

Grotesque Realism and Grotesque Body in Bakhtin / *Realismo grotesco e corpo grotesco em Bakhtin*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we will discuss the Bakhtinian concepts of Grotesque realism and grotesque body from various perspectives. We will begin by exploring the synchronic approaches taken by contemporary linguists and semioticians. Additionally, we will delve into Bakhtin's own treatment of these concepts, tracing their origins to his doctoral thesis during the early 20th century within the context of the Soviet Union. Subsequently, we will examine the significance of both concepts within the work *Rabelais and His World*. Finally, we will scrutinize some instances of the Grotesque in literary and visual arts from Ancient Judaism and early in Medieval Christianity, which were either directly or indirectly referenced by Bakhtin.

KEYWORDS: Bakhtin; Grotesque; Realism; Body; Rabelais

RESUMO

Nesse artigo, discutiremos os conceitos bakhtinianos de realismo grotesco e corpo grotesco a partir de diferentes aspectos, a começar pelas abordagens sincrônicas feitas pelos linguistas e semióticos contemporâneos nossos, mas também pela abordagem que o próprio Bakhtin fez desses conceitos desde a pré-história deles, isto é, enquanto o pensador russo elaborava-os em sua tese de doutorado, no contexto da União Soviética na primeira metade do século XX. Depois disso, discutiremos o significado de ambos os conceitos no interior da obra *A cultura popular na Idade Média e no Renascimento: O contexto de François Rabelais* e, por fim, examinaremos algumas manifestações do grotesco em obras literárias e de artes plásticas do judaísmo antigo e do cristianismo antigo e medieval, as quais foram direta ou indiretamente citadas ou aludidas por Bakhtin.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bakhtin; Grotesco; Realismo; Corpo; Rabelais

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Introduction

Grotesque realism and grotesque body stand among the most significant concepts in Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World* (1984).¹ Numerous essays and academic works in the humanities are constantly addressing and employing them as a theoretical concepts for conducting analyses or studies of literary works or other popular cultural phenomena taken as research subjects. To their proponents, these concepts seem suitable for Bakhtinian methodology.

Despite the frequency which scholars write about grotesque realism and the grotesque body, and the frequency with which these concepts are revisited for scientific investigations in the humanities in research conducted in Brazil and worldwide, there is a noticeable need for a deeper explanation of the meaning of Bakhtin's grotesque concepts in accordance with what the author himself, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, intended with them. While it is plausible for concepts to be reinterpreted in the humanities, as linguists and semioticians have done with Bakhtin's work, it is always important to revisit the original sense of these concepts in order not to lose sight of the legacy of the Russian thinker.

Therefore, we propose to revisit the grotesque in Bakhtin's work *Rabelais and His World* (1984),² starting from its genesis and subsequent development. In this article, we will do so by firstly highlighting the fertility of the grotesque concept, which has been embraced by numerous scholars in the humanities who have applied new approaches to it. Next, we will delve into the grotesque within the making of Bakhtin's work before it was published as a book, during the phases of its production when it was presented as a doctoral thesis to the Maksim Gorky Institute of World Literature. Following that, we will explore the meanings of the grotesque in the work alongside other concepts such as carnivalization and the carnivalesque, which are inseparable from the grotesque. Lastly, we will present the grotesque in the imagery and visual arts related to ancient Judaism and early and medieval Christianity, elements that are directly or indirectly referenced by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984).³

¹ BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

² For reference, see footnote 1.

³ For reference, see footnote 1.

1 The Profundity of the “Grotesque”

Concept for better or for worse, “grotesque realism” and the “grotesque body” are Bakhtinian concepts that have captured the attention of scholars in the humanities in general since the time they were first discussed by intellectuals who first accessed Bakhtin’s work in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, during his doctoral defence, as we will see below.

In more recent times, the frequent and sometimes enthusiastic utilization of the “grotesque” concept as a theoretical foundation for research in the humanities is constantly conducted, as evidenced by its frequent mention in scientific articles, especially in Brazil - which can be easily confirmed through a quick search both on the internet and in a university library.

Indeed, it is noticeable that a significant portion of the studies that propose a reflection on Bakhtin’s grotesque have been conducted from synchronic approaches. For instance, the text simply titled *Realismo Grotesco* [Grotesque Realism] (2010), authored by Eduardo Peñuela Cañizal, who, when writing about the topic, admitted to not being a regular reader of Bakhtin and instead used *The Dialogical Imagination* (1981)⁴ as a reference to address the subject, rather than *Rabelais and His World* (1984),⁵ as one might expect. Cañizal’s study (2010) takes a semiotic approach based on the reading done by the Bulgarian scholar Julia Kristeva (2014) of the Russian intellectual. Thus, it is a doubly indirect approach to the topic, both because it does not start from Bakhtin’s own work on the subject and because it employs Kristeva (2014) reading as mediation.

We can also point to Galin Tihanov’s article, “*The Gravity of the Grotesque*” (2012),⁶ in which the scholar related Bakhtin’s grotesque to subjectivity. Given the bias of his perspective, the scholar did not explain what the grotesque consists of in the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, Antiquity, or any time or historical context that could be situated. Instead, as one would expect, he worked on the concept in relation to the idea of subjectivity that particularly interested him in his essay.

⁴ BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

⁵ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁶ TIHANOV, Galin. The Gravity of the Grotesque. *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso*, v. 7, n. 2, pp. 165-178, jul./dez. 2012. Available on: <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/bakhtiniana/article/view/11381>. Last access: 23 oct. 2023.

On the other hand, Tzvetan Todorov, who greatly praised the genius of the Russian scholar in his work *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique suivi de, Écrits du cercle de Bakhtine* (2013),⁷ provided only a brief description of the concept by stating that the term “grotesque” is the opposite of the classical and did not delve into an extensive explanation of the subject. He simply summarized that the grotesque also opposes the official, the serious, and so on.

