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**From the Selected Works of Jennifer Peeples**

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# Toxic Grotesque

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## Toxic Grotesque Landscapes

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The cattle feedlot lagoons appear as septic lesions in Mishka Henner's satellite images—dark, liquid-centered, open sores that are ringed in a bloody red, or others, a bilious green.<sup>1</sup> The cows appear as swarms of insects from the great height. The earth itself has become infected.

[Figure 1]

Photographs of heaped trash, drainpipes, industrial sludge, and ominous looking smokestacks elicit visceral reactions of disgust and disbelief, uncertainty and anxiety over the breaking of environmental, industry and (maybe) nature's rules—all responses to encounters with the toxic grotesque.

Researching images and toxins is an exploration of a paradox. Many toxins are invisible, impossible to see, taste or smell and are hidden within bodies—flesh and bone bodies—and also bodies of land, water, and air. Their presentation may be banal or commonplace, such as the bathroom cleaner kept neatly concealed under the sink. And yet, we also live in a visual culture where the lack of something to see precludes access to media and, therefore, public and political interest. So the question I explore is, “how do we see toxins?” More specifically for this chapter, I examine how the grotesque functions in constructing an understanding of toxicity, nature, bodies, and normalcy in landscape images.

For Bakhtin in the writings of Rabelais (1500-1800), the grotesque was used during the festival of Carnival to rebel against the laws and tenants of the clergy and king, both of whom were trying to govern the bodies and actions of the commoners.<sup>2</sup> The grotesque costumes and street theater emphasized those things which could not be controlled: birth, death, decay, defecation, and deformity. The grotesque chronicled the ruling class's struggle “to accommodate mutable, unstable objects and beings in the world.”<sup>3</sup> The acts of the Carnival showed the bodies to be “unfixable” (always changing and moving) and unstable. They leaked (materially and symbolically). According to Hufford, they were the antithesis of the classical statues with their perfect bodies and sealed orifices.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to “the official feast,” the grotesque “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.”<sup>5</sup> The spectacle of religious and monarchical pomp and circumstance was temporarily turned on its head to show the uncontrollability of the lives of the people: a fleeting reversal of power and a questioning of the social system.

Science also functions to establish the laws and principles guiding an understanding of nature and, more specifically, the knowledge of the functioning of bodies. The grotesque is once again called upon, this time in the work of science fiction, to question the hegemony of science: the rules, principles, and tenets that attempt to classify, characterize, and control life on earth. The grotesque in science fiction shows a world where those rules and limits have eroded, in which the boundaries of science and nature have been breached. Chaos and mutability and (often unintended) transformation reign. Csicsery-Ronay contends that these modern forms of the grotesque are “actually far more constrained and suffused with threat, precisely because they call into question the physical foundations of the new materialism of science and technology.”<sup>6</sup>

A difference between the science fiction form of the grotesque and its environmental cousin is that constructs of the toxic grotesque attempt to illustrate that human action has already bent the rules of science and nature. Toxins have released what had previously been contained, mutating and transforming the natural into the seemingly unnatural, often in ways that are unanticipated and not always understood, and raising feelings of uncertainty and dread. Science fiction plays on humans’ anxiety for the future. Toxic grotesque images show that some of those fears have already manifested themselves in our bodies and environments.

The images of the toxic grotesque call into question industry, science, technology, and practices of modern living: synthetic chemicals (pesticides, herbicides), human-manipulated natural materials (such as the heavy metals found in mine tailings), and the toxicity associated with rampant consumerism (production, consumption, and disposal of hazard-producing products). And like the various forms of the grotesque that have come before it, the photographers constructing toxic grotesque imagery focus their lenses on altered aspects of physical bodies: the corporeal, the material, leakages, disease, and death. They present polluted places that are purposefully composed by the photographer as a means of challenging destructive hegemonies that normalize toxicity and attempt to erase their environmental and health manifestations.

