediums, as grotesques prove to be deeply mesmerizing and attractive (see below for further cultural examples). It is especially pertinent because it captures the point at which beauty vanishes. In an obvious sense, grotesques often show mutilated and disproportionate figures, which is a visible rupture of classically beautiful standards. However, grotesques please the eye not in spite of their disproportion, obscurity, and dread, but because of them. The combined elements of attraction and terror that together offer a more total beauty paradoxically appears in a way "beyond beauty." In light of the eclipse of the holy (or the white light of holiness), grotesques capture that moment, that stasis, when beauty returns upon the inscrutable white light of holiness. The visible *anti*-aesthetic speaks to the *ante*-aesthetic, namely the holy. Such encounters allow spectators to traverse beauty's return, its apotheosis. Therefore, the grotesque is an especially timely, though enduring, medium of beauty and holiness.

What exactly do I mean by grotesque? Historically, one finds a variety of definitions, classifications, and standards, but I mean "grotesque" in the broadest, and yet deepest terms.¹⁸ My definition of the grotesque is: that which aesthetically

17 John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (1999), 16: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html

18 Wolfgang Kayser sees the grotesque beginning with the late fifteenth-century discovery of Roman work and traces it to the present. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 13–29. Mikhail Bakhtin takes a rather ahistorical view of the grotesque as exemplified in the carnivals and festivals of the medieval era. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Others such as Ewa Kuryluk and Geoffrey Harpham see the grotesque as formally bound to historic forms, which cannot be repeated accurately in the general malaise of contemporary culture. Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome And Judas In The Cave Of Sex: The Grottesque Origins, Iconography, Techniques* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grottesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). See also Wilson Yates, "An Introduction to the Grottesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations," in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*, ed. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1–68, see 1–40.

renders the singularity that simultaneously generates attraction and fear. The “singularity” involved here is synonymous with the “holy.” In other words, the grotesque aesthetically depicts luminous darkness (ὕπερφωτον γνόφον).¹⁹ To the degree the pseudo-grotesque fails to be “luminous” or compelling, it becomes inane, pretentious, or boring. To the degree it fails to be “dark,” it becomes trite, oppressive, and apathetic.

The grotesque is timely not only because it is formally mystical and holy, but because our time is begging for it, seeking it, and creating it. Grotesqueries saturate our culture and can be seen as the unspecified cry of Israel to the beyond: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver” (Exod 3:7–8; cf. 2:23–24). The church can radically impact the world for good by creatively incorporating the grotesque. I am not suggesting that we hang prints of Goya’s wartime etchings in every church, but I am suggesting that we commission the church at large to artistically saturate itself with notes, hues, and tones of the grotesque. This includes but is not limited to: the silencing reverence of a tasteful but rugged crucifix (like that which hangs in the interior of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris); the haunting, stoic purity of Mary in Michelangelo’s *Pietà*; or inversely, the eerie statue of Mary at Notre Dame de la Garde Basilica in Marseille, France, in which she hovers above the impassioned Christ while she is entirely covered by her cloak, looking almost like an angel of death or a grim reaper. While examples like these are already typical of certain ecclesiastical aesthetics and are of course inaccessible to many, they serve to open our imagination to all the ways, subtle and otherwise, that we can introduce grotesqueries.