Marye Rosse Bernardi (2012) offered a more elaborate explanation of the grotesque, which, however, is also a synchronic approach like the others mentioned, as the scholar did not bother to cite examples outside of Bakhtin’s work, nor did she seek ways to interpret its meaning. Let’s see what the scholar wrote:

In this nearly forgotten aesthetic conception, the subject is never the individual in their intimacy, but rather the people, with their exaggerated, universal, cosmic, and abundant body, harkening back to the material and corporeal principle, joyful and festive. It is within the realm of grotesque realism that the phenomenon of debasement takes place, meaning the transfer of all abstract, ideal, spiritual, and lofty values to the material and corporeal plane, corresponding to the belly and the earth. Thus, constructed through the lens of debasement, these images tend to distort and deform the values of official and religious culture as well (Bernardi, 2009, p. 79).⁸

Norma Discini’s article, “Carnavalização” [“Carnavalization”] (2008), very interestingly and didactically demonstrated the effects of carnivalization, which is closely related to the grotesque, in the works of Rabelais, the subject of Bakhtin’s study. She also mentioned other works Bakhtin worked with, namely, books by Dostoevsky, Lucian of Samosata, and Erasmus of Rotterdam. However, the author of the article does not explore aspects of the concept’s historical development or its meaning, as that was not her objective at any point.

The contributions made by these scholars are significant as they demonstrate the potential of the Bakhtinian grotesque concept, which is approached from the perspectives

⁷ TODOROV, Tzvetan. *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique suivi de Écrits du cercle de Bakhtine*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2013.

⁸ In Portuguese: “Nessa concepção estética praticamente esquecida, o sujeito nunca é o homem na sua intimidade, mas o povo, com seu corpo exagerado, universal, cósmico e abundante, remetendo ao princípio material e corporal, alegre e festivo. É no plano do realismo grotesco que se realiza o fenômeno do rebaixamento, isto é, a transferência de todos os valores abstratos, ideais, espirituais e elevados para o plano material e corporal, correspondente ao ventre, à terra. Assim, construídas pela ótica do rebaixamento, essas imagens tendem a distorcer e deformar também os valores da cultura oficial e religiosa.”

of semiotics, subjectivity, and communication theory. It could also be revisited from countless other study perspectives as a theoretical foundation for research in various branches of the humanities.

Despite the relevance of studies like these for various areas of the humanities, we emphasize the importance of understanding the meaning of the grotesque as Mikhail Bakhtin himself conceived it, along with its historical development. Therefore, we intend to discuss it based on the terminology used by the Russian intellectual and his perspectives. Thus, in the following sections, we will seek to comprehend Bakhtin's grotesque from its prehistory.

2 Genesis of the Grotesque as a Theoretical Concept

In her article, “Do livro à tese de Bakhtin sobre Rabelais” [“From Bakhtin's Book to the Thesis on Rabelais”] (2022), Sheila Vieira de Camargo Grillo analyzed the stenogram of Bakhtin's doctoral defense at the Maksim Gorky Institute of World Literature. In her work, Grillo (2022) described the lengthy process that took place between 1930 and 1952, during which Bakhtin's text, now known as *Rabelais and His World* (1984),⁹ evolved from its initial intention as a book to its presentation and defense as a doctoral thesis. Subsequently, it underwent further revisions to meet the requirements of the Higher Certification Committee, and finally, it was published as a book in the Soviet Union in 1965. We do not have the methodological capacity or the intention to delve into the details of this process; instead, we will address some information that sheds light on our discussion of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque.

According to Grillo (2022), in the doctoral defense process in the Soviet Union during the 1940s and 1950s, the panel of examiners could either grant the candidate the title of doctor or an equivalent qualification to what we call a *Livre Docente* [Associate Professor] in Brazil, or they could reject the candidate's work and thereby deny the candidate either of these two titles.

In this process, as noted by Grillo (2022), in addition to submitting the thesis to the examiners, the candidate also delivered an oral presentation, which carried significant weight in the overall assessment within that context. The committee that evaluated

⁹ For reference, see footnote 1.

Bakhtin's thesis was composed of various reviewers, some of whom were official while others were not. Some provided written opinions after reading the work, while others conducted oral interrogations following the oral presentation without having read the thesis.

According to Grillo (2022), examiner Isaak Nucinov, despite acknowledging the significance of "Gothic realism" in Bakhtin's work, criticized the assertion that "the sources of Nikolai Gogol's literature come from it" (Grillo, 2022, p. 7).¹⁰ On the other hand, examiner Maria Teriayeva, during her questioning, "criticized the absence of a definition of Gothic realism" (Grillo, 2022, p. 13).¹¹ In turn, examiner Nikolai Brodski, also during his questioning, stated that "Gothic realism represents a degradation of the method" (Grillo, 2022, p. 14)¹² and disagreed with the idea that "Gothic realism" was reflected in the works of Dostoevsky, Bobok, and A Nasty Story. Finally, despite the commendatory tone of Mikhail Alekseev's questioning, this examiner raised an objection regarding the use of the term "Gothic realism" and proposed replacing it with "medieval folkloric realism."¹³ At the end of the defense, the minutes indicated that the use of "Gothic realism" in Bakhtin's work was a gross defect.

Grillo (2022) reports that in response to the panel's comments, along with other revisions that added an additional one hundred and twenty pages to the work – these were also included to address other critiques that are not relevant to mention here – Bakhtin replaced "Gothic realism" with "grotesque realism" in the final version of his thesis, which was resubmitted to the Higher Certification Committee. However, even so, in the final record, which would grant Bakhtin the title of doctor while denying him the coveted "*livre-docência*," there was still criticism of how Rabelais' realism was approached in the thesis, which, as recorded, was considered anachronistically treated as naturalism.

Based on what has been described so far about the defense process of Bakhtin's doctoral thesis, there are at least three pieces of information that are useful for discussing the meaning of the "Gothic," which was present in the initial version of Bakhtin's thesis. First, we observe that "grotesque" replaced "Gothic" in Bakhtin's theory, and understanding this substitution reveals something about the theory proposed by Bakhtin

¹⁰ In Portuguese: "as fontes da literatura de Nikolai Gógol provêm dele."

¹¹ In Portuguese: "crítica a ausência de uma definição do realismo gótico."

¹² In Portuguese: "O realismo gótico representa um rebaixamento do método."

¹³ Other questions were raised that we have not mentioned because they were not relevant to the purposes of this current essay.

that was reworked in the final version of his thesis. Second, despite sounding anachronistic to the examiners, it may be plausible that Bakhtin's "Gothic" anticipates characteristics of naturalism in the medieval and Renaissance aesthetic conception. Finally, the way Bakhtin approached the Gothic in his thesis is related to folklore in the conception that existed in this field of knowledge around the mid-20th century in the Soviet Union.

