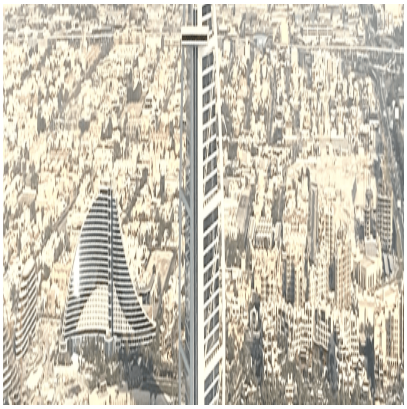


Exaggeration (revisited)

Description

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Iâ??ve just returned from Dubai, a city subject to analysis across many dimensions (smart city, meeting of cultures, diversity, development, opportunity, entrepreneurship, particular labour practices). Not least, it is a city of exaggerated dimensions, scales, shapes, social dimensions, politics.

Here are some images that confirm that exaggeration, followed by something I wrote in 2016 in my book *Mood and Mobility: Navigating the Emotional Spaces of Digital Social Networks* (pp.103-106). There I discussed exaggeration as a way of explaining positive and stimulating *affect* that in the right circumstances could be construed as *pleasure*.


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Caricature and Hyperreality

Itâ??s worth examining the relationship between pleasure and exaggeration further. One of the oldest forms of mass entertainment is the carnival, or festival. I live in the â??City of Festivals.â?• Since 1947, the city of Edinburgh has played host to an annual International Festival. The city in fact hosts several festivals at the same time, including the Fridge Festival, a departure from the main show. The streets are peppered with performers, handbill distributors, costumed actors scuttling from A to B, and late-running Royal Scots Dragoon guards getting ready for the famous Military Tattoo. The city shifts into a higher register. Festivals are popular in most major cities across the world and attract thousands of visitors. There are also music festivals, open air concerts, parades, pageants, and firework displays. The mass media also delivers and facilitates such public events. Festival experiences are played and replayed online. Thanks to ubiquitous entertainment from television, radio, cinemas and digital media, itâ??s festival time everywhere, all day and all year round.

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The idea of the festival has a long history. Think of the historic importance of religious festivals, pilgrimages, the Roman Saturnalia, carnivals and pageants. During the traditional festival ordinary people would break out from conformity and restraint imposed by the state and the church. Festivals offered license and stimulus for the growth of marginal and creative activity that would often slide into the illicit. Festivals and carnivals were participative events in which the strictures of the church, the state and the usual social orders would be relaxed, and even reversed. As outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the symbolic reversal of roles, the suspension of laws and customs under the pretext of carnival pranks, and orgiastic rituals sought â??a reintegration of opposites, a regression to the primordial and homogeneous,â?•[1] but such activities were also â??a symbolic restoration of â??Chaos,â?? of the undifferentiated unity that preceded the Creation.â?• Think of carnival costumes and the distortion of human and animal forms. Thereâ??s something festive and carnivalesque about distorted representations, a demonstration of the appeal of â??grotesque realismâ?• enjoyed within â??folk cultureâ?• to which Bakhtin refers.

The distortion of bodies contemporary costumery, puppetry, cartooning and animation is a remnant of what Bakhtin attributes to the base humour of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Such irreverent ribaldry is the other side to formal church and state ritual, with their definitions of the sacred, and insistence on respect for it, the aspirational and the correct. Contrary to propriety and order, the carnivalesque deals in parody and degradation of the high and the mighty, but also of the less than idealised body in total: a concern with the â??lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth.â?•[2] Bakhtinâ??s point is that these two strands (the formal and the degraded) co-existed in pre-modern awareness.

The chief literary subject of Bakhtinâ??s study into the grotesque is the lengthy satirical novel by FranÃ§ois Rabelais (c.1494-1553), *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel,* ostensibly about two giants and their encounters with ribald monks, wayward priests,

conceited rulers and arbitrary judges. The authorâ??s preface begins: â??Most noble boozers, and you my very esteemed and poxy friends.â?• Amidst the Late Medieval bathroom (garderobe) banter thereâ??s much violence, not least a description of bodily dismembering as a friar defends his wine store against raiders: â??He beat out the brains of some, broke the arms and legs of others, disjointed the neck-bones, demolished the kidneys, slit the noses, blacked the eyes, smashed the jaws, knocked the teeth down the throats, shattered the shoulder-blades, crushed the shins, dislocated the thigh-bones, and cracked the fore-arms of yet others.â?•[3] Bakhtin sees the parading of this kind of detail as a typical â??anatomization and dismemberment of the human body.â?• Thereâ??s also a culinary aspect to this butchery presenting â??a grotesque image of the dissected body.â?• [4] Itâ??s also about the parts and their exaggeration.