19 Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker, (London, UK: Aeterna, 2014), 87–95, here 997B. On this *analogical* connection between Dionysian light and the grotesque: Otto von Simson asks the rhetorical question, how can God be manifest in human creations (namely through the gargoyles and features of the gothic cathedral)? He says, “The Pseudo-Areopagite answered this question by pointing to the frailty of our intellect, which is incapable of perceiving God face to face. Therefore, God interposes images between Him and us. Holy Writ as well as nature are such ‘screens’; they present us with images of God, designed to be imperfect, distorted, even contradictory. This imperfection and mutual contradiction, apparent even to our minds, is to kindle in us the desire to ascend from a world of mere shadows and images to the contemplation of the Divine Light itself. Thus, it is, paradoxically enough, by evading us that God becomes gradually manifest; He conceals Himself before us in order to be revealed.” Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 53. Moreover, Simson emphasizes that the connection is predicated upon analogical metaphysics: “At the basis of all medieval thought is the concept of *analogy*. All things have been created according to the law of analogy, in virtue of which they are, in various degrees, manifestations of God, images, vestiges, or shadows of the Creator. The degree to which a thing ‘resembles’ God, to which God is present in it, determines its place in the hierarchy of beings.” Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 54. In his important study *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Geoffrey Harpham uses Simson’s passage on Dionysius to explicate the grotesque. Harpham, *Grotesque*, 109–10.

Moreover, Christianity has the greatest capacity to render the grotesque. On the one hand, Christianity positively accounts for grotesque-induced terror by refusing to see it as a limited quality of demonic darkness, opposed to angelic light. This duality would limit and thus belittle both divine light and the scope of the darkness one encounters in ominous dread. This fear would only reach as far as the counter-border of light and no further. Rather, Christianity sees the divine light itself not only as “fearful too,” but as *the* originary terror in which and to which all subsequent instances of terror stand. On the other hand, while Christianity can maximize the darkness of the grotesque more than any other worldview, it can also best save the inherent liberating power of the grotesque because it overcomes all ontological violence. A philosophy resigned to violence, whether in the guise of fate, determinism, or nihilism, will inevitably mute the grotesque by limiting ahead of time the extent of its power. The real poignancy of grotesques is that whatever violence is depicted on the surface, a “higher,” more inscrutable, more frightening, more powerful One forever remains “beyond” and sovereign. The real power here is that while the grotesque can make its attempt to incite violence and evil, it delivers its greatest threat as it bespeaks that divine Other who is wholly unaffected by and still more frightening than any particular moment of evil.

The apocalyptic drama in the book of Revelation displays this dynamic, namely that the grotesque is dreadful to the degree it conjures a still-more-frightening Other. The forces of darkness are led by the Red Dragon, that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan (Rev 12:9). He has seven heads with ten horns. With him are two beasts. The greater of the two emerges from the sea and also has seven heads with ten horns, but with the appearance of a leopard with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion (13:1–2). Upon his head are blasphemous names. The lesser of the two rises out of the earth and has two horns like a lamb, and he speaks like a dragon (13:11–13). These creatures are great symbols of power and fear. But those who make war against the Lamb will be conquered, “for he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (17:14; emphasis mine). Even here, the supremacy of the Lamb over the Dragon and his beasts is comically absurd. The lamb is typically a symbol of meekness, but here the Lamb stands on Mount Zion with his followers who have the Father’s name written on their heads (14:1–2). Like the roar of many waters or the sound of thunder, John hears a voice like that of harpists playing their harps, and all are singing a new song before the throne (14:2–3).

God sends forth seven “holy angels” with seven plagues to destroy the beast and all its worshippers (14:10). Before the destruction, God sends forth one of his angels to proclaim an “eternal gospel” to every nation and tribe, language and people, “*Fear God* and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water” (14:7;

emphasis mine). Those who withstand the beast and do not succumb to him in fear sing the song of the Lamb, in which we hear, “Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy” (15:4). When the first three angels have poured their bowls upon the earth, the sea, and the rivers, which bring terrible sores to the people and turn all the water into blood, the angel in charge of the waters says, “Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was” (16:5). When all the plagues have finished, multitudes rejoice in heaven, and the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures worship God saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great” (19:5).

These four living creatures are presented as the greatest of all creatures. Each is clothed in eyes and takes to flight by six wings. The first is like a lion, the second like an ox, the third has the face of a man, and the fourth is like an eagle (4:6–8). Forever they utter these words: “‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty,’ who was, and is, and is to come” (4:8). They are mutated, grotesque figures, part animal, part human, part angel, with unsightly, even beastly features. Yet what is most remarkable about them is that these monstrous creatures, who would otherwise be among the most frightening things we could envision, are themselves filled with fright. In Isaiah’s vision, which depicts similar creatures, the Seraphim fly with two wings, which one can imagine are Jurassic-like, while with another two they hide their faces, cowering, and with the remaining two, they cover their feet (Isa 6:1–3).