Like the characters at play during Carnival or those in science fiction, the subjects of toxic grotesque are constructed. For Carnival, the reveler puts on a mask, engages in street theater. With science fiction, the writer creates the grotesque from her imagination, her own distortions of science and materiality. For images of the toxic grotesque, the photographer also constructs grotesque through design and compositional choices. For example, John Pfahl’s image of a smokestack, *Occidental #26*, is made sinister and disturbing through the light of the setting sun reflecting orange and red off the particulates emanating out of the chimney.

[Figure 2]

The same subject matter shot from a long, low angle, with bright daylight reflecting off the steel and glass of the building, would create an image showcasing the promise of industry.<sup>7</sup> The

grotesque, therefore, is not inherent in the object or subject, but in its construction and viewers' response. The primary difference between the forms of the grotesque is that for the toxic grotesque, the subjects have not chosen to put on the costume of contamination nor are they capable of easily removing it. Their transformation is material and their 'normalcy' remains a toxic one.

## **Toxic Grotesque**

By examining both artistic and/or journalistic representations of toxic grotesque landscapes, this analysis asks in what ways images of the toxic grotesque function to challenge the viewing audience's understanding of nature, industry, health, normalcy, and contamination. The approach used for this project is a form of generative rhetorical analysis.<sup>8</sup> Initial images were gathered using a Google search for terms such as pollution, contamination, environmental toxins, chemicals, and industry. Previous work on the toxic sublime<sup>9,10</sup> and toxic visual narratives<sup>11</sup> led to the grotesque as a means of explaining many of the images found in the broad collection. Using theories of the grotesque as conceptual frameworks, I then studied the images for visual similarities, themes, and systems of organization. Similar to their grotesque counterparts, toxic grotesque images employ elements of excretion, infection, and collapse. Each of the three physical and conceptual elements points to a limit of a hegemony to control, contain, or separate those bodies they aim to subdue. After establishing the three categories, I performed close textual analyses on images that best exemplify the category, had gained public attention for the image (Henner; Deepwell Horizon spill), was a particularly striking example of a common visual trope (Pfahl) or had wide distribution to a larger audience (Scientific American images).

## Excretion

Bakhtin argues, "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."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, photographs of the toxic grotesque emphasize industrial and municipal porosity: the now iconic images of tubes, culverts, pipes, and stacks where the contaminated air and water leave the contaminating entity and enter the surrounding environment.

John Pfahl's 1988-1990 series *Smoke*, exemplifies this type of image. The photographs are cropped to show only the top of the stack, which is centered in the bottom of the frame. The focus is the smoke as it streams upward, swirls, or hangs heavy in the sky. It is constructed as dark and menacing, or white and fluffy, or (most commonly) red, orange or yellow with the reflections of light.<sup>13</sup> As with the toxic sublime, Pfahl's design choices of color, texture, and

especially movement play significant roles in the construction of uncontained contamination.<sup>14</sup> The texture and the color trigger a sense of anxiety, or at the very least disquiet, over what appears to be the unnaturalness of the excretion. And to further the concern, the release is moving, flowing through the unbounded air. As with Pfahl's work, other excretion images are frequently cropped to hide the extent of the contamination. The point of excretion, the breached dam or the open mouth of the pipe, is the focus. The destination of the pollutants is unknown, or at least the extent of the contamination is not established in the image.

Grotesque images of spectacular breaches of containment gain public attention. For example, both the Kingston Fossil Plant coal fly ash slurry spill in Tennessee in 2008 and the 2014 Mount Polly mine disaster in British Columbia showcased aerial images of blown dams and the subsequent paths of their destruction. In both cases, the containment system for the holding or tailings ponds failed. 'Pond' is a misnomer for many of the contaminated bodies of water found on mining sites. Some are kilometers wide and may contain billions of gallons of liquid. They are the storage sites of mercury, arsenic, selenium, benzene and other heavy metal laden byproducts created in the mining and burning of fossil fuels.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the Kingston and Mount Polly breaches, the grotesque images document the speed and ferocity of the releases, which carved new destructive waterways and submerged houses to their rooflines in sludge. Subsequent images of dead trees and animals provided evidence of the toxicity of the contaminated water and mud.