In the original formulation present in Bakhtin's doctoral thesis, which was criticized by several members of his committee, as we have just pointed out from Grillo's text (2022), the term "Gothic" referred to the aesthetic that the scholar intended to present as corresponding to the medieval period and reflected in Renaissance literary works, especially in the works of Rabelais. It appears that Bakhtin made the substitution of "Gothic" with "grotesque" because he did not want to directly confront the examining committee within the historical context and cultural environment where public authorities were not usually favorable to individuals like him, who had been condemned to exile on charges of cosmopolitanism (Clark; Holquist, 1984).¹⁴ It is understood that for him, replacing one term with another, albeit reluctantly, would be preferable to arguing and insisting on the use of "Gothic" and risking the rejection of his thesis and the denial of the doctoral title.

Replacing "Gothic" with "grotesque" required a reworking of the thesis because in the final version, the concept of the grotesque played a crucial role in the theory of cultural development through the history of literature proposed by Bakhtin's thesis. This happened because the term "Gothic" – at least in most instances in the final version of the book that we have in the Portuguese language – carries a negative connotation. It is associated with "darkness" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 65),¹⁵ "gloomy" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 196),¹⁶ "the [clergy] vestments" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 292),¹⁷ and "the seriousness" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 239)¹⁸ of the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the Gothic is presented as an attribute of the century that was chastised by the Renaissance (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 292).¹⁹

¹⁴ CLARK, Catarina; HOLQUIST, Michael. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, Mass. – London, Harvard University Press, 1984.

¹⁵ For reference, see footnote 1.

¹⁶ For reference, see footnote 1.

¹⁷ For reference, see footnote 1.

¹⁸ For reference, see footnote 1.

¹⁹ For reference, see footnote 1.

If, as we have seen, Bakhtin's "Gothic" was criticized by the thesis examiners, and the "grotesque," which replaced it, was in turn rejected in the final version of the work because it was understood, at least in part by some members of the committee, as a manifestation of naturalism, this means that Bakhtin's approach in his thesis was considered anachronistic. This is because his research subject, the works of Rabelais, was written in the 16th century, while the emergence of naturalism is generally dated to a much later period, roughly the early 19th century. Therefore, even indirect connections between Rabelais and naturalism were not admitted.

Despite the criticisms that Bakhtin's initial thesis received from his examiners for being considered anachronistic, it is interesting to note that art historian Erwin Panofsky (1957)²⁰ asserted that Gothic art paved the way for modern naturalism. While it is impossible for Bakhtin to have read Panofsky's book, to which we refer, as it was first published in 1951, and similarly unlikely for Panofsky to have read Bakhtin's text, which had not been published as a book at that time, it appears that the connection between these two thinkers arises from the *zeitgeist*.

In another of his works, Panofsky (1955)²¹ mentions the conception that the Renaissance painter and architect Giorgio Vasari (Arezzo, 1511 - Florence, 1574) had about the Gothic style, which could be referred to in a Germanic manner (Panofsky asserts that 'tedesco' became an insult in that context). According to the references made to Vasari, the style that would later be called Gothic "differs greatly from both the ancient and the modern" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 176).²² It was seen as a monstrous and barbaric style, invented by the Goths, lacking everything that is called order, and therefore, "should be called confusion and disorder" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 176).²³ Gothic architecture was understood by Vasari as a naturalistic style, derived from the imitation of living trees, a perspective that was entirely outdated in the Renaissance worldview.

In the final version of the thesis, the Gothic acquired unilaterally negative connotations, while the grotesque replaced it and altered the significance associated with it. While the Gothic could be historically and geographically situated, the grotesque took on an ahistorical validity. As we will see in more detail, "the images of the grotesque have

²⁰ PANOFSKY, Erwin. *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism: An Inquiry into the Analogy of the Arts, Philosophy and Religion in the Middle Ages*. New York: Meridian Books, 1957.

²¹ PANOFSKY, Erwin. *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers In and On the Art*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1955.

²² For reference, see footnote 6.

²³ For reference, see footnote 6.

their origin in an unremembered past (Tihanov, 2000, p. 285), It is an aesthetic category that emerged in an immemorial antiquity, survived through the unofficial and popular culture of the Middle Ages, and reached its peak in Renaissance literature. Afterward, it degenerated in posterity, as seen, for example, in the form of romantic grotesque, and from then on, it only subsisted in reduced, attenuated, and fragmented forms (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 21).²⁴

Both Bakhtin and Panofsky considered the Renaissance as a period of cultural zenith in the specific domains addressed by each of them. While the Middle Ages are ambiguous, representing the era of Gothic darkness, they also point to naturalism, which in Panofsky's conception is the expression of a future renewal that begins to unfold. In Bakhtin's view, it is the era of the effervescence of popular and unofficial culture that will reach its peak in the Renaissance.

From a strictly historical perspective, the Gothic precedes the Renaissance, just as the grotesque precedes the classical antiquity. However, in Bakhtin's approach, the grotesque spans all eras, being associated with popular culture, unofficial culture, and therefore, it was linked to folklore by one of the examiners who participated in Bakhtin's thesis defense. Nevertheless, as the term "folklore" could not be ascribed an ideological sense, this might be why Bakhtin did not accept it as an appropriate substitute for "Gothic" and instead opted for the broader term "grotesque realism" rather than the doubly restrictive term "folkloric medieval realism."

Being an aesthetic conception that predates the classical period in antiquity, it was to be expected that the grotesque had the potential to acquire a subversive and ideological sense. It had the sense of an unofficial cultural expression, a culture that continues to exist in the sublayers of society, always bubbling up here and there in small peripheral manifestations and ready to burst forth again in a torrential manner. Despite not being well-received by the committee, as we have seen, the concept of the grotesque related to popular and unofficial culture seemed to provide an ideological framework for Bakhtin's theoretical proposal to address marginalized cultural forms. This was especially significant because it was in a social context of totalitarian politics.

From another perspective, regarding Bakhtin's use of "Gothic" to refer to the medieval aesthetic category and thus qualify the realism in Rabelais' Renaissance work,

²⁴ For reference, see footnote 1.

it should be noted that in the view of the examining committee, this approach employed by the Russian intellectual placed the two periods, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in continuity. It rejected the idea of an established historical rupture, as desired by the dogmatic reading of Hegelianism regarding the succession of historical periods that prevailed in the academic view of the Soviet Union at that time.

As pointed out by Grillo (2022), the fact that Bakhtin, in his thesis, placed the Renaissance in continuity with the Middle Ages earned him criticism from the examining committee because this contradicted Engels' postulate that proposed the Renaissance as the overcoming of medieval culture. A committee member even stated that what Bakhtin had done amounted to a disregard for the ideology of the Renaissance. Therefore, it becomes evident that this criticism is ideological rather than academic, at least in the sense we understand it today.