From an initial assessment, one would imagine that the Red Dragon and his beasts are the most dreadful and thus the most grotesque of Revelation’s characters. But this is only to believe the demonic lie, which claims the dread of the holy for itself. Rather, Revelation shows that creatures are frightening and grotesque to the extent that they hallow the Holy One, and this hallowing is integral to their very natures. We can draw a direct, hierarchical line through all the creatures according to this principle. The following are in order from lowest to highest: the lesser beast and then the greater beast, the Red Dragon, the holy angels, the four living creatures, and finally the Lamb. The lesser beast reveres the greater, and the greater beast reveres the Dragon. Though the Dragon refuses to fear God, he is nevertheless conquered by him. Therefore, in the end, the Red Dragon’s might only testifies to the superior might of the One who conquered him. The angels are terrifying because of their power, and though we know little of their appearance, they exercise this power exactly as worship and service to God. Above them are the four grotesque living creatures who magnify our reverence of God, because though they are terrifying, they are still terrified of another. The Lamb, the perfect Son of the Father, absolutely hallows the Father and has supreme power and authority. If the four living creatures were dreadful because they were “obviously” monstrous and powerful beings, the Son is even more dreadful because he wields

more power than any other being but does so as the nonthreatening, vulnerable, and grazing animal that is the common lamb. Therefore, the power that we know he has is incomprehensible and unexpected. He is so entirely *beyond* created beings that nothing is in any way truly competitive with him. His supremacy is of another order, whereby he stands unrivalled though nonthreatening. He is, therefore, a dazzling, haunting, and truly ominous symbol of fear and power. But still, this grotesquery is predicated upon his manifestation of the Holy Father. Christ is most harrowing because he is pure hallowing.

Nevertheless, one might object that the church is no place for the grotesque. For the church, one might say, ought to be welcoming, not a horror house for some exhibition. Agreed, but however hospitable the church is, we have to keep that singularity which lures attraction and fear. Granted, a grotesque in a church will affect those who enter. One might wander in and shudder at the first glance of it. The one who brings a newcomer may feel the need to prepare his or her guest as they approach it. Children may need to be cautioned as they pass by it. Those who are in the throes of deep agony may need to avert their gaze from the grotesque. All this inconvenience may be the very reason why some feel we should abandon all grotesques. But let us imagine the impossible thing that we had the holiness of God in a glass jar and placed it upon a shelf in the church for all to see. Those who passed it would be shocked. Children would need to be cautioned and newcomers prepared. The same kind of dynamics is at play with the imaginary jar and the grotesque. If the holiness of God was bottled up, the very sight of it would be deeply disruptive to the otherwise natural order of our lives. An awe-inducing grotesque commands a certain kind of consecration that displays a structural affinity with the holy itself.

But is fear really a fitting response to God who has not given us a “spirit of fear” but of love (2 Tim 1:7)? Indeed, God has given a spirit of love, but before doing away with fear altogether, we should ask, what kind of person is without fear? A purely fearless person sees every impending threat to his or her health and safety as inconsequential. For reasons not yet specified, this person has given up on themselves and abandoned the task of survival. The implications extend beyond the confines of individual security. This person is altogether indifferent to the suffering of others. He or she cannot even acknowledge suffering as such because he or she has no connection to the dread of suffering. Nothing can phase this fearless person, and yet he or she will be alienated by the world, a world that is incomprehensible because of the economy of fear upon which it depends. In a fallen and violent world, the fearless person cannot receive life as a gift, as he or she is entirely unmotivated to protect it and thus receive it.

