

THE “GROTESQUE FACTOR” OF THE PICASSO MUSEUM IN MALAGA, ANALYSIS OF AN EXHIBITION: FROM THE *DOMUS AUREA* TO THE INDISCREET GAZES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Summary

The grotesque factor was a major exhibition held at the Picasso Museum in Malaga, which sought to update the aesthetic category of the grotesque. It was a profound revision of the consideration of grotesque art in the last 500 years.

Such a deployment of means, logistics and work had a negative point: disinformation. Throughout the entire exhibition, practically all the information related to the works was reduced to posters with basic information. The exhibition was complex and extensive, but the visitor was in a sea of doubts, which in the end could not be answered. In a second opportunity, the visitor or the student turns to the catalog to delve deeper into the “grotesque” of each of the works, but in the consultation of the catalog there is not a single catalog card developed on each of the works, that is, there is no express justification of the application of the category of the grotesque that justifies the inclusion of the works in the catalog.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the intellectual, iconographic and museographic construction of the exhibition *The Grotesque Factor*.

Keywords: History. Art history. Criticism. Didactics. Didactics of Social Sciences.

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1. INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE CATEGORY OF THE GROTESQUE

“So what is the grotesque in art? Sometimes described as exaggerated, sometimes assimilated to the deformed, sometimes close to the satirical and even to the incongruous, the field of the grotesque enters a field of hardy knowledge, still very open, with many doors that announce ministries to be discovered and jocosities to be enjoyed (...). Neither plague nor war, neither madness nor stupidity have been able to put an end to European culture, which, as we wish to demonstrate here, has been able over the last five hundred years to elaborate again and again critical places capable, in the strength of its marginality, of leaving behind what was culturally exhausted and launching seeds towards a new dawn, perhaps with saddlebags less and less loaded with utopias, but not for this reason definitively lacking in hope”¹ .

According to Basáñez Ryan, “we need this term (the grotesque) to express, without possible omission, a complex and sudden load of sensations that struggle to be translated in a certain instant in order to rescue our conscience from perplexity and bewilderment”² . Later we will comment, in the words of José Lebrero, how the term grotesque alludes to a triple meaning: “that which is defined under certain forms of ornamentation, that which looks into the abyss to see that nothing sustains us and that which fights with laughter the very foolishness of the human”³ .

Based on this triple meaning, the exhibition *The Grotesque Factor*, held at the Picasso Museum in Malaga (2012), where the concept of grotesque was developed over the last 500 years, including varied and profuse artistic sensibilities. “It is not adventurous to suppose its existence since the origin of Humanity”⁴ , says Basáñez Ryan. The concept of grotesque alludes to several terminological meanings, although it has been in art where it has received a greater formulation. The discovery of the *Domus Aurea* at the end of the 15th century in Rome unveiled a repertoire of paintings that were designated as “grotesque”, deriving the term from

1 LEBRERO STALS, José, "Un sendero tan misterioso como jocoso en la Historia del Arte, VV.AA., *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012.

2 BASAÑEZ RYAN, Fernando, "El fenómeno grotesco", *DC PAPERS, revista de crítica y teoría de la arquitectura*, 1, 1998, pp. 12-20.

3 LEBRERO STALS, José, "Un sendero tan misterioso como jocoso en la Historia del Arte, VV.AA., *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012.

4 BASAÑEZ RYAN, Fernando, "El fenómeno grotesco", *DC PAPERS, revista de crítica y teoría de la arquitectura*, 1, 1998, pp. 12-20.

the grottoes in which they appeared. Such motifs were a great success, and quickly spread through various artistic manifestations. They involved an amalgam of human figures, animals, real or not, vegetal forms, roots, plants and trees, in a certain way a reaction to the traditional systems of representation.



Fig. 1. Grotesques of the Roman period

If at first, the motifs were closely related to decorative systems, their full acceptance for “iconographic description and interpretation” will be in the Romantic period. It is important to keep in mind, as it was made clear to the visitor at the beginning of the *Grotesque Factor*, that “the ugly is the insufficiency with respect to beauty”, while the “grotesque, whose antithetical term would be grace, as a factor and not a virtue or a contractual defect”⁵.

We have to start from the idea that, depending on the prevailing sensibilities of today, there are still notable differences in what is understood by grotesque, for example in southern Europe or in the north, George Grosz, Goya, Daumier, or Hogarth, have left us “grotesque” works.