Regarding the value attributed to Medieval culture by Bakhtin and a certain cultural confluence between these two historical periods, Bakhtin's thesis and the theory proposed by historians from the Annales School coincided, as stated by historian Aaron Guriêvich²⁵ when he declared that "[Bakhtin and the Annales historians] emerged almost in synchrony and independently of each other" (2003, p. XIII).²⁶ Meanwhile, the Russian academics' view of history is criticized by Guriêvich (2003) because, according to the Russian historian, it was based on a dogmatic reading of Hegelianism through Engels and continued in this manner until the 1990s.

Regarding the connection between the Gothic and folklore, the alignment of the intended meanings of the concepts was such that, as we saw above, the examiner Mikhail Alekseev suggested replacing "Gothic realism" with "medieval folkloric realism" (Grillo, 2022).²⁷ In this case, within the context of the Soviet Union, folklore encompassed a wide range of subjects related to what we now call popular culture, that content of non-erudite culture associated with the peasantry, which is generally transmitted orally.

As we have seen, this replacement did not seem appealing to Bakhtin's project because the term "folklore" did not carry the same ideological weight as the grotesque potentially appeared to have. Although Bakhtin did not accept "medieval folklore" as the

²⁵ In this article, I quote two works by the same author, although the translations in Portuguese language transliterate two distinct names for the same author: Guriêvich (2003) e Gurevich (2000).

²⁶ In Portuguese: "[Bakhtin e os historiadores da Escola dos Anales] surgiram quase em sincronia e independentemente umas das outras."

²⁷ In Portuguese: "realismo gótico;" "realismo folclórico medieval."

suitable concept to replace “Gothic,” he began to attribute to the grotesque the characteristic of disproportionate size, much as one of the prominent Russian folklorists, Vladimir Propp, proposed in “On the Comic and Laughter”: “In the grotesque, exaggeration is at its highest level, which makes the exaggerated object monstrous. It goes completely beyond the limits of reality and passes into the domain of fantasy; in this way, it borders on the terrible” (Propp, 2009, p. 66).²⁸

Thus, the term “grotesque” is also suitable for Bakhtin’s theory because it corresponds to the bodies of the gluttonous giants in Rabelaisian literature, which Bakhtin was researching. Gargantua and Pantagruel came to be identified as grotesque giants, but they could not be considered Gothic giants because the meaning of grotesque was more comprehensive, appropriate, and had specificities that were not shared by the Gothic, which was restricted to the late Middle Ages and certain regions of France and Italy.

3 Grotesque Realism and Grotesque Body in *Bakhtin and His World*

Rabelais and His World (1984)²⁹ is Bakhtin’s work where the concept of the grotesque and other related concepts appear. According to one possible understanding of the author’s overarching argument in this book, the term ‘grotesque realism’ refers to the medieval aesthetic category reflected in the work *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by the Renaissance writer François Rabelais, to which the Russian scholar addressed. This work, before being published as a book, was defended as a doctoral thesis. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque, originating from medieval popular culture, is evident in Renaissance literature, including the works of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Boccaccio, Dante, and others, but primarily in Rabelais’ work, which is the focus of his research.

The problem is that we cannot rely solely on what is explicit in this text because in Bakhtin’s work, at least three different levels of reading are recognized: (1) the veiled critique of the context experienced in the Soviet Union under Stalin; (2) the history of literature from an idealistic perspective, tracing it from its mythical origins to its Renaissance peak; (3) the materialist and populist rhetoric used to adapt idealistic content to the requirements of socialist realism. Understanding the grotesque requires delving into

²⁸ PROPP, Vladimir. *On the Comic and Laughter*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

²⁹ For reference, see footnote 1.

all the layers of Bakhtin's thesis. According to Brandist (1996, p. 2): "Bakhtin, at least in his mature work, concentrated on the dynamics of western popular culture and literature in an attempt to highlight certain features of the contemporary Soviet cultural life."

In Bakhtin's work, it is asserted that grotesque realism is provided by the medieval carnival and its prototypical manifestations in antiquity, such as ancient agrarian festivals, Saturnalia, and so on. In this case, the carnival and the effect it produces, carnivalization, should be understood as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon that constitutes a true carnival worldview. This worldview is related to festivities, spectacles, rituals, verbal works, and vulgar (or low) discursive genres that have been produced since antiquity by unofficial popular culture. These elements have survived the seriousness of the Middle Ages by subverting symbolic or concrete reality through celebrations and expressions of debasement, inversions, beatings, insults, dethronements, and other forms of ambiguous degradations in a society that sought to impose a unilaterally serious understanding of reality through its official ceremonies, dogmatic religion, and authoritarian imposition.

According to this, carnivalization, which is the most important concept in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984),³⁰ is the transposition of these phenomena considered as carnivalesque into literature and culture. Historian Peter Burke asserts something that also applies to Bakhtin's use of the carnivalesque:

There is a sense in which every festival was a miniature Carnival because it was an excuse for disorder and because it drew from the same repertoire of traditional forms, which included processions, races, mock battles, mock weddings, and mock executions. The use of the term 'carnavalesque' is not intended to imply that Shrove Tuesday customs were the origin of all the others; the suggestion is simply that the major feasts of the year had rituals in common and that Carnival was an especially important cluster of such rituals (Burke, 1978, p. 199).³¹

The specificity of Bakhtin's theory lies in the transposition of these carnival rituals into literature and culture, as well as the ahistorical nature of these manifestations from antiquity in Saturnalia to the Middle Ages. We need to address this concept, albeit briefly, because it is not possible to understand the grotesque apart from carnivalization in Bakhtinian theory.

³⁰ For reference, see footnote 1.

³¹ BURKE, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Harper & Row Publisher, 1978.

Based on the terminology adopted and repeatedly used by Bakhtin himself throughout his work, we can say that by “grotesque realism,” the author refers to the system of images from popular comic culture that exists in opposition to the official culture of the Middle Ages. In fact, this opposition is difficult to place from a historiographical perspective in the medieval period to which Bakhtin intends to apply this approach, as recognized by Caryl Emerson when she stated that this terminology would only be applicable in the period of mature absolutism (1997).³² Similarly, it is difficult to delimit the popular culture to which the scholar refers. Popular culture of which time? From which region? In what context?