Because this person is fearless, the fretting of others can only appear silly. The more one is alienated from others the more one’s “amusement” towards suffering

becomes sinister, as he or she is disconnected from the deepest concerns and motivations that invariably guide his or her every decision. Also, fearlessness usually has the luxury of power, which liberates one from fear-inducing violence. Thus, the fearless person exercises a certain tyranny and is liable to find pleasure in torture. Without an acute, immanent knowledge of fear and thus the fear of those who suffer, one cannot distinguish between play, joking, and suffering. Therefore, we see that pure fearlessness is evil, and neither is actually real.²⁰

But does life so entirely submit to fear as to depend upon it and thus violence also? In the absolute sense, no. For the basic creaturely fears that we all have are met by God, who, though being incomparably frightening and powerful, loved us before we loved him. God's fortuitous love comforts us, namely as God's Love who is the Spirit, the Comforter. By so loving us, God raises our fears towards himself, and they become awe, wonder, and delight, though never a delight that is wholly untroubled, but the weighty delight that is as shocked as it is grateful. Therefore, God's love is hauntingly beautiful, humbling in majesty, and incomprehensibly true. In other words, God's love is holy, and it fulfills the basic creaturely impulses of fear by the glory of reverence.

20 In his fascinating work *God Is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human*, Dominic Johnson provides anthropological and sociological evidence for why the fear of the Lord is integral to human nature, and subsequently human flourishing. He argues that "belief in supernatural reward and punishment is no quirk of western or Christian culture. It is a *ubiquitous phenomenon of human nature* that spans cultures across the globe and every historical period, from indigenous tribal societies, to ancient civilizations, to modern world religions—and includes atheists too. Heaven and hell may be the best-known versions of supernatural reward and punishment, but they are mirrored by a panoply of others that are thought to occur in this life—notably negative outcomes such as misfortune, disease, and death—as well as in the hereafter. And while we in the West tend to think of a single, omnipotent God as our judge, in other cultures rewards and punishments may come from a pantheon of gods, angels, demons, shamans, witches, ancestors, ghosts, jinns, spirits, animals, sorcerers, and voodoo. In other cases, there is no specific agent at all, but supernatural consequences still come as the result of karmic forces of nature and the universe. The variation is remarkable, but there is a clear underlying pattern: our behaviour is strongly influenced by the anticipated supernatural consequences of our actions. They make us question our selfish desires, deter self-interested actions, and perform remarkable acts of generosity and altruism—even when alone and even when temptation comes knocking at our door." Dominic Johnson, *God Is Watching: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7. Moreover, Johnson argues that while there are indeed "many scientists who argue that religion is an accidental byproduct of human cognitive mechanisms that evolved for other reasons, there are many other scientists who argue that religion is the polar opposite of an evolutionary accident—rather, that it is an evolutionary *adaptation*. New work in anthropology, psychology, and evolutionary biology suggests that not only do religious beliefs and practices bring important advantages in today's world (such as promoting cooperation and collective action), but that they were actually *favoured* by Darwinian natural selection because they improved the survival and reproductive success of believers in our ancestral past. This offers a scientific alternative to the Dawkins model of God-as-accident. It also offers a striking twist on the old science and religion debate: religion is not an alternative to evolution, it is a *product of evolution*." Johnson, *God is Watching*, 11. For a more holistic account of religion and evolutionary theory from the Christian metaphysical perspective see Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

A Grotesquerie to the World

Besides being passably Christian, why should the church consider implementing grotesqueries? By creating and engaging grotesques, we create innumerable opportunities to correct excesses and vices that plague the church. We also reach a new depth of profundity and insight that is otherwise inaccessible.

