

1-5-2018

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Steven S. (2018) "Grotesque Leadership: The Aesthetics of the “Mangled Apricot Hellbeast”,” *Organizational Aesthetics*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, 11-17.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/oa/vol7/iss1/2>

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Grotesque Leadership: The Aesthetics of the “Mangled Apricot Hellbeast”

Steven S. Taylor
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In the 2016 Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Trump's candidacy has been described as carnival (Gonzalez, 2016), and Trump himself was called a "mangled apricot hellbeast" by one twitter user, and much worse by others. Pundits and scholars have sought to explain the election of Trump as a populist movement (e.g. Page & Dittmer, 2016), as an expression of racism (e.g. Milbank, 2015), and as expression of authoritarian personality types (e.g. Weiler & MacWilliams, 2016). His style of campaigning seemed to consist largely of telling people what he thought they wanted to hear, even if that meant telling bold-faced lies, and savagely and often preemptively attacking his critics. It was remarkably successful. And it was grotesque.

The grotesque is an aesthetic category, which is to say that it is a name we give to our immediate felt experience of something. In the same way that we might experience a sunset as beautiful or traffic as ugly, I experience Trump's leadership as grotesque. Looking more broadly, Trump's leadership is part of a larger trend in leadership that includes leaders such as Boris Johnson in the UK, Silvio Berlusconi in the Italy, and Vladimir Putin in Russia, and which I identify as grotesque leadership.

Taking an aesthetic approach (Hansen, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007) to leadership means focusing on the aesthetic experience *of* leadership. That is to say, the sensory felt experience of what is actually happening in the specific moments that we might identify as leadership. What is the felt experience for the leader and perhaps more importantly, what is happening for others – since there are generally more of them and without others it is difficult to claim that leadership is happening (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010)? This is a break with the long history of leadership studies (cf Jackson & Parry, 2008) which has primarily focused on leaders, from their traits to their behaviors.

More recent work in leadership, such as charismatic (Conger & Kanungo, 1988) and authentic (Terry, 1993) leadership does shift the focus to the felt experience of leadership, albeit without explicitly recognizing that the leadership they are interested in is fundamentally an aesthetic phenomenon. Sinclair (2007) has pushed for looking at post-heroic leadership, which moves the focus away from the leader and Uhl-Bien (2006) has conceptualized a relational approach to leadership that also shifts the focus away from the leader. Following this stream of scholarship, it is a small step to explicitly taking an aesthetic perspective and focusing on the felt experience of the others, much as we might focus on our felt experience of a work of art.

Explicitly taking an aesthetic perspective opens up the use of aesthetic categories (Strati, 1992; Taylor & Hansen, 2005) such as the beautiful, the ugly and the sublime. Aesthetic categories are the way that we name different types of aesthetic experience to ourselves. Working with aesthetic categories has the advantages of allowing us to differentiate between what are very different experiences of leadership and also draw upon vast work in philosophic aesthetics. For example, Ladkin draws upon the philosophic work of Plato and Plotinus to analyze beautiful leadership (Ladkin, 2008) and the philosophic work of Kant to analyze charismatic leadership (Ladkin, 2006). Beauty is without doubt the aesthetic category that has been engaged with the most in the organizational literature (cf Taylor, 2013), scholars have considered other aesthetic categories such as disgust (Pelzer, 2002) and the grotesque (Boje & Cai, 2004; Rhodes & Pullen, 2007), although not in direct relationship to leadership.

We all have some intuitive sense of the grotesque, if only from the slang term "gross" – which of course doesn't mean exactly the same thing, but conveys something of the feeling we associate with the grotesque. Scholars have struggled over the years to define the grotesque and the first thing that stands out is that what was grotesque for one era is not grotesque for another era, it is always contextual and contextualized – "each age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity" (Harpham, 1976: 463). Nonetheless, there are several consistent themes in the understanding of the grotesque: 1) it is a corporeal and affective response, 2) it is

connected to fear and anxiety, 3) It is about alienation and estrangement, and 4) it is fundamentally subversive. These ideas are about the grotesque as a form of artistic representation and I am making the leap to apply them to leadership. There is certainly a case that has been made to suggest that leadership is a performative art (cf Grint, 2001; Vaill, 1989) and as I explore these it does not feel like a large leap from these ideas about grotesque art to the leadership I am talking about. I now address each of these in turn.

Corporeality/affective response. “The Grotesque ... expresses psychic currents from below the surface of life, such as nameless fears, complexes, nightmares, Angst. It is a dimension of intense and exaggerated emotions and intense and exaggerated forms.” (Fingesten, 1984: 419) It is in its very essence, not cognitive, but rather felt deeply and strongly in the body. The way the grotesque connects directly with to body moves it away from not only the intellectual mind (Rhodes & Pullen, 2007), but away from intellectualism and towards anti-intellectualism. The grotesque leader is not simply not making an intellectual argument, they are making fun of intellectual arguments and mocking intellectualism.

Fear/anxiety. Fear and anxiety are the currency of the grotesque. “The grotesque involves the arousing of anxiety by giving expression to infantile fears, fantasies and impulses; what distinguishes it from the purely uncanny is that in the latter defenses against anxiety are weak, while in the grotesque the threatening material is distorted in the direction of harmlessness without completely attaining it. That is, the defense is still only partially successful, in that it allows some anxiety to remain, and characteristically will even contribute to the arousing of some anxiety. This is the basic paradox of the grotesque: it is double-edged, it at once allays and intensifies the effect of the uncanny.” (Steig, 1970: 258) This is a critical aspect of grotesque leadership, the way in which they manage to both allay and increase the followers’ fears. The balance of just the right amount of fear and anxiety is critical. The followers “must be believers whose faith has been profoundly shaken but not destroyed; otherwise we lose that fear of life and become resigned to absurdity, fantasy, or death.” (Harpham, 1976: 462)

Alienation/estrangement. Kayser (Kayser & Weisstein, 1981) argues that the grotesque evokes a sense of alienation in the audience. The grotesque makes us feel estranged from the world, “our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death.” (Harpham, 1976: 462) The grotesque leader connects to others who feel alienated and uncomfortable with the world and perhaps long for a time when they felt more comfortable – a nostalgia for the past, a desire to make America great again.