In fact, carnival grotesqueries are typically described in terms outside of the privileged realms of vision and the sound. They deal in the baser senses, and exaggerated depictions of the organs that process and produce them: smell (the nose), taste (the tongue and belly). These are the organs treated in the most exaggerated form in carnival costumes and in cartoons. Needless to say, odour, flatulence, excrement, and urine, percolate through Rabelaisâ?? novel, not to mention allusions to erotic sensations, and anything else generated or consumed below the waist.

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How does grotesque realism impinge on the pleasures derived through ubiquitous digital media? Media theorists Ross Buck and Stacie Renfro Powers confirm that the media present life in exaggerated form, creating â??super-displays,â?• hence the hyperreality of cartoons, CGI effects and digital interaction. Itâ??s not only in cartoons and satirical representations of bodies and body parts that are exaggerated. The emotions felt through mediated presentations can apparently be even more compelling than with real-life events. [5]

Thereâ??s an appealing seam of theory from neuroscience to be mined here. Neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran calls this propensity towards exaggeration â??the law of peak shift.â?• [6] According to Ramachandran, this law accounts for the animal (and human) propensity to respond to exaggeration, at least in the visual field. A lab rat can be trained to respond to simple shapes. Researchers have devised a simple experiment. They set up a cage in which a rat is confronted by two painted shapes: an elongated rectangle and a square. If the rat moves towards the elongated rectangle it is rewarded with a piece of cheese. If it moves to the square then it gets no reward. After a trial and error phase, as expected, the rat soon learns to go straight for the elongated rectangle every time. Now replace the square shape with an even longer elongated rectangle than the food rewarding shape. The rat will go for it, and with measurably greater vigour. Thereâ??s a tendency for the ratâ??s cognitive apparatus to assume that the longer the rectangle the greater the reward, even though there was nothing in the training phase to establish that rule.

The simple extrapolation from this and other experiments â?? plus some explanation in terms of neural wiring â?? is that when we animals get so used to a visual condition we regard it as normal. But then we become impressed, pleased with, allured by, or provoked by itâ??s exaggerated variant. At the very least our curiosity is aroused. Presumably,

thereâ??s a point at which the exaggeration no longer registers as such and the shape appears as a new class of object, or something entirely alien. In any case, according to Ramachandran the lure of exaggeration is one of the key factors in reading the environment.

I think this law of peak shift touches on ideas of the grotesque â?? faces with inordinately large noses and ears attract our pleasurable interest. Ramachandran refers to the popularity of caricatures of well-known people: politicians, entertainers and even our friends and relatives. He doesnâ??t address this issue, but thereâ??s also something to be said about animals as bearers of exaggerated human traits, zoomorphism, and anthropomorphised animals in cartoons and comics. The law of peak shift also touches on metaphor and play: the child who claims to his mother heâ??s just seen a carrot â??as big as God.â?• The tendency to exaggerate is a crucial element of play, according to Johannes Huizinga.[7] **Contemporary architecture also presents masterly demonstration of the power in exaggeration. Human inhabitants are accustomed to orthogonality, a world of right angles. In the visual field these angles and lines appear to converge according to the conventions of perspective. Exaggerating and distorting these vectors certainly produces an effect on the person negotiating such spaces, or perhaps a particular atmosphere or mood.** Studio Libeskindâ??s Military History Museum extension in Dresden provides an impressive example of architectural exaggeration. Thereâ??s much that is familiar in these spaces, not least the straightness of line and of course the classical contours of perspective. But then you realise the floor is sloping, walls converge, and the rules of form and perspective are grossly exaggerated. In such architectural play thereâ??s a pleasure. If we are conditioned to find reward and pleasure in the converging lines of our perspectival view in the everyday world, then according to the â??law of peak shiftâ?• that convergence increased magnifies the pleasure.

derrick wierenga

CGI and cartoons trade in exaggeration. To get the measure of everyoneâ??s interest in exaggeration see what gets top billing on Youtube. In 2013 top ratings went to a dance song about foxes, surreal moves by a Norwegian army platoon, a man showing how animals eat their food, as well as countless other parodies of pop songs and clips of animals doing crazy things and people caught in awkward situations.

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[1] M. Eliade, *The Two and the One* 114 .

[2] M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 21 .

[3] F. Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* 99 .

[4] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 194 .

[5] R. Buck and S. Renfro Powers, â??Emotion, media and the global villageâ?• 189 .

[6] Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tail Brain: Unlocking the Mysteries of Human Nature* .

[7] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* .

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Note

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Exaggeration

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. affect
2. pleasure
3. urban

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