5 VV.AA., *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012.

According to Lebrero, “these divergences are due to the fact that the aesthetic category has had a plural and convoluted evolution, very conducive to subjective interpretations”⁶.

In relation to the subjective interpretations to which the grotesque lends itself, Valeriano Bozal insists and justifies the prevailing notes of realism in the grotesque:

“It is often answered that realism is the note that marks the difference with respect to other paintings and other cultures. It seems appropriate to me as long as it is explained what is understood by realism, since realists are not only the figures of Spanish painters, but also all grotesque figures since they appeared in history. After this first question, there is nothing particular about dealing with the body, its physical nature, and its social nature, in both of which realism fulfills its specific condition. Both lead us directly to the analysis of the grotesque as conceived by Goya, since the Aragonese master goes a step further in what he paints, draws and engraves, in his motifs and in the way he approaches them, also in the way and manner in which he “forces” us to contemplate them, a subject that in no case should be forgotten, and opens the doors to the era we have come to call “modern”. The difference is the first feature, at least the most evident, of buffoons, deformed beings and bearded women, it is also the most remarkable feature of grotesque and comic characters since they have existed. They are not like us, but they belong to our world of life. This hypothesis contains a paradox: they are not, but they are, they belong to us. It is not a novelty, on the contrary, in the world of the comic and grotesque it is a constant”⁷.

The configuration of the world of the grotesque was expanding and extending over time, making it clear that its limits were, and still are, somewhat imprecise. It was not until the eighteenth century, with the theoretical reformulation of Aesthetics, thanks to Baumgarten, and the birth of Aesthetics, that a theoretical corpus began to be developed to theoretically support the grotesque and its possibilities. To Kant and his *Critique of Judgment*, we owe the birth of modern aesthetics, but it was not until 1853, when Karl Rosenkranz published in German territory his *Aesthetics of the Ugly*, a work of capital importance in the formulation of aesthetic categories, the pathetic, the picturesque, the kitsch, the sinister, the tragic, the abject and morbid, and what we have been commenting here, the grotesque.

2. THE GROTESCO FACTOR, a critical view

“The exhibition confronts this semantic ambiguity and culture of the object analyzed in it, assuming its heterogeneous condition. The conceptual path, as analyzed in depth in this book, runs through three simultaneous paths of genesis and maturation: the one that is defined under certain forms of ornamentation, the one that looks into the abyss to see that nothing sustains us and the one that fights with laughter the very folly of the human. The second mode of the grotesque takes us to the vertigo of meaninglessness, from the *Seven Deadly Sins of Bruegel the Elder* to the surrealism of Hans Arp and Meret Oppenheim or the Dadaism of Hannah Höch

6 LEBRERO STALS, José, “Un sendero tan misterioso como jocoso en la Historia del Arte, VV.AA., *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012.

7 BOZAL, Valeriano, “Grotesque. La sombra de la risa”, *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012, p. 73.

and Kurt Schwitters (...). Like the toy or the advertising poster, the work of art affected as a representation of what we call here “the grotesque factor”, as a specific result, departs from the models of the dominant general plans and operates as an urgent representation of something that is not necessarily essential. Frequently they are not part of the central project of the artist in question or were not made by conventional leading figures”⁸.

The Grotesque Factor was a major exhibition that sought to update the aesthetic category of the grotesque. Structured on two floors, *The Grotesque Factor* was a profound revision of the consideration of grotesque art in the last 500 years⁹. The exhibition featured some 80 artists and more than 250 works that allow us to reflect on grotesque art from Leonardo da Vinci to Cindy Sherman. “It is not an exhibition of theses but of hypotheses, says Lebrero.”¹⁰

