

the songs (a mixture of what seemed to be Country-and-Western and Irish folk) was in any way 'indigenous' to South Africa. Yet it struck me that something in the *performance*, the way in which these songs were celebrated, the dancing, the fake American ranch vibe, was, maybe, authentically South African. At any rate the people around me were 'people of South Africa', inhabitants. And for what it's worth, the kind of scene-setting that I indulge in above would not have been inappropriate (minus the light bulbs and white faces) had it featured amongst the introductions to the texts in Opland's collection. Maybe the day will come that an oral anthology that affords itself the epithet 'South African', will also give account of cultural events such as these.

The Grotesque in Literature?

Literature and the Grotesque

edited by Michael J. Meyer

Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995, 195 pp.

ISSN 90-5183-793-3

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Those of us who feel that the relationship between literature and the grotesque is an area of crucial importance for the whole field of literary (and cultural) studies, and that this area has not received anything like the attention that it really deserves, primarily since it has all sorts of implications both theoretical and practical for the way in which we constitute the field, are bound to feel disappointed and perhaps a little cheated by this anthology of essays published last year. Certainly the title suggests something far more definitive than what we actually have—to the extent that there may be a trades description problem here. Meyer's anthology is far too disparate a collection that does not hang together all that well; it certainly does not have anything like the cohesion one would expect of an anthology with this title. The quality of the two-and-a-bit-page introduction (which I would characterise as 'very poor') only serves to confirm this judgement. The introduction fails to provide anything like the overview or theoretical

synthesis that I think is really required for this project to work, particularly given the title that Meyer has chosen, which seems to me to be better suited to a New Accents/Critical Idiom type text. Because of this lack of an adequate synthesising overview, the anthology has a somewhat uneven, *ad hoc* quality. The clearest sign of the editor's failure is his assertion that the grotesque is a kind of universal archetype, a viewpoint that gets flatly contradicted in the cultural materialist position on the grotesque that informs Leonard Cassuto's article 'Jack London's Class-Based Grotesque', and is unequivocally expressed in the final statement on the grotesque in Tim Libretti's article on proletarian fiction ('What a Dirty Way of Getting Clean: The Grotesque in Proletarian Literature'). For Cassuto and Libretti the grotesque is a social and historical form, whose power and role can shift significantly within different social and historical contexts (see p. 114, p. 190).

Let me point out a few points about the articles on the grotesque that the introduction might have drawn our attention to. The essays tend to divide themselves quite neatly into those who see the grotesque as a positive, subversive and disruptive force (in Bakhtin's sense) and those that see the grotesque in a negative sense, as a sign of cultural malaise and psycho-social distortion. This is the case particularly with the articles that deal with the modern grotesque, seeing the texts under analysis as presenting a critique of modern 'normality' as itself grotesque. The articles also seem to be divided as to whether the grotesque provides a new tool or angle on familiar terrain, or is a category that represents something deeper and more radical, a category of the socially repressed that is the direct and powerful expression of the most fundamental psychological and cultural ambivalences regarding the human body, using the transgressive shock of dismemberment, disfiguration and unsettling deformity in order to point to the radical uncertainties regarding the repressive role of order and law in the social constitution of the subject. Thus this latter position is likely to suggest texts for analysis that are shockingly or offensively transgressive in the way that they subvert the staid, the normal and the accepted in violently challenging established conventions and rationalities. As Bernard McElroy points out: 'The grotesque does not address the rationalist in us or the scientist in us, but the vestigial primitive in us, the potential psychotic is us' (quoted in Jack Slay's article p.105). McElroy's *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* is an important theoretical source for a number of the articles, and would appear to be, on the strength of the references made to him and material quoted, to be a most incisive and exciting theorist of what is termed the 'contemporary grotesque' (as opposed to the Renaissance grotesque most famously and definitively explored in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*).

