

of some very judicious exclusions (Bosch and Arcimboldi, for example). Three objectives are outlined: the presentation of a mostly unpublished corpus of images – although this claim seems overstated; the investigation of a relatively neglected phase in the history of the grotesque, characterised by new cultural issues, as opposed to the more archaeologically/classically oriented period around the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries; and, above all, an analysis of the phenomenon's different cultural stratifications, such as its relationship with burlesque literature, hieroglyphs, emblems, *impresa*, encyclopaedic collecting and rhetoric.

A crucial section of this introduction discusses the renaissance meaning of such critical terms as ornament and imagination, and these are more thoroughly investigated in chapter one. As in the case of imitation (a critical term discussed later in the book), they are precisely defined so as to avoid any anachronistic misunderstandings. Renaissance imagination, for instance, has little to do with our modern idea of more-or-less unrestrained fantasy because, in the renaissance philosophical play between immanence and transcendence, the imagination was the faculty which revealed the order of things under their appearances. Morel takes us beyond these appearances in the realm of grotesques: if they seem to be incredible and the product of the most rampant fantasy, in fact they obey a logical system whose mechanisms the author aims to reveal.

Chapter two outlines a short history of *grottesche* from Giovanni da Udine to Taddeo Zuccaro, while chapter three deals with a few selected sources (Doni, Ligorio and Lomazzo). Chapters four and five analyse the fresco cycles in the library of the Benedictine monastery of S. Giovanni Evangelista in Parma and in the Uffizi; these illustrate the relationship between grotesques and hieroglyphs (Valeriano, Horapollon, Colonna), as well as the analogies between the taxonomical project of the *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* and the grotesques' bizarre inventory of the world.

Chapter six, which deals with the hybrid and the monstrous (Aldrovandi, Cardano, Della Porta), deepens this analysis. Referring to the three most important principles of the renaissance episteme as outlined by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, Morel argues that the principle of analogy is an important key to our understanding of the *grottesche*.

Chapters seven and eight investigate the assonance of this genre with burlesque literature (Berni) and the rhetorical structure of grotesques, while the last chapter sheds light on the reaction against their freedom of expression in the new climate created by the end of the Council of Trent (Gilio, Paleotti).

It is impossible to summarise all the most important results of Morel's research. Each chapter is full of many good observations. A few may appear controversial, but his arguments are constructed in so complex a manner that the refutation of only one of them would require several pages. It may therefore be more useful here to concentrate on the most ambitious aspect of the book, its methodological premises and goals. Morel's

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This is a very ambitious book which will not disappoint the most demanding of readers. It is neither a comprehensive history of grotesque decoration nor a systematic survey of the phenomenon in Italy in the early modern period: Philippe Morel has much more to offer, and that is an 'archaeology' of mannerist culture in its artistic, literary, rhetorical and philosophical expressions. While the author is obviously fascinated by and dedicated to his subject *per se*, one can say that grotesques are only the starting point for an investigation into the complex web of cultural relationships in which they were originally embedded.

The introduction deals with the geographical and chronological limits chosen (roughly speaking, central Italy between 1560 and c.1595), a brief discussion of previous studies dedicated to this issue, and an explanation

intellectual mentors are invoked directly as well as indirectly: if his cultural history becomes 'une "archéologie" des grotesques' (p.12), the image refers to Foucault; when he writes eloquently about 'le degré zéro de l'analyse historique et de la réflexion critique' (p.37), or about 'le degré zéro de l'iconique' (p.112), we think immediately of Barthes; the expression 'les ingrédients du dispositif paradoxal' (p.106) owes much to Benveniste, perhaps via Hubert Damisch; and the author's love of detail has more to do with Warburg and Arasse than with Morelli.

Morel's disenchantment with traditional art-historical enquiry is indeed obvious. From the very beginning of his book he criticises the poverty of critical discourse on the grotesque: according to him, formal analysis and questions of attribution are historically and intellectually limited, while iconological interpretations are either too vague or too systematic. One of Morel's most important contributions is indeed his questioning of the validity of a method which attempts to impose a closed structure upon the openness of the work of art, an approach which is all the more absurd if one considers the grotesque's irregular status. His outspoken criticism is directed to the hermeneutical excess produced by an overdose of iconological interpretation, and he adds that it would be a fundamental methodological mistake to approach these cycles of grotesques as if they were narrative decorative programmes because we cannot usually 'read' them as a coherent symbolic system.