Finally, one of the most powerful toxic grotesque images of excretion in recent memory is oil spewing from Deepwater Horizon's uncapped well at the bottom of the ocean. While the stills and live streaming of millions of gallons of oil escaping into the ocean were paired with images of thousand mile-long surface oil slicks, scientists were still worried that the real damage to the ocean remained undocumented, pointing to the limits of grotesque images. Frank Muller-Karger, an oceanography professor at the University of South Florida, told the oversight committee, "I think there's an enormous amount of oil below the surface that unfortunately we can't see."<sup>16</sup>

These images' grotesquery is the industrial leakages through orifices, not the less visible, more damaging pollutants hidden in the air, soil, or water. Pictures of smokestacks and drainpipes function synecdochically as representatives of industrial pollution. For the grotesque, it is the permeability that is important—the lack of containment. The images reveal that we are unwilling or unable to stop contaminants from exceeding their (apparently ineffectual) boundaries between those areas deemed 'toxic' and those that are intended to be kept 'clean.' The uncertainty then is where the visible and invisible pollutants go once they escape.

## Infection

Csicsery-Ronay notes that with the grotesque, “Bodies are constantly reminded that they are not armored containers, but rather invitations to opening and wounding, arenas of autonomous life-forms, diseases, mutations, intimate viruses.”<sup>17</sup> The science fiction grotesque bodies focus on visceral flesh, sores, dismemberment, and organs without bodies.<sup>18</sup> The fictive deformities and maladies as seen in the works of Phillip K. Dick or the films of David Cronenberg become manifest in the toxic grotesque.

Some of the most visually striking toxic grotesque landscape photographs are satellite images of U.S. factory farms or CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations), which were discovered by British photographer Mishka Henner while looking for military compounds.<sup>19</sup> While ag-gag laws can prevent journalists and activists from documenting CAFOs,<sup>20</sup> the satellite images are no less shocking than those photographs taken on the ground. *Business Insider* notes that “these ‘lagoons’ look like gigantic, multicolored petri dishes.”<sup>21</sup> *Grist* described the images as “bloody zombie wounds.”<sup>22</sup> *Fast Company* called the images “a post-apocalyptic nightmare.”<sup>23</sup> As examples of the toxic grotesque, the pools appear as openings in the land, revealing the infiltration of toxins in the body of the landscape. The ground is no longer able to contain the infection, allowing the toxins to ooze and pool on the surface.

Other grotesque landscape images similarly call to mind sickness or infection. Photographs of toxic algal blooms, commonly referred to as red tides,<sup>24</sup> show waterways the color of blood or, alternatively, melted cherry popsicles. The recent algae occurrence on Lake Erie turned vast expanses of its waterways a swirling, thick, iridescent green. An EPA-caused mine breach in Colorado colored the Animus River a flat orange.<sup>25</sup> Images of hazardous air quality show the air as thick and clotted, obscuring details of the cityscape, and creating an ominous grey uniformity.

The images of these toxic events emphasize the strangeness of the incidents: what should normally be healthy and clean—the land, air and water—appear to be sick and abnormal. As with human infections, the images create the expectation in the viewer that the ‘illness’ will subside and health will return with the resumption of normal color and density, belying the ecological damage that precedes and is caused by these toxic events.

