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Thomas O. Haakenson. *Grotesque Visions: The Science of Berlin Dada*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

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Abstract

Review of Thomas O. Haakenson. *Grotesque Visions: The Science of Berlin Dada*. Bloomsbury, 2021. 219 pp.

Keywords

grotesque, avant garde, vision, objectivity, empirical science

Thomas O. Haakenson. *Grotesque Visions: The Science of Berlin Dada*. Bloomsbury, 2021. 219 pp.

In his opening chapter, Thomas O. Haakenson beckons the reader to learn to see grotesquely. Such an invocation requires an unlearning of the grotesque, so commonly and reductively defined by way of its supposed synonyms: the ludicrous, the strange, and the bizarre. Haakenson's grotesque—the grotesque of Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—does not so much titillate and disgust, as it defamiliarizes and provokes. Steeped in Bakhtinian corporeality, inciting the Kantian imagination, employing a Goethean embodied theory of optics, and humoring in a form akin to Chaplin's slapstick, the grotesque forges a critical opening between artwork and observing subject. It furthermore illuminates the dialectical relationship between science and art. As practitioners developed visual methods for popularizing empirical scientific knowledge, artists employed the grotesque as an aesthetic strategy with which to challenge science's empirical dogma.

The book's case studies support Haakenson's dialectical argument, as chapters toggle between the endeavors of scientific advocates and Dada artists. Haakenson proposes Rudolf Virchow's Museum of Pathology and Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science as exemplary of science's cult of visuality. Both Virchow and Hirschfeld's curatorial visions sought to discipline public vision, as they arranged evidentiary material and crafted spatial narratives with which to instruct the public to see scientifically. Espousing an untiring faith in "immediate visual perception," both Virchow and Hirschfeld coopted visual tenets of anthropology's empirical project to respectively secure belief in the lessons of cellular and anatomical pathology and the reality of nonnormative sexualities. Vision, Haakenson argues, was both an invaluable tool and major source of anxiety for science in modern Germany. In the burgeoning discipline of anthropology, for example, vision was called upon to relay "objective" information to the wider public, while practitioners questioned the inexact and faulty methods of empirical observation on which the discipline relied. In the debates between anthropologists Hermann Cohn and Alarik Frithiof Holmgren and in the intellectual contributions of the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory, Haakenson analyzes anthropology's attempt to tend to this crisis of vision: anthropologists supplemented fieldnotes with novel methods of physiological measurement; developed criteria and training regimens for methods of observation; and built extensive photographic archives with which to bolster their empirical project. These scientific institutions and activities are not Haakenson's "grotesque visions" but rather their fodder. Turning from scientific practitioners to members of the Berlin Dada movement, Haakenson exposes the avant-garde mobilization of the grotesque to disrupt optical conventions and contest scientific claims to objective truth.

Drawing on the literary grotesques of German Jewish author and philosopher Salomo Friedländer and Dutch avant-garde writer Til Brugman and the photomontages of Hannah Höch, Haakenson both resuscitates neglected or undervalued Dada figures and proves how this artist network marshalled the grotesque to rebuke science's optical and objective claims. A short story from Friedländer, for example, employs bestial characters and wordplay to critique the display of anatomical pathology—an explicit, albeit fictionalized reproach of Virchow's Museum of Pathology. In a similar manner, Brugman's literary grotesque "The Department Store of Love" humorously and fantastically invokes Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science, as she criticizes, for instance, the Institute's fetishization of the sexual subject via its renowned "wall of intermediary stages." Höch's photomontages, and more specifically her series *Aus einem ethnographischen Museum (From an Ethnographic Museum)*, sourced materials from anthropological photography, rearranging and reinscribing these images and thematizing their constructed nature, hence the fallacy of science's visual and "objective" culture.

The result of such case studies is a deft interweaving of the visual debate in science and art, the grotesque its red thread. Most informative and exciting are moments where Haakenson highlights ways in which science's dogma of visuality fails even before the Dadaists arrive on scene. When science makes its way into the public arena, anthropological ideals and scientific visions fall short: despite Virchow's attempts to tame the public vision of pathological objects under the cloak of scientific authority, the recalcitrant eyes of the public still looked on lasciviously. As anthropologists cultivated photographic archives, accumulating visual evidence with which to secure the status of a young, empirical scientific practice, the institution succumbed to human oversight: the first archivist of the Berlin Society omitted and even repeated number sequences, while failing to label other photographs all together.

Grotesque Visions will interest those working in German studies, visual studies, art history, cultural studies, and the history of science. The book aims to challenge a Foucauldian "selective and genealogical approach" to the history of vision, most explicitly critiquing Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (85). Crary's disciplinary preoccupation with vision, Haakenson attests, comes at the cost of grounded and messy context. Individuals—expert and nonexpert, established and nascent—experimented with vision, failing, appropriating, and resisting optical techniques. Haakenson's coda furthermore corrects Peter Bürger's use of a mistranslation of Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie (Aesthetic Theory)*. The result is a confusion of subjective perception (*Anschaauung*) with an object's visuality (*Anschaulichkeit*) and risks conflating subject and perception. Such conflation jeopardizes the critical potential of the grotesque, which operates in the space and interaction between observer and work of art.

While taken up comprehensively in the first two chapters, the analytic of the grotesque is lost throughout the later chapters. A continued analysis of the grotesque throughout might better synthesize otherwise discrete case studies. The grotesque gives way to later chapters focused on vision, the cult of visibility, optical empiricism, and “objectivity”—terms which beg for more thorough definition by way of expanded citations from scholarship within history of science, a discipline deeply indebted to the Foucauldian approach Haakenson also sets out to critique. Amid conservative attacks on science and systematized defunding of the arts, the grotesque promises critical reflection, concerted debate, and the potential for radical transformation. Perhaps we should all learn to see grotesquely.

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