In his introduction Morel declares that it is not so important to define the contents, symbolic values and programmes of cycles of grotesques, as to investigate the forms in which such contents were produced, put together and distributed. In other words: rhetoric takes the place of formal analysis and iconology. But it is only when we reach page 51, where he discusses the cycle in the library of S. Giovanni Evangelista, that he refers to semiotics as an alternative to a stultifying iconological interpretation. According to Morel, only a semiotic approach will enable us to understand the complexity of the phenomenon, thus revealing its points of contact with the episteme and the rhetoric of the time.

What is particularly welcome in Morel's book is that he provides a profound analysis of grotesques, insisting on their inherent features without referring to something external to them, as most so-called iconological interpretations do. In chapter two, he describes the autonomous linguistic system of the grotesque which has its own vocabulary, syntax, themes, and rhetoric. After having analysed this autonomous 'internal' system, he then investigates its 'external' relationships with the cultural world: hieroglyphs, emblems, *imprese*, collecting and literature.

The book ends with an impeccable analysis of the causes of the genre's decline (effects of the Council of Trent, Gilio, Cardinal Paleotti) and with a comparison between the *épistémé de l'âge classique*, as defined by Foucault, and that of the Cinquecento which is so well embodied by grotesques: they neither represent nor demonstrate, because they function both as a collection

and as a field open to all sorts of inventions and experiments. At the beginning of his book Philippe Morel laments the lack of sophistication in earlier 'discourse' on the grotesque, a discourse that ought to be as sophisticated as the *grotesche* themselves. Now we have it. Nobody before Morel has written on this subject so intelligently, passionately and eloquently.

My only criticism concerns various bibliographical omissions, and the lack of attention paid to the rôle of patrons and viewers. It is true that Eugenio Battisti's *L'antirinasimento* (1962, 2nd ed. 1989) does not offer an extended discussion of the grotesque, but an analysis in terms of magic, *meraviglia*, monsters, *Wunderkammern* and literature is already there, even if Morel's method and objectives are completely different. Moreover, I would have liked to have seen a citation of the collection of texts put together by Paola Barocchi in the third volume of her *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento* under the rubric 'le grotesche'. Also to be regretted, in the context of collecting, the *Wunderkammer* and the museum, is the absence of Horst Bredekamp's *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben* (1982, 2nd ed. 1993), and Paula Findlen's *Possessing Nature. Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (1994).

The second criticism is perhaps more substantial. Philippe Morel is so engrossed in the different strata of his archaeological excavations that he sometimes tends to forget that an external world exists and may have an influence on artistic choices. It is persuasive to argue that the hieroglyphs in the library of S. Giovanni Evangelista were neither heretical nor paradoxical in a Benedictine context, but does not the fact that the Congregation of S. Giustina, to which the monastery belonged, was severely criticised during the sessions of the Council of Trent for its heterodox theology throw new light on the issue? Does it not make a difference to know when, where, by whom and for whom a cycle was painted? What may seem at first sight a change of paradigm in the discourse, to use Morel's terminology, may be simply the result of the fact that a cycle was painted for a different patron, had a different function, and was viewed by a different audience. Of course, the author is perfectly aware of these issues, as his only reference to reception (p.85) makes clear, but one is left with the impression that the issue of historical context has been somewhat neglected.

By way of compensation, the passage on reception is one of the most impressive in the book. Morel makes no attempt to substitute one closed system with another: if his research aims to reveal the rules of the semiotic game in the realm of the grotesque, he is ready to concede that senders and receivers were not always conscious of the semiotic web in which they lived. This theoretical flexibility, anti-dogmatism and common sense are commendable aspects of the book.

This is the most important discussion of the culture and aesthetics of Mannerism since John Shearman's monograph of 1967. The author's own curiosity (p.5) is a match for the mannerist culture of curiosity (p.68), and the reader can only admire the patience and also the joy with which he travelled all

over Italy in search of answers hidden behind these countless disconcerting, enigmatic but also ludic details.

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