

## Cavity: Historical Interiors of the Body

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**Abstract:** The idea that a building has a face (*faccia* or *facciata*) had become widely accepted by the end of the fifteenth century. Both Vasari and Scamozzi, for example, compare the main door and windows of a building's façade to, respectively, the mouth and eyes of a face. Other writers had already developed this anthropomorphic metaphor further. Filarete, writing in the mid fifteenth century, believed that: 'the building is truly a living man. You will see it must eat in order to live, exactly as it is with man. It sickens or dies or sometimes is cured of its sickness by a good doctor...it needs to be nourished and governed and through lack it sickens and dies like man'.

A few decades later, in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), Poliphilo makes his way through the throat, stomach and internal viscera of a colossal lovesick automaton—a literal example of Filarete's building as body. Giambologna's giant personification of the Apennines (1579) for the Villa Medici (now Demidoff) at Pratolino near Florence provides a built equivalent of Colonna's fantasy. It contained a network of rooms for various purposes including dining as well as one in the head within which a small orchestra could be installed.

These examples suggest that in early modern architectural theory, the metaphor of the building as body was not restricted to the facade and columnar order, as in the familiar Vitruvian *topos*, but extended to the interior. This paper will take seriously Filarete's proposition with reference to the enigmatic 'Hell Mouth' in 'Vicino' Orsini's sixteenth-century Sacro Bosco (Sacred Wood) at Bomarzo. I will argue that anthropomorphic garden buildings of this kind dramatize the theme of 'becoming' and that this theme is inextricable from that of the grotesque.

**Key Words:** Bakhtin, Bomarzo, Building as Body, Grotesque, 'Hell Mouth', Interior, Monsters, Renaissance

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## **Cavity: Historical Interiors of the Body**

We wish to see *ourselves* translated into stone and plants, we want to take walks in *ourselves* when we stroll around these buildings and gardens.

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882.

### **Introduction: Building into body**

The idea that a building has a face (*faccia* or *facciata*) had become widely accepted by the end of the fifteenth century. Both Vasari and Scamozzi, for example, compare the main door and windows of a building's façade to, respectively, the mouth and eyes of a face.<sup>1</sup> Other writers had already developed this anthropomorphic metaphor further. Filarete, writing in the mid fifteenth century, believed that: 'the building is truly a living man. You will see it must eat in order to live, exactly as it is with man. It sickens or dies or sometimes is cured of its sickness by a good doctor...it needs to be nourished and governed and through lack it sickens and dies like man.'<sup>2</sup>

A few decades later, in the romance *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), the protagonist Poliphilo makes his way through the throat, stomach and internal viscera of a colossal lovesick automaton—a literal example of Filarete's building as body.<sup>3</sup> Giambologna's giant personification of the Apennines (1579) for the Villa Medici (now Demidoff) at Pratolino near Florence provides a built equivalent of Colonna's fantasy. It contained a network of rooms for various purposes including dining as well as one in the head within which a small orchestra could be installed.

These examples suggest that in early modern architectural theory, the metaphor of the building as body was not restricted to the facade and columnar order, as in the familiar Vitruvian *topos*, but extended to the interior.<sup>4</sup> This paper will take seriously Filarete's proposition with reference to the enigmatic 'Hell Mouth' in Pierfrancesco 'Vicino' Orsini's sixteenth-century Sacro Bosco (Sacred Wood) at Bomarzo. I will argue that anthropomorphic garden buildings of this kind dramatize the theme of 'becoming' and that this theme is inextricable from that of the grotesque.

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Kohane and Michael Hill, 'The Decorum of Doors and Windows From the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century', *Arq* 10, no. 2 (2006): 150, for Vasari and Scamozzi's use of this metaphor.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Averlino Filarete, *Treatise on Architecture*, trans. John R. Spencer, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999): 35-36.

<sup>4</sup> See Vitruvius on the Corinthian, Doric and Tuscan Temple types for example: Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, eds. Ingrid D. Rowland and Thomas Noble Howe (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 54-62.

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Figure 1. 'Hell Mouth', Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo, 1552-85 (photo: Luke Morgan).