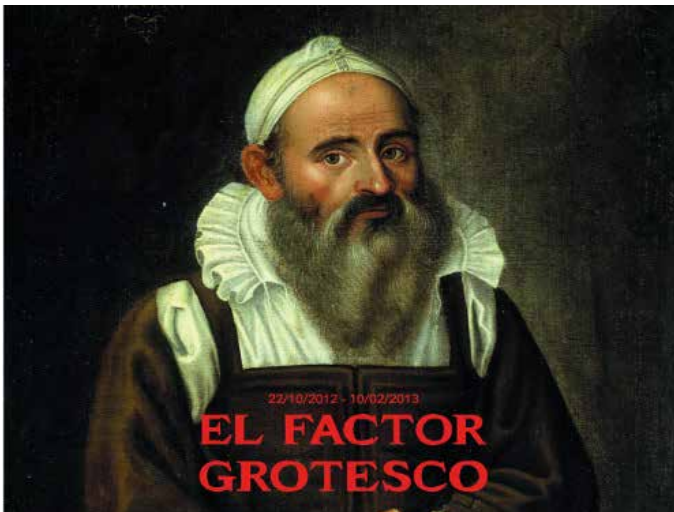


Fig.2. Exhibition poster

The pieces in the exhibition came from different public and private collections from all over Europe and some from North America: The Royal Collection, owned by the Queen of England, the Louvre, the MoMA, private collections, etc.

Such a deployment of means, logistics and work had a negative point: disinformation. Throughout the entire exhibition, practically all the information related to the works was reduced to posters with basic information. The exhibition was complex and extensive, but the visitor was in a sea of doubts, which in the end could not be answered. In a second opportunity, the visitor or the student turns to the catalog to delve into “the grotesque” of each of the works, but in the

8 LEBRERO STALS, José, “Un sendero tan misterioso como jocoso en la Historia del Arte, VV.AA., *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012.

9 With references to pieces from antiquity.

10 *El cultural.es*, 19/10/2012.

consultation of the catalog there is not a single catalog card developed on each of the works, that is, there is no express justification of the application of the category of the grotesque that justifies the inclusion of the works in the catalog.

For us, this question of misinformation is particularly interesting, since, from the point of view of the spectator's reception, the exhibition was anything but "didactic"¹¹. Certainly, it was an accumulation of works, duly arranged, of the highest category, but in the end, it did not fulfill its final purpose, to indoctrinate and educate the spectator, since it required a very deep academic formation to be able to understand the works exhibited in their full reality. The exhibition as a whole called and moved to "aesthetic pleasure", but not to a correct contextual understanding of the exhibits. Many things were lacking, such as the catalog cards and catalog sheets, but, above all, situating each of the works under the particular worldview that surrounded them was a problem.¹²

Within the context of Art History and its approach, *The Grotesque Factor*, or any other exhibition, especially those of a historical nature¹³, seems to us to be a good way to develop the critical abilities of the observing subject, who will find a way to show how artistic objects, on certain occasions, are capable of provoking bewilderment and doubt, when they are not properly presented.

In this way, a good critical and intellectual work would be to propose tools and methodologies that will allow the use of temporary exhibitions as a means to promote a historical-critical awareness¹⁴ among students. A methodology of analysis could be the following:

Exposure analysis

Review. The identifying data of the sample to be commented shall be provided.

Biography of the curator. In order to understand the proposed work within the professional and academic circumstances of the curator.

Relevance of the exhibition in the current context. Expository historiography of the subject to be dealt with. How many times, and by whom, have exhibitions of similar characteristics been carried out? What is the difference between the exhibitions that preceded it and the current one?

Narrative discourse used: What is the story line used in the sample and why?

11 DOSIO, Patricia Andrea, "El diseño expositivo como recurso didáctico en la educación superior", *Reflexión Académica en Diseño y Comunicación*, XIX, 2012, Buenos Aires. http://fido.palermo.edu/servicios_dyc/publicacionesdc/vista/detalle_articulo.php?id_articulo=8323&id_libro=380 Accessed April 5, 2024.

12 HUESO MONTÓN, Ángel Luis, CAMARERO GÓMEZ, M. Gloria, *Hacer historias con imágenes*, Madrid: Síntesis, 2014.

13 GALINDO MORALES, Ramón, "La Historia, ¿Un conocimiento útil en nuestros días? Reflexiones sobre usos y abusos del conocimiento histórico", *Humanidades y Ciencias. Aspectos disciplinares y didácticos*, Granada: Atrio, 2007, pp. 75-87.

14 FERNÁNDEZ PARADAS, Antonio Rafael, *Museología aplicada: Didáctica, casos prácticos y materiales docentes*. Málaga: ExLibric, 2015

Critical analysis: Does the exhibition reflect a consensual historical-artistic reality, or on the contrary, does it falsify history and offer certain political or ideological positions?

