

Just as science fiction evokes the sublime, it also evokes what is called “the grotesque.” Sometimes the stunning new things shows us are not awesome; sometimes they are disgusting! Science fiction authors live to both blow our minds with sublime imagery and gross us out with repulsive imagery. Science fiction is full of revolting new things, especially in the sub-genre of science fiction horror. We call these revolting things grotesque.

The grotesque is the opposite sensation of the sublime. Science fiction’s technological sublime is a sense of the awesome power of scientific rationality, of all the things science and technology can do and show us. Science fiction’s grotesque is a sense that there are things that defy science and rationality, that disturb our scientific categories. We experience the sublime on grand stages. We experience the grotesque more personally, often through individual, disgusting bodies that appear as monstrous fusions of disparate things that should be kept apart.

“The grotesque has to do with the struggle to accommodate mutable, unstable objects and beings in the world.” A novum becomes grotesque “when its disorienting anomalousness also disorients the routines of human lives and institutions.”

“The grotesque brings the sublime to earth, making it material and on our level, forcing attention back to the body. It traps the sublime in the body, partly to subvert it, but also because SF’s fictive ontology requires this duality.”

The grotesque developed as an aesthetic sensibility during the scientific revolution. “As science becomes the dominant ideology in the Enlightened West, the physical is enclosed within systems of intermeshing laws, and the body, so leaky and open in grotesque play, becomes a containment vessel.” “The scientific universe becomes populated with bodies, all of them capable of transformations that disturb the human sense of its place in the world.”

“Scientific materialism...saw the universe as...a body of laws.” “Any deviation from those laws, in any object living or dead, organic or inorganic, corporeal or mathematical, is a shock to the system. And when these anomalies directly affect the living sentient beings who derived the body of laws in the first place, the effect is grotesque.” (See, for instance, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*.)

When confronted with the grotesque in science fiction—be it a dripping human-machine hybrid (like *Tetsuo*); a gruesome alien that looks like part slime mold, part dog; fused bodies; torn bodies and open wounds; things ‘that should not be’—“The mind is troubled, trying to find a solution to the problem posed by perceiving what it should not be possible to perceive.” “The SF grotesque usually involves some surprising, repulsive invocation of the primacy of organic physicality.” “The grotesque turns...attention intensely toward things, in which it detects a constant metamorphic flux, an intimate roiling of living processes that perpetually change before understanding can stabilize them. This process is one of steady descent into interiors, into grottoes of being, in the hope of finding a core, but always finding more transformation.” (See, for instance, John Carpenter’s *The Thing*.)

“The grotesque obstructs the mind from completing its effort of quick understanding, arresting it when it wishes to get on with its routine of knowing, and forces it to learn something it is not sure it wants to know.” “As with the sublime then, the perceiver of the grotesque seeks a setback

position, from which to understand unnatural fusions in terms of their principles of order.”  
“The *scientific grotesque* comes with the recognition of an embodied, physical anomaly, a being or an event whose existence or behavior cannot be explained by the currently accepted universal system of rationalization” (such as Carpenter’s Thing).

While the sublime aligns science fiction with scientific rationality, the grotesque links it more closely to myth. Science breaks the world into fixed, discrete knowable categories. The world of science is stable. Myths describe the world as always changing form in often unnatural, supernatural, and irrational ways (recall all those old Greek stories about the god Zeus taking different forms—a swan, a bull—to seduce human ladies). The world of myth, unlike the world of science, is unstable.

Myth “imposes perpetual metamorphosis, according to which ‘no realm of being, visible or invisible, past or present, is absolutely discontinuous with any other, but all equally accessible and mutually interdependent.’” “The grotesque introduces mythic thought in a non mythic context, ‘polluting’ the pure aspirations of reason with the fluctuating, mutagenic, class-defying world-picture of the sacred.”

When science fiction tilts from the sublime toward the grotesque—when it shows us monsters instead of gleaming starships—technoscience becomes “the occasion for releasing and revealing the uncontainable metamorphic energies of the world and its discrete things.” The science fiction technological sublime show us a future where reason is triumphant and overpowering. The science fiction grotesque shows us a future where reason is powerless and breaks down.

“The sublime is law set free of life; the grotesque is life set free of law.”

We often see the grotesque in the beings that science fiction creates: the “interstitial beings” composed of things that should not be joined together: animals evolved into humans; people who are machines (cyborgs); aliens that look like mashed together animals.

When confronting the science fiction grotesque, all boundaries—social, moral, physical—“between genders, between machines, humans, and animals, between technology and organic life—can come down.”

While the technological sublime was the dominant form of imagery in Golden Age science fiction half a century ago, the grotesque is the dominant form of science fiction imagery now. “The dominant morals of SF’s stories have had less and less to do with adapting to law and order, than to understanding the inherent volatility of the physical.”

“The Enlightenment’s sublime dream of rational control over human life by a race of sages has been succeeded by a far more lively dream of transformational plenitude facilitated by professional alchemists with no guiding collective purpose other than the quick realization of current individual images of desire.”