First, grotesques are acts of solidarity and compassion. This can be seen straightforwardly in images and music that speak directly to injustices and evil and so empathize with the suffering of the world.²¹ Whatever the chosen medium, one has the ability to say with a grotesque, “I feel what you feel; I see what you see; I hurt how you hurt.” The insecurities that can accompany a newcomer to church can be addressed in love before any formal meeting. Will I be accepted, or judged? Are my sins too many, too heinous? Can they handle a drug addict, a prostitute? Is the church more than a bandage for sentimental folk; can it address the horrors I’ve seen, I’ve committed? We can speak Christ’s “Yes and Amen” without uttering a word (cf. 2 Cor 1:20). Also, by taking up the challenge to create grotesques, we will be made more sensitive to the pain of others and therefore be all the more ready to love. Moreover, these kinds of grotesques can also critique and condemn the latent apathy in many churches. Some may be unwilling to compassionately put themselves in others’ shoes, as it were, or go out into the world to see its hurt, but a confrontation with a powerful, and yet still appropriate, grotesque will be an immanent word of admonition.

Second, grotesques save us from nihilism. One may find this idea counterintuitive because the grotesque is often a symbol of nihilism itself. Here we might think of the contemporary master of the genre, Francis Bacon. But to retrieve the point about the sanctity *of* horror, the sanctity in-and-beyond horror, the act of painting is a way to bring meaning about in a meaningless world. However resigned to nihilism one may be, he or she defies such nihilism by the creative process. Painting is thus an unwillingness to surrender all truth, goodness, and beauty to nothing, even if this crusade for meaning has the false humility of one who says, “this life is all there is so we might as well do something with it.” Nihilism is not the logical, coherent theory that best accounts for human experience, but is instead a lament. Therefore, grotesques can subtly defend life by its “pleasing” and persuasive articulation of the lament that is nihilism.

In addition to this overt nihilism, grotesques critique modernist rationality (and its post-modern offspring), that ethos of belief that seeks to “get” the truth once and for all, whether this is the positivism based upon scientific method, theo-

21 See my article “On the Humanity of *Mad Max*,” in which I seek to demonstrate how *Mad Max*, a thoroughly grotesque action film, exudes a deeply compassionate sensibility. Justin Mandela Roberts, “On the Humanity of *Mad Max*,” *The Other Journal* (February 25, 2016): <http://theotherjournal.com/2016/02/25/on-the-humanity-of-mad-max/>

logical foundationalism (including the revelatory positivism of Barth), or the various kin of dialectics (Marxian materialism or Hegelian idealism). Ultimately, the grotesque has the power to undercut false confidence like no other. Its effect is not tied to any single philosophy or ideology but always stands beyond one's grasp and finds a way of disrupting the status quo with an inconvenient truth.

Finally, grotesques mediate transcendence. Our discussion of Picasso and Goya has already indicated the phenomenological profile of transcendence that accompanies the grotesque. But this transcendent moment reaches further than the confines of art galleries and represents God in the collective imagination of a culture. We may belong to a secular age, but people are more indulgent in alternative modes of transcendence than ever. The examples are endless. Consider the unprecedented commercial success and cultural dominance of mega-franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and what has now become the superhero war between Marvel (e.g., *The Avengers*) and DC (e.g., *Batman v Superman*). We also see the grotesque prominently in video games, which have become a multi-billion-dollar industry. Because they allow for more interaction, video games subsequently encourage a more all-consuming dedication. Some games (e.g., *World of Warcraft*) create an online virtual world in which people interact with other real people, though in the guise of their avatar. Thus, some people are more invested in virtual reality than their neglected somatic reality. One can easily see the new level of devotion at a fan expo or convention at which devotees arrive in full costume (a cassock?) and may be able to speak Klingon or Elvish.