Selection of works: Which works have been selected and why? Are there any representative works missing that should be included? What information is included in the information panels? With the information provided, is the public able to understand the reason for the work, under the worldview of the world that gave birth to it?

Catalog analysis.

Physical description of the book, not standardized. Here we will highlight those physical particularities of the edition to be treated. This will be approached from free writing, and not from the standardized description of the different areas that make up a catalog entry or a bibliographic one.

Study scheme proposed in the monograph. We will reproduce the scheme of work proposed by the author or authors, for the chapters to be dealt with, from which we will proceed to their critical analysis.

Critical analysis. During the critical analysis, we will highlight all those aspects that characterize the commented work.

Bibliography. In this section we will focus especially on the bibliography cited by the author and his update on the latest developments.

From the methodological analysis and the correct critical evaluation of the exhibition and its catalog, we could answer the following question: does the exhibition allow us to understand the reality of the world reflected in the works?¹⁵ The application of the proposed methodology will provide the student with the necessary critical skills that will allow him to discern for himself about these and other questions in relation to the educational values of the exhibition.

3. THE BEARDED WOMAN OF PEÑARANDA, AN EXAMPLE OF ANALYSIS FROM THE GROTESQUE

Portrait of Brígida del Río, the bearded woman of Peñaranda. 1590. Work by Sánchez Cotán. The bearded woman of Peñaranda, inscription in capital letters: "BRÍGIDA DEL RÍO DE/ PEÑARANDA DE E/DAD DE L AÑOS/MDXC". Museo del Prado, Madrid, Oil on canvas. 102 x 61 cm.

15 FERNÁNDEZ PARADAS, Antonio Rafael and SANCHEZ LOPEZ, Juan Antonio, "Identidades vernáculas, propaganda subliminal y sentimiento nacionalista. La "Sección retrospectiva" de la exposición internacional de Barcelona de 1923 o la feria de las vanidades del mueble español", *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea* (Italy), 19, 2014.



Doña Brígida del Río was one of the most famous characters of Spain at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century. The interest she aroused was such that several books and paintings echoed her. The painting preserved in the Madrid art gallery of the Prado was widely spread among different sectors of the population, since engravings were made of it, and it was the work that Covarrubias used to illustrate the *Emblemas morales*, written in 1610.

The portrait of Brígida del Río, in a context in which several paintings of graceful women with beards circulated. This type of works are interesting for history, since, in general, they usually present texts in which the women depicted are recorded, so as not to give any doubts about their true existence.

As we have mentioned before, in the exhibition catalog of the grotesque there is no approach that justifies the category of the grotesque in each of the works. After a leisurely reading of it, we have extracted those notes that justify the portrait of Brígida del Río as a faithful reflection of the conceptuality of the grotesque¹⁶. In this sense, Valeriano Bozal's words are

16 BOZA, Valeriano, "Grotesque. La sombra de la risa", *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012, pp. 71-89.

related to those previously mentioned by the curator of the exhibition, José Lebrero, Basáñez Ryan, or Wolfgang Kayser .¹⁷

"I would like to begin this intervention with a sensation that I do not know if everyone participates in: when I contemplate the portraits of *Brígida del Río, the bearded woman of Peñarada* (1590). Juan Sánchez Cotán, *La mujer barbuda (Portrait of Magdalena Ventura and her husband* (1631), by José de Ribera, or *La monstrea vestida La monstrea vestida y la monstrea desnuda* (both of uncertain date, around 1680), by Juan Carreño de Miranda, when I contemplate these figures, although they may be comical, I do not feel like laughing. The same thing happens to me when I look at Velázquez's buffoons, for example, *El bufón Calabacillas* (circa 1640), and also at many of Goya's drawings and prints, especially the grotesque ones of the *Disparates* (1815-1821)".