## Collapse

One of the most common visual tropes found within the images examined emphasizes the collapse of the boundary between a polluted environment and human bodies and habitats. Countless images show people bathing, swimming and washing in dark water, encrusted with visible trash and saturated with less visible pollutants and waste. In others, human bodies are

coated in the sludge from mine tailings or engulfed in the smoke from burning plastics and other debris. Dorrian argues, that in “grotesque phenomena...spacing collapses. Things that should be kept apart come together and live through one another. A feeling of contradiction exists; formal discriminations collapse, and an unnatural and filthy equivalency reigns.”<sup>26</sup> The grotesque “emerges as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which the self and the other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone.”<sup>27</sup> Harpham argues that the grotesque calls “into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles.”<sup>28</sup>

In *Scientific American's* slideshow of the world's ten most polluted places, the contaminated landscape images are made toxic through the inclusion of human bodies.<sup>29</sup> Four of them have young men (children and adolescents) as focal points. They are often shirtless and shoeless, covered in the contaminated dirt and water, illustrating the vulnerability of those who live in these polluted places. A fifth image depicts children's proximity to toxins through a doll left on the floor of an abandoned Chernobyl, Ukraine building, a trope used again in pictures of the befouled waters around Rio De Janeiro prior to the Summer 2016 Olympics.<sup>30</sup> In collapse images, the humans are often depicted as insignificant in comparison to the contaminated landscapes: the small child on what appears to be a mountain of trash, or the sole fisherman gliding through the seemingly unending bodies of dead fish floating on the water's surface. The toxic landscape has taken over. There appears to be no hope of re-separation. The human body is subsumed.

It is important to note that the toxic grotesque images of collapse are consistently of non-western people and places. The polluted waterways are photographs from India or Haiti. *Scientific American's* ten most polluted places are Russia, Niger, Argentina, Indonesia, Zambia Bangladesh, Ukraine, and Ghana.<sup>31</sup> While Westerners, the primary audience for the analyzed images, benefit from many of the products that produce these toxic legacies, they are not required to carry the largest physical and environmental burden. The repetition of similar locations and characters constructed in these grotesque visual narratives has the potential to equate the most often represented people and places with contamination instead of showing them to be the victims of complex industrial, economic, political and social systems, which is a more difficult condition to capture in a photograph.

The non-visible collapse of the barrier between humans and toxins—even for those people who are privileged enough not to live or work in a severely polluted environments—is so complete that all of our bodies carry a toxic load of hundreds of different chemicals that have been excreted from industries, carried through geographical bodies, and delivered to us by the products we consume, and that are all capable of illness and disease.<sup>32</sup> Fish in remote alpine lakes are contaminated with “a wide range of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) such as DDT,

PCBs, toxaphene, hexachlorobenzene and others.”<sup>33</sup> Reassurances of containment, of boundaries, of closure, of certainty, of normalcy are gone in the toxic grotesque.

## Impact

With the religious, political, and science fiction grotesque, the elimination of boundaries provides a means of gaining agency, to thumb one’s nose at the rules that contain and limit a people. The grotesque also functions as a means of questioning the limits of knowledge and raising ethical concerns over the hegemonic strongholds of science, technology, and progress, while raising the fear of mutations, deformities and invasions *before* fiction become reality. The question then is whether the toxic grotesque is able to challenge hegemonies, question the status quo, provide warning, and liberate in ways similar to its grotesque precursors?

A question frequently asked of photography is whether the process of mediation negates the power of experience. Noted critic, Susan Sontag in *On Photography* questions the ability of photographs to evoke response in an audience.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, DeLuca and Demo maintain that photographs domesticate the sublime in nature, diminishing its power by bringing it into the homes and hands of people.<sup>35</sup> And in the case of toxins, Pezzullo argues that the safety provided by the image dulls the physical and emotional response, as compared to engaging in a toxic tour where participants visit communities affected by industrial contamination.<sup>36</sup> In many ways, they are right. But what the images of the toxic grotesque do is that they allow the viewer to look, and to look without social condemnation for staring. They allow the viewer to look without the toxic sludge touching their skin, or smelling the putrid water: to look without feeling the need to flee. The viewer is not forced to question whether proximity to the contaminated body is physically affecting them in that moment. The images give the capacity to see from greater heights in some cases, with greater clarity in others. By not providing the same experience, confliction, threat or vulnerability as being physically present, the viewer is allowed to move from the fast thinking response of self-preservation, to the more reasoned, logical response of questioning the social, cultural, political, as well as health and environmental complexities of what is being seen.<sup>37</sup>