### The 'Hell Mouth' and the grotesque

Orsini began work on his garden from the 1560s but it remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1584. After several centuries of neglect, the Sacro Bosco was 'rediscovered' in 1949 by the Italian critic Mario Praz and the Spanish Surrealist artist Salvador Dali. Praz and Dali made a film about the garden and its monstrous sculptures (it is now called the 'Parco dei Mostri'), which initiated a virtual scholarly industry of reconstructions and interpretations. Much of this work has been focused on the attempt to find a literary source or narrative structure that might help to clarify the garden's meaning. As a result there are now numerous accounts of the Sacro Bosco, ranging from the biographical to the alchemical, none of which has, however, succeeded in becoming universally accepted.<sup>5</sup>

Despite over half a century of research into the Sacro Bosco, the 'Hell Mouth' has received little serious attention either as a sculpture or as a building.<sup>6</sup> Like many garden motifs (*giochi d'acqua* for example), it has mainly been treated as an historical curiosity of little merit except perhaps as a diversion for children

<sup>5</sup> The literature on the 'Sacro Bosco' is very large, so I give here only the more significant recent studies (which all provide comprehensive bibliographies): Horst Bredekamp, *Vicino Orsini e il Bosco Sacro di Bomarzo: Un principe artista ed anarchico* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Elefante, 1989 [original German ed. 1985]), Anne Bélanger, *Bomarzo ou les incertitudes de la lecture: Figure de la meraviglia dans une jardin maniériste du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), and Sabine Frommel, ed., *Bomarzo: Il Sacro Bosco* (Milan: Electa, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Claudia Lazzaro has identified a possible source for the 'Hell Mouth'. She notes that: 'In his treatise on agriculture of the 1580s, Giovanni Saminati said that a grotto should be ornamented with frightful and ridiculous masks, and made so that one could sit inside, and even be equipped with a dining table.' Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden: From the Conventions of Planting, Design, and Ornament to the Grand Gardens of Sixteenth-Century Central Italy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990): 142. The 'Hell Mouth' may in fact have inspired Saminati's suggestion, or vice versa: the grotto and the treatise are contemporary with one another.

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(or the childlike). It is not, however, a unique survival from Renaissance Italy. Gaping mouths also appear in the gardens of the Villa Aldobrandini at Frascati and the Giardino Giusti at Verona; on the façade of the Palazzo Zuccari in Rome; and as fireplaces at the Palazzo Thiene, Vicenza and the Villa della Torre at Fumare, Valpolicella.



Figure 2. Gaping Mouth, Giardino Giusti, Verona, late 16th century (photo: Luke Morgan).



Figure 3. Gaping Mouth, Villa Aldobrandini, Frascati, c. 1600 (photo: Luke Morgan).

As a consequence of this lack of attention, no-one seems to have noticed that the motif of the 'Hell Mouth' is remarkably consistent with the imagery and themes of François Rabelais's novel *Pantagruel* (1532), a copy of which Orsini owned.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested that the image of the gaping mouth is the real 'hero' of Rabelais's comic 'chronicle'.<sup>8</sup> The giant Pantagruel's name means 'all-thirsting' and the notable events of his childhood are mostly associated with eating, drinking and swallowing. As a baby, for example, Pantagruel required the milk of 4,600 cows, often devouring the cows themselves as well. He effortlessly consumed live bears as if they were chickens and eventually had to be chained to his cradle so as to prevent him from eating everything in sight. As Bakhtin writes: 'All of these feats are related to sucking, devouring, swallowing, tearing to pieces. We see the gaping mouth, the protruding tongue, the teeth, the gullet, the udder, and the stomach.'<sup>9</sup>

For Bakhtin, this emphasis on the orifices and interior imperatives of the body is a distinctive feature of grotesque realism. He argues that, 'the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth...The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.'<sup>10</sup> For this reason, eating and drinking are highly significant manifestations of the 'open unfinished nature' of the grotesque body.<sup>11</sup> In the act of consumption, he claims, 'the body transgresses...its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Orsini mentions *Pantagruel* in a letter of 6 January 1579 to Giovanni Drouet. For a transcription of the letter, see, Bredekamp, *Vicino Orsini*, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984): 325.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 331

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

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Figure 4. Detail of the 'Hell Mouth'.