This imaginative, transcendent alternative to religious consciousness is more than a chance to escape life; it is a chance to *finally* experience life. These fantasies are not a rival to religion and Christianity but the "religious" cultus of a people victimized by a secular age. They are cultural "high places" at which one can feel something of the ominous holy. Behind the lure of these franchises is a stunning, beautiful, and profound disclosure of the holiness of God through the darkness of grotesques. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* not only have an exquisite variety of mesmerizing grotesque creatures (e.g., orcs and Uruk-hai), but the integrity of the story itself is predicated upon the ghost of Sauron, whose great eye burns within the walls of Mordor. Frodo and Sam set out to destroy the ring of power under the impending threat of Sauron's bodily return. In other words, Sauron haunts Middle-earth. *Star Wars* is sold on the basis of its iconic villains, from Darth Vader to Darth Maul and Kylo Ren. *Harry Potter* has its own dazzling grotesques, but again, its overall persuasiveness is tied to the looming threat of "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Voldemort, who is ethereally absent/present. Video games can be equally as grotesque and dark. Thus, people today are not less interested in the holiness of God, but the church may be. One might

argue that films and video games have contributed some of the greatest religious art in the last fifty years.

One might ask whether or not grotesques are inappropriate for children to see. Granted, children are uniquely vulnerable, and we must consider that when introducing grotesques. But we delude ourselves and harm our children if we think that they need to be shielded from or kept oblivious to the darkness in life. Moreover, children and youth are compelled by the grotesque. Old Disney films are deeply ominous (e.g., *Fantasia*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*). While these films mostly reserve such dread for the baddies, recent children's films have been exploring the positive aspects of the grotesque by making the protagonist and the storyline thoroughly grotesque (e.g., *Shrek*, *Hotel Transylvania*, *Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Despicable Me*, *Monsters Inc.*, *Megamind*). The grotesque has proved to appeal to children's sensibilities and educate them by gaining compassion for the "other."

For example, Shrek the ogre and his "steed" Donkey reluctantly set out to rescue Princess Fiona in a deal with the incompetent and self-absorbed Lord Farquaad. The comedic absurdities are everywhere, from Shrek carrying his donkey steed instead of the knight being carried on horse-back, to the affectionate dragon who was once seen as purely ferocious. Shrek and the princess fall in love, but in this film, the beautiful princess magically transforms into an ogre, rather than the more anticipated end of Shrek shredding his grotesqueries because of true love. By using films as examples, I am attending to the source that subsequently saturates culture. Children have these grotesque heroes on their clothes, backpacks, and pencils. They have them as toys, they sleep with them as stuffed animals, they watch and re-watch these films, and they memorize them.

We see these same impulses in adolescents and adults with their own grotesques. A powerful symbol of the grotesque's universal appeal is Kim Adams' sculpture *Breugel-Bosch Bus*. The sculpture is a 1960 Volkswagen that has been transformed into a diorama. Adams re-interprets two classic grotesques, *Tower of Babel* by Pieter Bruegel (1525–1569) and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516), by creating a scene made entirely of toys. By studying the grotesque in contemporary American film and literature, Schuy Weishaar describes the workings of the grotesque in remarkable continuity with our thesis: "The grotesque is the prism at the center of this process, constantly fragmenting and obfuscating, but in such a way that it adds variety, intensity, and color to the visions we perceive," and "Just as the prism refracts all light that tries to penetrate it, the grotesque effects a kind of leveling of those worlds that writers/artists 'shine' through it."²² This "initiates the critic/theorist of the grotesque on a

22 Schuy R Weishaar, *Masters of the Grotesque: The Cinema of Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, the Coen Brothers and David Lynch* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 4. In *Masters of the Grotesque*,

spiraling journey both into and out from the seats of contradiction and/or paradox.^{22,23}

Conclusion

Bulgakov recognized the dark spiritual power of Picasso's paintings but wholly resisted them as demonic temptations. But the church must consider the wider question: with whom does this power ultimately lie? The demonic omits a distinct spiritual quality that we can name with Otto as numinous fear, which is an originary feature of holiness. So, what are the consequences of opposing demonic dread and divine dread? Either we absolutize the difference between light and darkness in ontological dualism, or we suggest that evil is an actual reality created by God. Both disrupt sound Christian convictions. Rather, the demonic is the idolatrous distortion of numinous fear but nevertheless always a participation in the holiness of God. Thus, we can see a qualitative affinity between the demonic, or grotesque, and the holy.