The grotesque forces the viewer to grapple with images that initially seems nonsensical—that humans are polluting the environmental that is necessary for their survival. According to Csicsery-Ronay, “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.”<sup>38</sup> Harpham adds, “Resisting closure, the grotesque object impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future.”<sup>39</sup> The uncertainty of the grotesque is where its power comes from: the inability of a viewer to quickly classify or contain it. The toxic grotesque shares those characteristics while at



the same time constructing a powerful want in the audience for the re-establishing of boundaries, of classifications, and leak proof containers—for certainty.

One threat of the mediated toxic grotesque is not that the viewer of the images will be unmoved, but that the toxic grotesque shows contamination to such an extreme that other less visible pollutants may be perceived as less compelling or less pressing simply because they do not appear as threatening as what is being observed. The use of the grotesque can skew the visual expectations of toxicity to the point that one does not ‘see’ toxins within one’s own environment.

The rhetorical power of the grotesque, therefore lies in the images’ ability to change the terms of public discourse concerning toxins and incite further discourse on their existence, ubiquity, and perceived necessity. The images of toxic grotesque landscapes unquestionably reveal the instability and permeability of the existing system as a means to challenge the prevailing rationalities surrounding toxins in the environment. As documented in this analysis, grotesque images use the elements of excretion, infection, and collapse to initiate these public discussions. Extrapolating from this work, the images that appear most impactful in terms of audience response are ones that elicit visceral reactions, such as disgust (zombie wounds and toxic sludge); resonance (the smokestack appearing similar to ones located in my community); immediacy (viewing the Deepwater Horizon spill as it was taking place); and uncertainty (do these toxic excretions affect me?). Diminishing their influence, especially for privileged audiences, is the repetition of subject matter in grotesque landscape images that can establish toxins as normal, a necessity, too far gone to possibly fix, and far away—someone else’s unfortunate sacrifice required for modern living. As Csicsery-Ronay maintains, “Sometimes [the grotesque] lead[s] to paradigm shifts, sometimes to renormalization.”<sup>40</sup> As this essay argues, it is the construction of the image, not solely or even most importantly the content of the air, water, or soil, which shifts that balance.

## Figure Captions

Figure 1: Mishka Henner, *Coronado Feeders*, Dalhart, Texas, 2012-2013

Figure 2: John Pfahl, *Occidental #18*, Niagara Falls, NY, 1990

## Notes

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- 1 Mishka Henner, *Feedlots*, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://mishkahenner.com/Feedlots>.
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  - 4 Mary T. Hufford, "Carnival Time in the Kingdom of Coal," *Social Identities* 16, no. 4 (July 2010): 559–81. doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2010.498255.
  - 5 M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10. See also Ross Singer, "Anti-Corporate Argument and the Spectacle of the Grotesque Rhetorical Body in Super Size Me," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 2 (June 2011), 137.
  - 6 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, 184.
  - 7 John Pfahl, *Smoke Series*, accessed January 17, 2018, <https://johnpfahl.com/pages/smoke/S16.html>.
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  - 9 Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 4 (December 2011): 373–92. doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2011.616516.
  - 10 Within toxic imagery, the primary differentiation between photographs that are sublime and those that are grotesque is in the intended response from an audience. The toxic sublime raises spiritual feelings of awe, magnificence (often in relation to size), insignificance and fear, while the grotesque focuses more on the physical, creating responses of disgust, repulsion, alienation, and the want of cleanliness and order.
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  - 13 John Pfahl, *Smoke Series*.
  - 14 Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime."
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  - 17 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, 191-195.
  - 18 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, 191-195.
  - 19 Mishka Henner, *Feedlots*.
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  - 38 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, 186.
  - 39 Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 16.
  - 40 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, 190-191.