Several scholars have recognized these and other problems in Bakhtin’s theory. Russian historian Aaron Gurevich argues that Bakhtin’s theory of carnival in popular culture is one-sided and therefore historically incorrect (1997);³³ Craig Brandist (1999), an authority in cultural theory, points out inadequacies in Bakhtin’s proposition about culture applied to the Middle Ages; Elide Oliver (2008), a researcher and translator of Rabelais’ work into Portuguese, states that Bakhtin’s definition of popular culture changes according to convenience; British historian Peter Burke (1978) and Richard M. Berremong (1986), a scholar in the field of linguistics, indicate that Rabelais’ work also has erudite sources, in addition to popular ones, although Bakhtin omits comments on some to highlight others.

The criticisms and questions raised about Bakhtin’s work, as well as the critiques, should be addressed and discussed in the context in which the research was conducted and based on the specific historical situation experienced by the scholar. It is likely, as Brandist (2000), suggests, that Bakhtin’s use of the term “the people” stems from the conception held by the Russian intellectual movement, known as the Russian populists (1850-1890), in the pre-revolutionary context.

To clarify what Russian populism was, we must dissociate it from the contemporary notion of the term in our society, where we commonly refer to populists, especially Latin American politicians, who use demagogic, paternalistic, and covertly simplistic rhetoric as “populists.” In Russia, this common notion of populism was incorporated into the language by transliterating the Latin term with Cyrillic characters,

³² EMERSON, Caryl. *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*. Princeton University Press, 1997.

³³ GUREVICH, Aaron. Bakhtin and His Theory of Carnival. In: BREMMER, Jan; ROODENBURG, Herman (orgs.). *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day*. Cambridge: Polity, 1997, pp. 93-104.

only adding a Russian-language suffix [*populistckii*]. Meanwhile, populism in the sense that Russian intellectuals attributed to it is a term derived from the Russian word *narod*, meaning “the people,” In this sense, the term for a populist is *narodnik*, which refers to intellectuals engaged in enlightening the popular masses.

In a context where “the very idea of education was revolutionary” (Chambelain, 2022, p. 31),³⁴ Russian populists were engaged in bridging the gap between the aristocracy and the peasant population. “To rectify their mistake, all educated men had an obligation to work tirelessly for the transformation of Russia into a just society” (Chambelain, 2012, p. 89). They were influenced by German romantics such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and determined to provide education and awareness to the peasant masses about the historical-social situation they were involved in and their political rights.

According to Aurora Bernadini (2008, p. 111), “the Russian intelligentsia held an almost mystical belief in the peasant (the people, for the populists), as the bearer of an eternal and genuine truth.”³⁵ It appears certain that this populist idea was incorporated into Bakhtin’s work, as he needed to align the historical perspective of his thesis on Rabelais (idealism and neo-Kantianism) with socialist realism, which was a state policy in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s, as noted by Alastair Renfrew (2015).

Note the frequency with which Bakhtin discusses the immortality of the people and how he relates it to the carnival and the grotesque body. We can find some of these statements in the following passages:

Carnival with all its images, indecencies, and curses affirms the people’s immortal, indestructible character. In the world of carnival the awareness of the people’s immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 256).³⁶

We shall conclude by stressing that the carnival awareness of the people’s immortality is intimately related to the immortality of the becoming of being and is merged with it. In his body and his life man is deeply aware of the earth and of the other elements, of the sun and of the star-filled sky. The cosmic nature of the grotesque body will be analyzed in our fifth chapter (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 257).³⁷

³⁴ CHAMBERLAIN, Lesley. *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia*. New York: The Overlook Press; Rookery Press, 2012.

³⁵ In Portuguese: “a *intelligentsia* russa mantinha uma crença quase mística no camponês (o povo, para os populistas), como portador de uma verdade eterna e genuína.”

³⁶ For reference, see footnote 1.

³⁷ For reference, see footnote 1.

Thus, in the grotesque concept of the body a new, concrete, and realistic historic awareness was born and took form: not abstract thought about the future but the living sense that each man belongs to the immortal people who create history (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 365).³⁸

The populist terminology adopted by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) – which extends beyond the terms discussed here – certainly imbued his presentation of the history of the evolution of literary forms, which reached their highest level in the Renaissance after a long history of development that had occurred since mythical consciousness, with a socialist realist flavour. This was a theory that resulted from the combination of his conception of Cassirerian neo-Kantianism infused with Hegelianism.

The metaphysical-religious tone that the repetitive assertion of the eternity of the people lends to Bakhtin’s work should not come as a surprise, as Chamberlain suggests: “All Russian philosophy except positivism was fundamentally theology” (Chamberlain, 2012, p. 215). Furthermore, Brandist asserted: “Bakhtin was a peripheral figure in Soviet intellectual life who contemplated the experience of revolution in religious and philosophical ways” (Brandist, 1996, p. 2). Thus, we must acknowledge that themes related to Theology and Religion are by no means outside the scope of Bakhtin’s research, especially because theology, religion, and Christianity are inseparable elements of Western culture.

We can assert that through his thesis, Bakhtin aimed to demonstrate the phenomenological development of symbolic consciousness through the history of literature (BRANDIST, 1997, 2002, 1999,). According to Craig Brandist (2002), terms like “unofficial culture” and “popular culture” correspond to the populist language that Bakhtin employed as a socialist veneer for his Hegelian and neo-Kantian reading of history. Part of the task of understanding Bakhtin is to unveil the hidden meaning of these words within the specific ideas of the Russian author.

We can affirm that through his thesis, Bakhtin aimed to demonstrate the phenomenological development of symbolic consciousness through the history of literature. Thus, according to Bakhtin, in the array of images that make up grotesque realism, the emphasis lies on the material and bodily element, which is considered a positive principle united with other aspects of life. In the words of the Russian scholar himself, we read the following:

³⁸ For reference, see footnote 1.

They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of “classic” aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed. The new historic sense that penetrates them gives these images a new meaning but keeps intact their traditional contents: copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment. All these in their direct material aspect are the main element in the system of grotesque images. They are contrary to the classic images of the finished, com pie ted man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 25).³⁹

The elements of this system of images are open bodies in a state of becoming and disproportionately large dimensions, excessively detailed and often repugnant physiological language (which in a certain sense can be considered by us as naturalism), whose vocabulary includes profanity, blasphemies, profanities, parodies, and ironies provided by ambiguous language, in order to maintain the positive aspect of the insults uttered. In the grotesque of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, unlike the later period when the grotesque became unilaterally associated with negative symbolic aspects of existence, especially in Romantic literature, both negative and positive poles prevail.