By comparing Kayser's account of the grotesque with the holy, we also discovered a structural affinity. Kayser says the grotesque depicts a pregnant depth "in and behind" the image, which makes all contemplation and language regarding the "It" of the grotesque inherently posterior. Also, as a play of the absurd in an estranged world, the grotesque ruptures, fractures, and crosses all our finite categories and shows how tenuous our concepts and names are. In order to maintain

which deals extensively with *Nightmare Before Christmas* creator Tim Burton, Schuy Weishaar ties a number of our themes together: "the comic and tragic drama of life persists simultaneously as we fruitlessly exert ourselves in our attempts to bring resolutions, to make them. They are parallel but particular blanknesses that can devastate and horrify as much as they astound or delight because they invite contradiction, opposition, conflict, combination, fragmentation, synthesis, and scission . . . the grotesque names this level of our conflict-ridden interchange . . . with reality aesthetically expressed. As with Ishmael's uncanny moment of recognition in the dark, his realization about the ineffability of whiteness, or Pip's mad sea-born sagacity, our categories, the contents of these categories, the meanings and associations with which they are invested, and the crippling effects their confusion entails for us—these are the junctures whereat the grotesque can emerge as the (metaphysical) aesthetic context within which such confusion arises, can be recognized, and/or expressed. It works according to a principle of macerated mimesis in its isolation, application, inversion, division, unification, etc. of any of the competing poles of the paradoxes between which human being finds itself drawn: light and dark, high and low, inside and outside, body and essence, contentment and anxiety, creation and destruction, life and death, good and evil, pleasure and pain, transcendence and obfuscation, the divine and the demonic, movement and stasis, self and other, official and carnival, imaginativeness and bleak materialism, reason and madness, mythic and modern, and the list goes on. Whether the grotesque finds expression as a literary mode, an artistic style, an aesthetic dimension, a pattern of thought (archetype, etc.), a metaphysical reality, a social ideology, or something else, it is utterly bound up with the human. Perhaps this is why its fruits seem forbidden but necessary. Perhaps this is why it can elicit desire and disgust, laughter and revulsion—or, simply put, love and hate and everything that comes with them—all at once. The grotesque is caught up with the breadth, depth, and confusion of what it means to be human." Weishaar, *Masters*, 193. For Weishaar's argument that Dr. Seuss may be more subversively grotesque than Bruegel, Bosch, and Bacon, see Weishaar, *Masters*, 2–4.

23 Weishaar, *Masters*, 4.

estrangement, the grotesque must occupy a “suspended middle” between what is alien and what is familiar. All of these features accord with the dynamics of the white light of holiness. Moreover, the grotesque is mystical on a formal level, as the mystic sensibility is that which apprehends the aesthetic measure of paradox that unveils the holy. Therefore, the grotesque participates in the eternal gaze of the Son upon the Invisible Father.

With this renewed connection between the divine and the grotesque in mind, I suggested that in Dostoevsky’s “beauty will save the world,” beauty be replaced by the grotesque. For metaphysically, the grotesque captures that moment, that stasis, when beauty returns upon the inscrutable white light of holiness. The grotesque’s *anti*-aesthetic speaks to the ontological *ante*-aesthetic, namely the holy. Such encounters allow spectators to traverse beauty’s return to the holy. The grotesque is then what aesthetically renders the singularity that simultaneously generates attraction and fear, this “singularity” being synonymous with the holy.

Moreover, culture craves and seeks transcendence in the grotesque, and Christianity has the greatest capacity to render it. Additionally, I offered three concrete reasons why the grotesque will connect the world and the church, elevating both. In the end, I believe the grotesque will save the world, partially for the theoretical reasons I suggest, but really because all such reasons are predicated upon this basic truth, that the grotesque has saved the world. For in weakness and fear we proclaim the mystery of God, Christ and him crucified, who is that morbid if still radiant light of the world (1 Cor 2:2).