The 'Hell Mouth' is both a mouth framing an abyss and a place to eat. It invites the participation of the visitor, who would have supplied the missing dimensions of consumption (food and drink), while simultaneously serving as the object of consumption; and sound (conversation, laughter, music). The 'horrid face', as an inscription in the garden describes it, appears as perpetually ready and waiting to devour anyone who ventures inside, leading to a symbolic death in the maw of the monster. Paradoxically, however, one of the main reasons for entering the gaping, toothy mouth was to eat, drink and listen to music (if Giovanni Guerra's 1604 drawing is to be believed).<sup>13</sup> The 'Hell Mouth' is at once, therefore, a bodily grave and an unusual dining chamber. It is tragicomic or grotesque in Victor Hugo's sense: 'The grotesque is everywhere: on the one hand it creates the formless and the terrifying, on the other hand the comic, the buffoon-like.'<sup>14</sup>

The erudite *détournement* of Dante inscribed upon the lips of the 'Hell Mouth': 'Lasciate ogni pensiero voi ch'entrate' ('Abandon all thought, you who enter here'), which plays on the famous line from *Inferno*, 'Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate' ('Abandon all hope, you who enter here') is deliberately, though subtly, comic in much the same way.<sup>15</sup> Once again, however, the Sacro Bosco is not unique in this respect. Humour had an established place in Renaissance garden design. Indeed, as early as the fifteenth century, Leon Battista Alberti had approved of the presence of 'comic statues...provided they are not obscene'.<sup>16</sup> Despite Alberti's caveat, in gardens of the following century the humour verges on the scatological in, again, an authentically Rabelasian manner. At the lowest end of the central axis of the Villa Medici at Pratolino, for example, was a figure of a laundress and a urinating boy by Valerio Cioli, which may have

<sup>13</sup> For an accessible reproduction of Guerra's drawing, probably made in situ, see Lazzaro, *Renaissance Garden*, 142.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Note that the current inscription 'Ogni pensiero vola' ('Every thought flies') is misleading. The original text appears in Guerra's drawing.

<sup>16</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass. And London: The MIT Press, 1988): 300.

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been based on a woodcut from the *Hypnerotomachia*. According to contemporary accounts, the boy was designed to continuously soil the washerwoman's laundry.

Lazzaro interprets this sculptural group rather solemnly: 'The pissing boy provided yet another source of water, a witty counterpart to Jupiter at the head of the garden, and together the boy and the laundress present an ironic commentary on the grandiose imagery at the top of the hill, contrasting the water's supernatural origins with its mundane destination.'<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Bakhtin writes about the 'debasement and generating power of urine' in the popular traditions that Rabelais draws upon and refers to the *Manneken Pis* in Brussels, which is a version of the figure at Pradolino.<sup>18</sup> In Rabelais's second book, Pantagruel's urine creates all the medicinal springs of France and Italy. In other words urine, like other bodily fluids and functions, is an ambivalent signifier that may amount to more than an ironic (and rather juvenile) joke.

The representation of bodily functions in the 'Hell Mouth' and Cioli's Laundress group—on ingestion and micturition, respectively—suggests that these are exemplary images of the 'devouring and generating lower stratum,' or of the *material body*.<sup>19</sup> The imagery of both, like their functions, is in the end prosaic. In his discussion of *Pantagruel*, for instance, Bakhtin argues that the gaping mouth is 'the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld...[and]...is related to the image of swallowing, this most ancient symbol of death and destruction. At the same time, a series of banquet images are also linked to the mouth (to the teeth and the gullet).'<sup>20</sup> Chthonic death and banqueting are, likewise, the chief themes of the 'Hell Mouth'.

The emphasis of the 'Hell Mouth' on 'the lower bodily stratum', on eating or devouring, therefore, is suggestive of its grotesque character. As I have suggested, the eating here is not just figurative but participatory. Not only is the bodily relation and exchange between the occupant and the building made uncannily explicit in the 'Hell Mouth', through its literal if colossal anthropomorphism, but its function as a dining chamber is instantiated by its imagery. One is consumed immediately prior to potentially participating in an act of consumption oneself in a vertiginous *mise-en-abyme* of ingestion. Notably, for Bakhtin, the grotesque body is, fundamentally, 'a body in the act of *becoming*. It is never finished, never completed'.<sup>21</sup> The 'Hell Mouth' exemplifies this basic idea. It appears as if perpetually frozen in the moment of swallowing, devouring and rending.

This emphasis on the mundane functions or physical needs and sensations of the body—what Bakhtin describes as the Renaissance 'rehabilitation of the flesh'—may also be implicit in the inscription: 'Abandon all thought you who enter here'.<sup>22</sup> The haptic, embodied encounter with the building is, in other words, more important than detached, intellectual experience

Filarete's original suggestion that buildings are no different to bodies in their susceptibility to sickness, the traversable interior of the lovesick colossus of the *Hypnerotomachia*, the network of rooms contained within the *Appennino*, and, finally, the grotesque 'Hell Mouth' all imply, not the idealized, static and closed body that tends to be identified as 'classical', but the mundane corporeal body. This is a material body that needs feeding, tending, that is in a constant state of change, and that may sicken and die 'like a man'.