The introduction needed to state things more authoritatively and to provide a kind of theoretical synthesis that would prepare the ground better

by stressing points of contact and difference between the articles, and in so doing ensuring that it helps to assert the recent shift in critical reading towards what we might call categories of the 'Other', those categories which seem to be almost beyond categorisation in their elusiveness and contradictoriness because of their strong roots in the human unconscious, categories such as the uncanny, the fantastic and the grotesque which are now seen as having a very special connection with the cultural imagination. It is unfortunate that the reader does not emerge from a reading of this volume with a sense of this.

Though some of the articles are thought-provoking, and provide valuable insights into the grotesque and the role that it can play within literary texts when it comes to the actual texts that are under analysis, the reader is bound to feel let down. The texts analysed tend to be peripheral texts, not in the sense that they are not key canonical texts, but that any reader who has some familiarity with the notion of the grotesque will readily think of texts that would seem to be crying out for this kind of analysis as more centrally and importantly texts of the grotesque. These key texts that one would think of as being ripe for rereading in terms of the notion of the grotesque are conspicuously absent. Moreover, the title of this anthology would seem to be something of a misnomer since some of the articles refer outside of literature, to other cultural forms (fine art and film). This flirtation with film might of itself point to the text's gravest limitation: it is not possible to look at a bit of art and, particularly, a bit of film, without suggesting that given the strong presence of the grotesque in contemporary film, particularly the dominant popular genres of horror and science fiction/fantasy, the scope of the volume should have been broadened considerably. If film is in, it should be in a lot more substantially, and the title should reflect this. There is also a strange absence of satire and comedy, the two modes or genres in which the grotesque plays a powerful role, particularly in regards to subversion of the stereotypical and the conventional. What this anthology should be about is deepening our sense of the importance of the grotesque for the analysis of literature, not presenting new angles on writers and texts that do not ostensibly seem to have a grotesque element or connection with the grotesque. It is in terms of this that I think that the volume fails—and it is in terms of this that I think the different articles must ultimately be evaluated.

Tim Libretti's article presents the most exciting exploration of the politics of the grotesque, suggesting that the grotesque, though bound up within a particular context, has the power to act as a positive force for the restoration of the human in the face of the human alienation created by capitalism, particularly insofar as it reaffirms the importance in human life of the physical dimensions of death and renewal. Libretti links the grotesque

subversion of the whole, the closed and the complete, to the bourgeois control over the means of cultural production and the practice of concealment and effacement which characterises this control. He further links the grotesque to the social and physical alienation (away from a sense of self as physical whole and part of a social whole) created by capitalism and the development of the 'atomised bourgeois individual' (p. 182). Grotesque laughter here (and this is the first time laughter is referred to in the anthology) serves as a 'disalienating' force (p. 187) restoring the wholeness shattered with the radical division of labour within the capitalist system.

Of the rest of the articles included, I would say that the pick are: Jack Slay's 'Delineations in Freakery: Freaks in the Fiction of Harry Crews and Katherine Dunn', Kelly Anspaugh's 'Jean Qui Rit' and 'Jean Qui Pleure': James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis and the High Modern Grotesque, and Greg Metcalf's 'The Soul in the Meat Suit: Ivan Albright, Hannibal Lecter and the Body Grotesque' (if only for its interesting confrontation with the horror of the grotesque, its dominant mode within contemporary popular culture).

These titles (Anspaugh's excluded) of themselves give a clear indication of the lack of centrality of which I have already spoken. I fear that it cannot be argued that the volume escapes this censure on account of the sense of the width of the field that the range of its selections affords.

Rethinking South African Literary History

Rethinking South African Literary History

edited by Johannes A. Smit, Johan Van Wyk & Jean-Philippe Wade

Durban: Y-Press, 1996, 250 pp.

ISBN 1-875094-05-9

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At a certain happy moment in the career of an academic, s/he ascends to the status of 'expert', and in so doing earns the right to tell the rest of the profession how to do their jobs. The most common event for such (invariably tedious) pontification is the professor's inaugural lecture, but there are other