In a description that attempts to paraphrase Bakhtin, it can be stated that the system of images in grotesque realism involves the debasement of everything that is elevated to the material and bodily plane. To debase, in this sense, is to bring closer to the earth, just as the Latin-derived term ‘humiliate’ carries this meaning. This phenomenon of debasement is brought about by laughter, as according to Bakhtin, laughter degrades, lowers, and materializes. Comic genres such as satire, parody, and irony are exemplary in this type of debasement because they are essentially ambiguous, thus maintaining both the positive and negative aspects of the object of their invective simultaneously.

Through debasement, the most terrifying elements of existence, such as death and the demonic, are presented in a comical manner. In grotesque realism, the demon, who often smiles, is a “comic monster” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 34), as the dreadful is represented as “gay and comic” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 34),⁴⁰ and death itself is not opposed to life but rather connected to its renewal. This is provided by popular culture since ancient times, through the Middle Ages, and reaching its peak expression in the Renaissance, after which

³⁹ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁴⁰ For reference, see footnote 1.

the “true grotesque” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 34)⁴¹ degraded into romantic grotesque, which distanced itself from popular culture.

From the vast system of images in popular culture, one image holds special prominence and is the best representation of grotesque realism, and that is the aforementioned “grotesque body,” Bakhtin describes it as follows:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. This especially strikes the eye in archaic grotesque (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 26).⁴²

Bakhtin outlines a highly idealized history in three stages for the grotesque body: archaic, classical, and post-ancient (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 31).⁴³ As we have reiterated, its peak manifestation occurred during the Renaissance, after which the grotesque degraded into the romantic, becoming a mere bourgeois anecdote. In an antiquity stretching into the distance, dominated by the form of myth, the grotesque body originated, and from this period, we have almost only archetypes of its manifestation left. After the archaic period, from the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome⁴⁴ to the end of the Middle Ages, the grotesque body subsists, through unofficial popular culture, amid fierce battles against the culture that attempts to tame and accommodate it to the forms of language (in the Cassirerian sense), which are more rational than myth. Finally, in the Renaissance, the grotesque achieves a synthesis between the forms of myth and language. In the words of Tihanov (2000, p. 264): “This incongruence in Bakhtin’s narrative may suggest that he

⁴¹ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁴² For reference, see footnote 1.

⁴³ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁴⁴ In *The Dialogical Imagination* (1981), starting from the Hellenistic period, Bakhtin presents the struggle of the lower genres which in future will produce the novel. They go together with the survival of the unofficial popular culture in the Medieval period, appearing renovated in *Rabelais and His World* (1984).

considers the Renaissance to be an exception, a solitary island in the predominantly non-grotesque history of the human body.”

According to this evidently Hegelian dialectical scheme, the Renaissance grotesque (post-ancient) is the synthesis of the antitheses that existed in the forms of the grotesque originating from mythical thought (archaic) and the grotesque that manifested itself from the period of Classical Antiquity proper until the Middle Ages (classical). While the archaic grotesque, being essentially mythical, did not rely on language, in the Cassirerian scheme followed by Bakhtin, the classical grotesque attempts to shape the mythical content into the language structure that is antithetical to it, to which it marginally resists. The synthesis of this process is only achieved when in the Renaissance, literature equalizes myth and language, which struggled throughout the ‘Gothic century’ – here understood as the period from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Bakhtin’s understanding of the history of the grotesque body combines Hegelianism and neo-Kantianism because, according to Tihanov, in the early decades of the 20th century: “Neo-Kantism was indeed ‘infected’ with and moving towards Hegelianism” (2000, p. 269).

We read in Bakhtin that “is a body in the act of becoming” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 317).⁴⁵ The movement of this body is related to the expression of the spirit in its self-recognition, following the historical Hegelian dialectic:

The last thing one can say of the real grotesque is that it is static; on the contrary it seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being. Its images present simultaneously the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born; they show two bodies in one, the budding and the division of the living cell. At the summit of grotesque and folklore realism, as in the death of one-cell organisms, no dead body remains. (That is, when the single cell divides into two other organisms, it dies in a sense but also reproduces; there is no departure from life into death.) Old age is pregnant, death is gestation, all that is limited, narrowly characterized, and completed is thrust into the lower stratum of the body for recasting and a new birth (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 52-53).⁴⁶

According to Brandist (2002), in Bakhtin, the grotesque body becomes an image of the universal dialectic of life, the inner movement of the spirit in itself, as this image of the body represents the phase in which, in general, the spirit shapes itself and frees

⁴⁵ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁴⁶ For reference, see footnote 1.

itself from the purely natural, and rises to possess a more independent existence. This body is not individual and biological but rather the body of the people, the body of humanity that finds its best expression in Rabelais.

After the Renaissance, according to Bakhtin, the grotesque would continue to exist in “ruins” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 21),⁴⁷ especially during the Romantic period, which truly degenerated the grotesque by unilaterally associating it with negative aspects of existence such as ugliness, horror, death, decadence, and vileness, expressions completely divorced from laughter. Up to the point where Bakhtin’s research reaches, Wolfgang Kayser (1966)⁴⁸ was the only one who had written a work dedicated to the grotesque, but his approach focused solely on the Romantic grotesque, making the content written by the German literary critic of little relevance to Bakhtin’s study. From the 19th century onward, interest in the grotesque waned and then re-emerged in a renewed form in the 20th century in the forms of realistic grotesque and modernist grotesque.

4 Images of the Grotesque in Ancient and Medieval Judaism and Christianity

In addition to Rabelais’ giants Gargantua and Pantagruel, who are the quintessential representation of the grotesque body, there are many images of the grotesque presented by Bakhtin in his book. The references that the Russian scholar made to the terracotta figures from Kertch are famous, which are old pregnant women who laugh. Regarding these images, he stated the following:

This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed, Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 25-26).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁴⁸ KAYSER, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966.

⁴⁹ For reference, see footnote 1.

In correlation with the grotesque image of the old pregnant women who laugh, there is one described in the narrative of the birth of Melchizedek found in the ancient book of *II Enoch*, which belongs to the apocryphal literature of Second Temple Judaism. Despite being a representation of the grotesque body, it appears highly unlikely that Bakhtin had access to it in his research.

According to the narrative of *II Enoch* (also known as Slavonic Enoch), Melchizedek's mother, Sopanima, conceived without having sexual relations with her celibate husband Nir (Noah's brother). When Nir realized that Sopanima was pregnant, he questioned his wife, who denied betraying him, claiming she was old. However, while Nir was reprimanding her, she suddenly died. Noah came to help his brother bury his wife, and when they encountered her lifeless body, she miraculously gave birth to a fully developed child who communicated like an adult and acted like a priest.