<sup>17</sup> Lazzaro, *Renaissance Garden*, 165.

<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 151

<sup>19</sup> The phrase is from Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 325

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 317

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

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Intriguingly, in each of these cases, the material body is associated with the potentially dysfunctional, certainly mutable, *interior*. Giambologna's *Appennino*, for instance, can be associated with the Classical tradition of colossal sculpture, but its interior cavities, with their multiple unrelated functions and painted scenes of shepherds, mining and metallurgy evoke, not the triumphant supermen of Antiquity, but rather the imperfect 'inhabited universe' that Rabelais tells us is located in Pantagruel's mouth. In both one could 'descend into the stomach as into an underground mine'.<sup>23</sup>

In all of these examples, the interior appears as essentially *unruly*. What this may suggest is that, historically at least, the analogy between the interior of a building and that of a body functions quite differently to the more familiar (Vitruvian) comparison of the façade of a building with the exterior proportions of bodies. In early modern anthropomorphic garden structures—hybrids of architecture and sculpture—the grotesque mode is almost always present. This indicates that the architectural interior cannot, in these instances, be reconciled with any putative 'classical' ideal of balance, serenity, stasis and completion; of the body expunged of its functions. Interiority in these examples seems to necessarily entail imperfect corporeality, a state of perpetual change rather of than resolution or completion.

**'Monstrously well invented'**

Technically, the 'Hell Mouth' lacks a body. The incomplete, unfinished body (or, in this case, bodiless head)—a body always on the point of transformation, or of becoming something other—is a leitmotif of grotesque realism, but it is also a defining principle in early modern concepts of monstrosity. As Ambroise Paré, the French physician and author of one of the most influential sixteenth-century studies of deformity (1573) wrote:

Monsters are things that appear outside the course of Nature (and are usually signs of some forthcoming misfortune), such as a child who is born with one arm, another who will have two heads, and additional members over and above the ordinary. Marvels are things which happen that are completely against Nature as when a woman will give birth to a serpent, or to a dog, or some other thing that is totally against Nature...<sup>24</sup>

Monstrosity, abnormality, deformity and the grotesque all require, of course, a normative standard against which they can be defined and from which they are perceived as deviating. For Paré, the standard is natural law—monsters are 'outside' of nature, marvels are 'against' nature—but this notion is, like every other historical conceptualization of nature, socially and culturally constructed. Monstrosity should be thought of therefore as a discourse that is generated by its multiple contexts in just the same way that normality or 'the natural' are discourses.<sup>25</sup>

In the history of art and architecture, the grotesque operates in much the same way. The grotesque image, motif or structure is, precisely, a deviation from an accepted norm or ideal standard. Bakhtin has argued that on the level of aesthetics, all grotesque images are, 'ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of "classic" aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed.'<sup>26</sup> In a phrase, we might say that the grotesque is to the classical (or, to be precise, a received idea about the classical), as the monstrous is to the 'natural'. From this perspective, it may be that

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., .339.

<sup>24</sup> Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. Janis L. Pallister (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982): 3.

<sup>25</sup> On the idea of monstrosity as a discourse, see the pioneering work of Georges Canguilhem.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p.25.

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the architectural interior, which, on the basis of the body/building analogy often appears as grotesque, should also be described as deviant or 'abnormal' in the sense that it deviates from an accepted norm.

The bizarre zoomorphic composites described by Horace at the beginning of his *Liber de Arte Poetica* feature prominently in Renaissance debates about the grotesque. Horace's treatise was interpreted as legitimizing artistic license—a central humanist *topos* and a paradigm of early modern art theory. In Michelangelo's opinion, for example, at least as reported by Francisco de Holanda, those who argued that Horace was opposed to the depiction of hybrid creatures in painting were wrong. According to him: 'Although this may be called deception, it should really be labeled monstrously well invented [*ben inventado e monstruoso*]. Rather than imposing the customary forms of men and animals, admirable as they may be, sometimes it is actually more reasonable to paint a monstrosity'.<sup>27</sup>

On the other side of this debate, however, is the artist and biographer Giorgio Vasari, whose views have proved the most influential in the long term. Vasari's Italo-centric critical distinction between what he called 'Gothic' and the *maniera moderna* ('modern manner') was informed by his reading of the only ancient treatise on aesthetics that was available to him—Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*. In his criticism of the wall-decorations of his own period, Vitruvius bemoaned the corruption of contemporary taste: 'But these paintings, which had taken their models from real things, now fall foul of depraved taste. For monsters are now painted in frescoes rather than reliable images of definite things...Now these things do not exist nor can they exist nor have they ever existed'.<sup>28</sup> For Vasari, the Gothic or medieval style was just as corrupt, or 'un-classical'.

