

The Grotesque Body as Systemic Revolt: A Reading of Jeremy Robert Johnson's *Skullcrack City*

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Abstract:

The grotesque and absurd aesthetics of the body explored in this paper is found in the modern Bizarro fiction, specifically *Skullcrack City* by Jeremy Robert Johnson. The analysis of the novel through a profound reading examines how the novel challenges hypermediacy in virtual cultures, explains the loss of the consumer psychology and narrates the breakdown of the body in the environments of hyper-capitalism, paranoia, and pharmaceutical dystopia. With the idea of the grotesque body, developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the theory of abjection by Julia Kristeva and the Body without Organs suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, this paper cuts the human figure down to a dissected product, devoured, cut up to pieces and re-purposed. It makes the argument that the work by Johnson is expressing an ugly truth of biological profusion and narrative disinvestment in which the psychotic underbelly of the late capitalist culture is revealed by drawing the body as a fundamental locus of both systemic and ontological revolt.

Keywords: Bizarro fiction, grotesque, absurdism, Body without Organs, abjection, psychosis, capitalism, Jeremy Robert Johnson.

Introduction: Bizarro Fiction: Grotesque Flesh and Fractured Worlds.

The grotesque body has returned not only as a shock device in the cultural wastelands of late capitalism, but also as an effective location of literary insurrection. Bizarro fiction, a marginal genre frequently dismissed by mainstream critics as absurdist pulp or, in its manifestation as weird just to be weird, as liberation of the dehumanized subject, is one that explores the violent deformity of the human subject in a particularly thorough manner. It employs the surreal perversion of the realism to express the deeper dissatisfaction of a postmodern world in which the line between the human and the commodity has started to be

unmarked. Bizarro fiction confronts the conventional dichotomies of the corporeal and the conceptual through a combination of calculated techniques of excessive bodily distortion, scatological humor and narrative instability. It imposes a conflict between the classical body which is clean, closed and obedient and the grotesque one that is porous, leaking and not easily definable by systems that attempt to classify it. There can be no more visceral and theoretically dense point of tension than in what Jeremy Robert Johnson has done in *Skullcrack City*, a work that is able to dismantle the integrity of the human body to reveal the disintegrating logic of the hyper-capitalist world it is being used in.

Skullcrack City shoots the grotesque body into the black heart of the cybernetic dystopia and a pervaded schizo-reality. The novel traces the story of S.P. Doyle, a top-level banking consultant that realizes that his business life has just been little more than a coverup of a worldwide pharmaceutical conspiracy. Since Doyle shifts between being a cog in the financial machine to becoming a fugitive on the run, his body becomes subjected to a series of radical, usually involuntary, changes. The drug Hex tearing his mind apart, parasite neural worms taking over his inner organs and even his flesh being used to fulfill interdimensional purposes. This physical disintegration is analogous to the schizophrenic division of the larger society, a society in which the subjectivity is besieged on both sides, both internally by a corporate interest, and externally by the disintegration of its environment and structure. Johnson writes in a hallucinogenic, unapologetically visceral style, leaning so much on the aesthetics of body horror, noir, and drug-induced delirium to provide the space in which the human body is no longer the safe haven of the self. In this world, the grotesqueries of the body is not only a major symptom of systemic psychosis, but also an end game and a last resort of struggle with a world that has lost all sense of its aspect.

Johnson does not simply use the grotesquerie in the middle of his work as a cosmetic or stylistic factor; it is an inherent ontological state. It is not these bodies that are merely distorted on the altar of horror but they are de-functionalized, de-psychologized, and re-coded by forces, both corporate and cosmic, which lie many levels above the understanding of an average individual. Pharmaceutical corporations and extra-dimensional forces in the universe of *Skullcrack City* do not just exploit the body, but have transformed it into a data farm, a biological incubation chamber and a location of extraction of cognition. These are not dystopian tropes per se but are, in fact, grotesque epistemologies, whole modes of knowing and not knowing the world via disfigured, distorted and leaking flesh.

The paper aims at reading *Skullcrack City* as a clear illustration of what could be called a corporeal absurdism. It is a form of fiction in which the disintegration of the corporeal body is the main language in which an illogical, crippled world is articulated and denounced. The study will follow the way in which the grotesque realism theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, theorist of the grotesque abjection Julia Kristeva and the radical theory of the Body without Organs (BwO) by Deleuze and Guattari have addressed the position of the absurd

body as a location of disrupted metaphysics, which Johnson undertakes in his work. By doing this, it claims that *Skullcrack City* is a critical response to the contemporary rationales of regulation, selfhood, and transcendence, which propose that, in a world where the actual has become a nightmare, the only way to access a different form of truth is by dismantling the very concept of normal self.

The concept of the grotesque as described by Bakhtin and the excessiveness of the body is crucial in viewing bodies in *Skullcrack City*. Bakhtin underlines that the grotesque body is not a whole, finished entity but an unfinished one, and it overgrows itself and crosses its boundaries (26). It is characterized by its orifices that include the mouth, the genital organs, and the anus that symbolize the interaction of the body with the world (26). The porosity marks the disappearance of the boundaries between the inside and the outside, placing the body in a permanent state of becoming and not a finished, classical ideal of smoothness and wholeness (Bakhtin 317). This constant becoming of the body by Doyle in the novel by Johnson takes place either because of the mutation that is brought about by drugs or trials by being parasitized.