And he sat on the bed at the her side. And Noe and Nir came in to bury Sopanim, and they saw the child sitting beside the dead Sopanim, and wiping his clothing. And Noe and Nir were very terrified with a great fear, because the child was fully developed physically, like a three-year-old. And he spoke with his lips, and blessed the Lord. And Noe and Nir looked at him and behold, the badge of priesthood was on his chest, and it was glorious in appearance. And Noe and Nir said "Behold, God is renewing the priesthood from blood related to us, just as he pleases," And Noe and Nir hurried and they washed the child, and they dressed him in the garments of priesthood, and they gave him the holy bread and he ate it. And they called his name Melkisedek (*II En* 71.17-21).

The birth of Pantagruel bears very close resemblances to the excerpt cited from 2 Enoch, as can be seen below:

And as they went cackling on about such light-hearted topics, out comes Pantagruel, all over hair like a bear. In a spirit of prophecy one of the sagewomen declared: 'Born hairy was he! Wondrous deeds will he do! If he goes on to live, then old shall he grow' (Rabelais, II, p. 61).⁵⁰

The similarities cannot be ignored, as in both narratives, there is a death and a birth, an astonishingly developed child, an expectation surrounding the abilities of the newborn, and an allusion to suspicion that the mother, in both cases, may have had

⁵⁰ RABELAIS, François. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Penguin Classics. Translated and edited with an introduction and notes by M.A. Screech. London: 2006.

extramarital relations because in Rabelais' text, it is ironically stated that Pantagruel was born after ten months.

The main characters in Rabelais' work are Gargantua and Pantagruel, father and son, who bear a striking resemblance due to their disproportionately large size, as Erich Auerbach explained in his article "The World in Pantagruel's Mouth" (1953),⁵¹ in which he describes a whole society residing in the mouth of this character. Associated with their size is their appetite, which depletes the world's material resources and leads to violence in pursuit of satiety. Interestingly, in ancient Enochian literature, there is also mention of gluttonous giants born from inappropriate relationships that deplete natural resources and commit acts of violence to satisfy their insatiable hunger. This time, we are referring to the book of *I Enoch*, also known as the Ethiopian Enoch:

And they took wives unto themselves, and everyone (respectively) chose one woman for himself, and they began to go unto them. And they taught them magical medicine, incantations, the cutting of roots, and taught them (about) plants. And the woman became pregnant and gave birth to great giants whose heights were these hundred cubits. These (giants) consumed the produce of all the people until the people detested feeding them, So the giants turned against (the people) in order to eat them. And they began to sin against birds, wild beasts, reptiles, and fish. And their flesh was devoured the one by the other, and they drank blood. And then the earth brought an accusation against the oppressors (*I En 7*).

Here, the existence of gluttonous giants and the fantastic narrative of their births suggest a connection between the symbols in *I Enoch* and *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. It is unlikely that Rabelais was familiar with the ancient works of the Enoch cycle, which were entirely unknown in the West until the 18th century and circulated only in Ethiopia in the Ethiopian language, where they were part of the canonical literature of the Orthodox Christian Church. But at least with regard to the giants, it appears that Rabelais' work is a parody of *I Enoch*. Regardless of any historical factors unknown to us at this time, what we are interested in emphasizing is the phenomenon of grotesque realism in these works, and that is quite evident.

⁵¹ AUERBACH, Erich. The World in the Pantagruel's Mouth. In: AUERBACH, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard Trask. Princeton University Press, 1953, pp. 262-284.

There is another highly significant theme for the representation of the grotesque in Bakhtin, which can be identified in religious expressions from the ancient Judeo-Christian world, namely, hell and the devil, both of which are important components of Rabelaisian work.

Regarding this theme, although there is no direct quotation, Bakhtin makes repeated references to the medieval book “The Vision of Tundale,” as we can read: “Lucifer is pictured chained to a red-hot range while he himself devours sinners” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 389).⁵² “In ‘The Vision of Tundale’ (twelfth century) Lucifer devours sinners while he himself roasts on a gigantic range” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 390).⁵³ “This is why as early as ‘The Vision of Tundale,’ Lucifer is represented as a gay monster, the symbol of obsolete power and of fear that has been defeated” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 391).⁵⁴

The text alluded to by Bakhtin is as follows:

And there he saw the lord of darkness... His figure was this: he was as black as coal and had the form of a man from his feet to his head, and he had a mouth in which there were many evils, and he had a tail so large that it was a dreadful thing. In that tail, there were a thousand hands, and in each hand, it was as wide as a hundred spans, and the hands and their nails and the nails of the feet were as wide as spears, and that whole tail was so full of very sharp needles to torment souls. And that Lucifer lay hidden on a bed of iron, made in the same way as grates, and on that bed lay glowing coals, and demons blew on them and lit them, many demons, and they surrounded them with many souls, so many that there is no living man in flesh who could count them, nor think, nor believe that such and so many people were created in the world after it was formed (PEREIRA, Codex 244, 111, text modernized by us).⁵⁵

⁵² For reference, see footnote 1.

⁵³ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁵⁴ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁵⁵ In Portuguese: “E ali viu o senhor das trevas... A sua figura era esta, ele era tão negro como o carvão e tinha figura de homem dos pés até a cabeça, e tinha uma boca em que havia muitos males, e tinha um rabo tão grande que era coisa espantosa. Nesse rabo havia mil mãos e em cada mão tinha a largura de cem palmos e as mãos e as unhas delas e as unhas dos pés eram tão largas como lanças e todo aquele rabo era tão cheio de agulhas muito agudas para atormentar as almas. E aquele Lúçifer jazia escondido sobre um leito de ferro, feito da mesma maneira que as grelhas e sobre aquele leito jaziam carvões acesos e sopravam-nos e acendiam-nos, muito demônios e cercavam-nos de muitas almas, tantas que não há homem vivo em carne que as pudesse contar, nem cuidar, nem crer, que tais e tantas pessoas foram criadas no mundo depois que foi formado.”

A medieval image that attempted to depict Lucifer as described in this description is “*Les très riches heures*,” which is in the “Book of Hours of the Duke of Berry,” c. 1450, available for online viewing on the *Web Gallery of Art*.⁵⁶

Bakhtin was aware of the apocryphal book “The Apocalypse of Peter,” written between the late 1st century and the early 2nd century CE, which, in addition to inspiring the *Vision of Tundale*, also significantly influenced the imagery of Hell in the Middle Ages, both in visual arts and Renaissance literature, and perhaps even influenced the imagination of all subsequent generations. However, as Bakhtin argues, the grotesque degenerated after the great work produced by Dante Alighieri.