Had he known it (and there is no evidence that he did despite that fact that the Sacro Bosco was constructed during his lifetime), Vasari would surely have disapproved of the 'Hell Mouth' at Bomarzo. It is, as I have suggested, a fully-fledged work of the grotesque; a witty Rabelasian monster as well as an idiosyncratic building conceived as a bodily cavity. As in other images of the grotesque body: 'It is not a closed, completed unit [on the classical model]...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>29</sup>

**Conclusion: From 'Hell Mouth' to 'Moon Face'**

Filarete's comparison of the interior of a building with that of a body—'You will see it must eat in order to live'—is unusually relevant to the 'Hell Mouth', the form and function of which is dedicated to eating. The theme of consumption is, as Bakhtin argued, associated with the 'lower bodily stratum' or material body; that is, the mundane corporeality of the living body rather than the static, closed and reified body. I have suggested, in addition, that this quality of materiality is often present in early modern concepts of the architectural interior as analogous to the interior of the body.

It may be worth pointing out, by way of conclusion, that the imagery of the material body and of the mask-like 'Hell Mouth' has its source in old popular traditions associated with festivals and celebrations. As anthropologists and historians have shown, in early modern Europe such rituals or carnivals functioned as brief moments of respite from the restrictions of class, gender and place in which, for a day or two, the established order was turned upside down under the auspices of mock kings, princes and bishops of

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981): 135-36.

<sup>28</sup> Vitruvius, *Ten Books*, 91.

<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 26.



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misrule.<sup>30</sup> In his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin went further and claimed that carnival was not a historically specific social phenomenon restricted to early modern festival culture, but constituted a trans-historical discursive mode. Writing in which distinct forms of literary discourse ('high' and 'low' for example) are deliberately brought into conflict with one another is, in Bakhtin's terms, 'carnavalesque.' The 'Hell Mouth,' which is at once terrifying and comic (or 'tragicomic' as Hugo put it), clearly fulfills these criteria.

Critics of Bakhtin have pointed out that the mocking, subversive, and critical activities of carnival were generally tolerated by ruling elites. As carefully controlled and temporary inversions of the usual order of things, they served to consolidate and reinforce class and gender stratification in hierarchical societies. It has been argued that Bakhtin overestimated the critical agency of the carnivalesque, partly as a result of his own circumstances as a philosopher and literary critic in the Soviet Union with scholarly interests in Western culture.<sup>31</sup> But that criticism does not in the end invalidate Bakhtin's fundamental insight: that the functions and imagery of the 'lower stratum,' the prosaic necessities, processes and desires of the body form a neglected (at times actively suppressed) literary and artistic tradition of grotesque realism, which I have attempted to show is crucial to our understanding of the early modern analogy between the architectural and the bodily interior.

The association of the Renaissance image of the grotesque gaping mouth with carnival, and its transgression of supposedly 'classical' aesthetic norms and mores, has ensured its long afterlife, especially in theme park architecture (which as Terence Young has suggested owes much to the history of landscape design).<sup>32</sup> The garishly painted 'moon face' at Luna Park in Melbourne is, from this perspective, only an early twentieth-century incarnation of the theme (Sydney's version is later). It belongs to a tradition that incorporates Filarete's focus on the vulnerable interior of the building rather than its perfected exterior order, Colonna's traversable lovesick giant, the 'inhabitable world' of Pantagruel's body, the internal network of the *Appennino*, and the 'Hell Mouth' at Bomarzo, and thus attests to the continuing relevance of what might, finally, be recognized as an historical architectural type: the 'grotesque interior'.

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1975), and Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> Michael Holquist, for example, argues in his prologue to Hélène Iswolsky's translation of Bakhtin's book that the concept of 'grotesque realism' is a 'point-by-point inversion of the categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism.' *Rabelais*, xvii.

<sup>32</sup> Terence Young, 'Grounding the Myth—Theme Park landscapes in an Era of Commerce and Nationalism', in *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, eds. Terence Young and Robert Riley (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002): 2.