If not all, many of these figures are part of a repertoire that does make those who contemplate them laugh when, paradoxically, they are real. At the fairs, the bearded woman and the monster with several heads and limbs are offered to the revelry of those who visit the barracks (...)¹⁸ . Bozal, like Kayser¹⁹ , exemplifies his exposition through the laughter provoked by works such as the bearded woman, but at the same time goes a step further, since he does not start from the grotesque phenomenon as an evasion of reality, but as reality itself, that of the sixteenth century, and that of today, where there are "grotesque" characters, whether in a painting, or in a circus. The aforementioned words of Basáñez Ryan, perfectly exemplify the feeling that Brígida del Río provokes in the spectator, past and present: "a complex and sudden load of sensations that struggle to be translated in a certain instant in order to rescue our conscience from perplexity and bewilderment"²⁰ . "There is nothing to "correct" in the bearded women or in Calabacillas, nothing in the unbridled characters of the Goyaesque prints: they are there, with their "deviation", as part of nature, of our world of life, something like they will continually remind us that the world is imperfect and deformed, but that it is so"²¹ .

"The bearded women and the jesters are also different, but unlike the previous protagonists (the deformity of the Jewish executioners, emulators of the fallen angels, etc.), they are not stereotypes, they are not schemes of behavior or perception. They are real individuals, they respond to real characters who had a name and their biography"²² .

17 KAYSER, Wolfgang, *Lo grotesco: su configuración en pintura y literatura* (1957). Buenos Aires, Nova, 1964. "The monstrous that has arisen precisely from the confusion of the domains, and together with it the disorderly and the disproportionate appear as characteristics of the grotesque", p. 24. "While the grotesque in ornaments and paintings was considered only as something completely alien to nature and at the same time as a product of the subjective imagination, it was possible to reject it without any problem", p. 32. The shudder mixed with the smile has its basis precisely in the experience that our familiar world, which apparently rests on a fixed order, is being distanced by the irruption of abysmal powers and is disarticulated by renouncing its forms, while its orderings are dissolving." p. 40.

18 BOZAL, Valeriano, "Grotesque. La sombra de la risa", *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012, pp. 71-89.

19 P. 40.

20 BASAÑEZ RYAN, Fernando, "El fenómeno grotesco", *DC PAPERS, revista de crítica y teoría de la arquitectura*, 1, 1998, pp. 12-20.

21 BOZAL, Valeriano, "Grotesque. La sombra de la risa", *El factor grotesco*, Málaga: Museo Picasso, 2012, pp. 71-89.

22 Idem. p. 78.

The aforementioned contributions of Bozal, with respect to the grotesque, but also in relation to our bearded woman, are especially interesting since he frames them in the very concept of the theory of aesthetics, and the connotations between the beautiful and the good, the ugly and the bad: "(...) But I have for me that these characters are framed in a "theory" according to which the physical deviation from what is proper and decorous has much to do with the moral deviation from what is right and good, a "theory", which remarkable predicament during the Middle Ages, although its roots in older times"²³ .

Federico Rivilla, referring to the other bearded woman, Ribera's Magdalena Ventura, is much more explicit in his contributions "when the guides of the old "Hospital de Afuera", pass fleetingly by the splendid "Grecos" that it preserves, to go, instead, to stop in front of "La mujer barbuda" by Jusepe Ribera, they certainly do not do it for any aesthetic reason: but simply for the "morbid" that they suppose to the representation of such a phenomenon"²⁴ . Pérez Sánchez, in the same line, cites with respect to Ribera's bearded woman that, "in spite of the evident descriptive intention, almost of illustration of natural history"²⁵ .

We began this commentary with the words of Lebrero in his definition of the grotesque. We bring them up again, since as a whole they would exemplify the nervous smile that Brígida del Rio had to endure, in life, and in painting, before those who crossed her path:

"Sometimes described as exaggerated, sometimes assimilated to the deformed, sometimes close to the satirical and even to the incongruous, the field of the grotesque enters a field of knowledge that is still very open".

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²³ Idem, p. 78.

²⁴ REVILLA, Federico, "Lo pictórico y lo extrapictórico en "la mujer barbuda de Ribera", *Boletín del Seminario de Estudios de Arte y Arqueología: BSAA*, 54, 1988, pp. 451-454. In relation to the discourse we have been mentioning about the characterization of the grotesque and its role within the "reality", Revilla states that "The Duke of Alcalá, interested in this type of portraits, would have wanted it as one more curiosity in his gallery, where to "surprise", "astonish" or "disconcert" his distinguished visitors (all of them so baroque pretensions)", p. 452.

²⁵ PEREZ SÁNCHEZ, Alfonso, E., "La piel de lo real", *Ribera*, Barcelona: Noguer-Rizzoli, 1979.

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