At the head of the medieval presentations of the underworld we must place the so-called “Apocalypse of Peter,” This work was composed by a Greek author at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century and is a summary of the antique conceptions of Hades, adapted to Christian doctrine. (Bakhtin, 1984 A, p. 388)⁵⁷

Regarding the “carnivalized hell” - to use Discini’s expression (2008) - Bakhtin points to one of the panels by Hieronymus Bosch, which represents the grotesque in hell, corresponding to the *Vision of Tundale*. In the image on the right side of the famous triptych “*The Last Judgment*” by Hieronymus Bosch,⁵⁸ there is the typically grotesque depiction of sinners being roasted by Lucifer on the grill. According to Bakhtin, this content is related to the *Vision of Tundale*, as we can read in his words:

As we have seen, these grotesque-comic elements were already given in their initial form in the “Vision of Tungdal.” They had an influence as well on pictorial art. For instance, Hieronymus Bosch painted a panel presenting the Tungdal theme (circa A.D. 1500) which stressed precisely the grotesque aspects of the “vision” (the sinners devoured by Lucifer). The frescoes of the Cathedral of Bourges also depict a comic hell (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 389).⁵⁹

As repeatedly stated by Bakhtin, grotesque realism is not one-sided; its representations are ambiguous, simultaneously serious and comical, not solely related to

⁵⁶ *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry* c. 1450. Manuscript (Ms. 65). Musée Condé, Chantilly. Available on: <https://www.wga.hu/index1.html>. Last access: 17 May, 2023.

⁵⁷ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁵⁸ *Last Judgment Triptych (right wing)* 1504-08. Mixed technique on panel, 167 x 60 cm; Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna. Available on: <https://www.wga.hu/index1.html>. Last access: 17 May, 2023.

⁵⁹ For reference, see footnote 1.

representations of negative aspects of existence but also to the positive. Bakhtin points to the grotesque through the direct quotation he makes from John 9:6 in Latin: “*Lutum fecit ex sputo*” [He made clay with spit]. As the Russian thinker explains, from this verse, a popular tradition developed in France in which every place where the Lord had expelled urine, excrement, and saliva became sacred (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 149).

It is also interesting to note how the body of Christ, which the apostle Paul discusses in *1 Corinthians* 12:12-27, is a grotesque body, as it is a unified and diversified body, open to the entry of new components. In this body, there is no division; the members interact with each other, being different from one another, without hierarchy among them. In fact, the less honourable members receive more honour. In this body, a carnivalesque inversion takes place.

Final Considerations

We have just completed a journey to understand Bakhtin’s concepts of grotesque realism and grotesque body, during which, firstly, we explored new perspectives on the grotesque, which have been developed by linguists and semioticians who renewed the vitality of Bakhtinian concepts of grotesque realism and grotesque body in works of synchronic perspective. Next, we revisited Bakhtin’s grotesque in its prehistory, when it began to replace the term “gothic” in Bakhtin’s thesis and discussed what this meant for the structure of the work *Rabelais and His World* (1984).⁶⁰ Then, we delved into the meaning of the grotesque within Bakhtin’s work, considering its particular significances. Finally, we pointed out the grotesque in visual arts and in the ancient Jewish and early Christian medieval imaginary.

This entire journey has allowed us to move beyond a superficial understanding of the grotesque and seek a comprehensive grasp of the concept from its origins, both historical, within the context of the vicissitudes experienced by Bakhtin in the Soviet Union during the first half of the 20th century, and theoretical, in which we observed that Bakhtin aimed to develop an aesthetic category specifically corresponding to the work of Rabelais and cultural phenomena aligned with it. To arrive at the definition of such a category, Bakhtin delved into the history of art, literature, and Western culture in general,

⁶⁰ For reference, see footnote 1.

challenging the very structures established by tradition and causing discomfort to intellectuals adhering to traditional terminology. Even today, Bakhtin's grotesque requires a deeper understanding by researchers of the Russian thinker's work, as its significance has much to contribute to contemporary research in the humanities.

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Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso* [*Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies*] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review II

The work is suitable for the proposed theme: “grotesque realism and grotesque body in Bakhtin,” The title corresponds to the content of the text. The objectives are clearly stated and developed coherently. The author demonstrates familiarity with the proposed theory and an up-to-date knowledge of the current bibliography. The article presents an original reflection, engaging with existing knowledge while also introducing new theoretical-conceptual perspectives on the subject. The contribution to the field of knowledge and related areas is significant and justified by the author, who also discusses other studies conducted from different perspectives and situates their research. The article uses appropriate language for scientific work. Prior to publication, a grammatical review is recommended, as there are some typos in certain words and expressions. For these reasons, the review is favorable for publication in *Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso*. APPROVED

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Review III

The excellent article “Grotesque Realism and Grotesque Body in Bakhtin” aims to reflect on Bakhtinian concepts related to its title, and it does so in a very fruitful manner, examining with acuity “The Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: The Context of François Rabelais,” but also tracing the genesis of the concepts in previous versions of this work, which were presented as a doctoral thesis. This path of reflection provides historical depth to the concepts and works, in other words, it brings them to life. The author also aptly highlights the philosophical foundations that underpin Bakhtin’s study. However, when it states that it was “a theory that resulted from the combination of his [Bakhtin’s] conception of Cassirerian neokantism imbued with Hegelianism,” it may be relevant to remember that Hegelianism is also present in Cassirer’s philosophy. The “return to Kant” after Hegel, which marked the neokantians, did not always entail the abandonment of Hegel, and this is the case with Cassirer. To further enhance the reflection in this excellent article, it might be interesting to emphasize Cassirer’s inflection from idealist philosophy towards language (a “linguistic turn,” which scholars of his work prefer to call a “semiotic turn,” or in other terms, a “cultural turn”). This philosophical direction, moving from the ideal to everyday life, seeks to ground itself in the mundane. Therefore, when the article asserts that “Bakhtin’s populist terminology (...) certainly tinged his presentation of the history of the evolution of literary forms (...) with socialist realism,” the undeniable populist terminology is influenced by socialist realism, but the reflection has its philosophical roots in Husserl’s concept of the “lifeworld,” also present in Cassirer’s work. APPROVED

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