The destabilizing environments of the Bizarro fiction are conceptually supported by the theory of abjection by Julia Kristeva. When the subject is introduced to things that break down the identity, abjection ensues where the subject is dragged to a stage of meaning failure (Kristeva 2). The abject is what is disrupting identity, system, order (Kristeva 4). The experience of grotesque bodies and the presentation of hybrid bodies in *Skullcrack City* is a crisis of failed borders of the self in which the subject comes to face with the loss of psychological boundaries. The disgust of Doyle to the "Deckheads", the humans that are mutated with their flat heads as a primary experience encountering with the abject.

A political interpretation of these distortions can be realized in the concept of the Body without Organs (BwO) by Deleuze and Guattari. The BwO is an organ that lost its structure and functionality to become a surface of absolute intensity and possibility (149). Although recent intellectuals such as Mark Fisher have suggested that it is the capitalist realism that contributes to psychological disintegration (2), the disintegration of the flesh in the literal sense of rearranging or disarranging the flesh under pharmaceutical authority is dramatized in the story by Johnson. BwO, the *Skullcrack City* is a nightmare of corporate control and, possibly, a way of escaping.

Johnson makes Doyle a literal embodiment of corporate evils before the ghostly horror truly starts. Being a high-level analyst in a bank based on the predatory lending business, Doyle's body is already where the grotesque stasis is already present. Johnson explains the physiological appearance of Doyle by distinguishing through a list of little grotesques: sinus infection, filled-up pipes, and the overall feeling of biological corrosion (42). This is a reflection of the impurity examination by Mary Douglas in which the inability

of the body to fit in the social categories that are considered clean is a violation of the cultural order (44).

The body of Doyle is a malfunctioning machine, it is impossible to sustain a stable subjectivity in the hyper-capitalist world. His work is associated with handling the so-called dirty data and his body takes on this dirt that is expressed through an actual uncleanness which the bank tries to police. Grotesque imagery, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham argues, disrupts meaning systems and exhibits anxieties in cultural terms that are based on institutional power (14). His physical ill health is not just a personal sickness issue; it is an epistemological issue that is a result of his involvement in a degraded economic system.

The drug 'Hex' is a catalyst to the transformation of Doyle into BwO. Hex is a depotentialized agent, which enables Doyle to visualize the monstrous underbelly of hyper-capitalism, its lurid, unseen strata. But this knowledge causes him to lose his physical integrity. The ego of Doyle starts to melt under the impact of Hex, and this resembles the concept of Bakhtin of the grotesque body that starts to consume the world (317).

There is overloading of DoYLES sense organs making his body more of a map of intensities instead of an organism which functions. Abjection is best displayed in this state of drug induced delirium that Kristeva is in. The visions that Hex has to offer are both fascinating and repulsive to Doyle, which results in a scenario when meaning falls apart (Kristeva 2). It is a pharmaceutical instrument which seeks to fill in the dimensions, although, in the case of Doyle, it represents the major language in which he comprehends his own degradation.

The single most grotesque aspect of *Skullcrack City* is the existence of the so-called neural worms, parasitic creatures that dwell inside human bodies in order to do the work of their masters across dimensions. Such is the literalization of the body which is captured by late capitalism. The notion of open body promoted by Bakhtin is turned negative here since Bakhtin interpreted openness as a good quality of communal renewal, Johnson is introduced as a weakness (Bakhtin 26).

The worms penetrate into the body using the so-called holes in order to make use of biological functions to serve corporate purposes. This indicates the capitalist realism of Mark Fisher in which even the most personal desires and biological functions of the subject are infiltrated by the system (Fisher 2). The fight by Doyle with these parasites is a fight to recover the "closure" of his own body, a throwback to the classical ideal which is all the more unattainable in a world characterized by the dystopia of pharmaceuticals.

The climax of the novel is reached when the body of Doyle is pushed to the level of carbuncular extremity. In one of the attacks by a monstrous being, Doyle refers to how huge

teeth would grab onto his neck and the beat of a tongue on his head (Johnson 184). It is at this point that his consciousness starts to melt away into the impending consumption of the statue of the static. He is no longer a whole entity but a passage to sins and eating he becomes, an orifice in BwO (Deleuze and Guattari 153).

The fact that Doyles brain is a hot commodity in the extra-dimensional evolutionary plans makes literal the cognitive extraction that the contemporary corporate organization involves. In this case, consciousness is handled as a reservoir of information that can be accessed and recycled by the forces of monstrosity (Johnson 312). This symbolizes the final loss of consumer psychology: Doyle is no longer the consumer of the world; it is a system much bigger than he himself, that is consuming the product.

Conclusion

In conclusion, The body in *Skullcrack City* by Jeremy Robert Johnson is always in a crisis, being weakened by pharmaceutical corruption and parasitism. Johnson provides a philosophical counterargument to a world in which bodies and minds are being remodeled by hyper-capitalist forces by using the repulsive and the incongruous.

The grotesque body of Bizarro fiction is not merely a style, but an ontological state, through the perspective of Bakhtin, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari. The breaking down body of Doyle is a metaphor of a neoliberal culture that is on its deathbed. After all, according to the novel, the grotesque is the only good state of being in a world of systemic psychosis a body that does not want to be ordered or cleaned by those forces that want to devour it.

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