Subversiveness. “The Rabelaisian 'marrow' of the grotesque is its subversive laughter and its ability to dethrone established hierarchies and to overturn official orders of reality. Jung states that the grotesque can 'expose the "dirty bottom" of officialdom and the established regime' (Jung 1988: 1 04).” (Rhodes & Pullen, 2007: 167) The grotesque leader operates outside of the establishment, so that they can subvert the existing power hierarchy. They are not bound by the rules, they do not have to be politically correct and in fact gain power by not following the rules and conventions of behavior.

Grotesque leadership, then is leadership that is a caricature or exaggeration of normal leadership. It is not just any form of exaggeration, but one that connects to seemingly irrational feelings of fear, anxiety, and alienation, and subverts the established order.

The Donald

I have referred to Donald Trump and others as a grotesque leader. However, I would be remiss if I didn’t recognize that in my theorization of grotesque leadership as an aesthetic category, that characterization is from a particular perspective – in this case it is my own perspective. I experience Trump as grotesque because of his racist and sexist acts,

because he makes fun of handicapped people, because he attacks anyone who he perceives as having slighted him. He is grotesque – an exaggerated caricature of the worst aspects of what I believe a president should be. He is not civil, he does not make compelling reasoned arguments (something as an academic I truly love). But I also have to admit that his supporters do not refer to him as grotesque. Luckily, many writers (typically on the left) have tried to understand why people support Trump (e.g. Berman, 2016; Friedersdorf, 2016; Saunders, 2016; Wood, 2016).

Looking at these writers, I see three recurring themes about why people support Trump that relate to the grotesque. First, they see him as being authentic. Second, they see him as fighting the establishment, and third, they don't believe he will really do what he says he will do. I now illustrate and discuss each of these in turn.

"It's considered an indication of authenticity that he doesn't generally speak from a teleprompter but just wings it. ... He is not trying to persuade, detail, or prove: he is trying to thrill, agitate, be liked, be loved, here and now. He is trying to make energy." (Saunders, 2016).

Authenticity is a feeling, more than an intellectual judgment (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010), it is a feeling of connection to the other. Trump connects to us because he is like us. He doesn't make arguments, he makes assertions just like most of us do. It is grotesque because that connection is not with our best selves, but is instead with our shadow, with the dark part of our selves (Chopra, 2016).

"I know he would do a pretty terrible job at this point, but I really am at the point of letting the whole thing burn down and explode. Trump would help us get there faster and more efficiently. Like the joker from The Dark Knight, I just want to see the world burn." (Friedersdorf, 2016)

Although this may be a more extreme expression than most of Trump's supporters it captures the alienation from the world that the grotesque depends on. Rather than being part of the establishment Trump will fight it, even if that means burning the whole thing down – whether that is intentional or not.

"I think it is very unlikely that he can pull any of that stuff off. It seems improbable to me, because he still has to work in the constraints of what I hope will be a checks and balances system. Frankly, I don't think he is going to have to make good on a lot of these crazy promises." (Pappu, 2016)

The third theme is that many Trump supporters don't believe he really means what he says. That is to say they recognize that Trump, the candidate is a caricature, an exaggeration, a grotesque in the classic sense.

Concluding Thoughts

There is a school of thought that conceptualizes leadership as a phenomena that includes both leaders and followers (e.g. Ladkin, 2010; Taylor, 2012; Taylor, Ladkin, & Statler, 2015). So far, I have focused on the actions of the leader, so I now turn from looking at the grotesque leader to looking at the followers. What does their attraction to the grotesque leader tell us? Looking at my four characteristics, it suggests that feeling is more important than thinking; there is a culture of fear; we are estranged from the world; and we are ready to revolt.

To say that feeling is more important than thinking is nothing new, decision science researchers have long found this to be true. However, what the grotesque taps into is the complete abandonment of even lip service to reasoned argument and thought. The

American comedian, Stephen Colbert coined the term "truthiness" to describe something that felt true, even if it wasn't necessarily true. The grotesque connects directly to the felt sense of what is true and false, what is right and wrong, and arguments or facts to the contrary don't matter.

The culture of fear is not a new thing. Although, Franklin Roosevelt may have told us that we had nothing to fear but fear itself, grotesque leaders tell us that we should be very afraid. This works slowly to create a culture of fear, which is stoked by leaders and media anxious for ratings. Nothing gets our attention like fear, all the more so when it is fear of the nameless, faceless "other". As long as we have no personal knowledge of the other we can imagine and fear all sorts of terrible things to be afraid of – they hate our freedom, they are coming for our daughters, and so on. The fear feeds directly into how we feel and reason and evidence to the contrary doesn't stand a chance.

But it is not just the nameless, faceless "other" that we feel estranged from – it is the entire world. The world we knew has changed and the new world feels like an alien place. This may come from something as simple as the way in which a loss of privilege feels like oppression, or even something as supposedly benign as constantly changing technology. The result is nostalgia and a longing for the good old days when the world felt like it was supposed to feel – even if the world the followers are longing for is a figment of their collective imaginations.

In a world full of fear, which feels different and odd, it is easy to blame the socio-political establishment for getting us here. It may even be true that the establishment bears significant responsibility for creating the current status quo. And even if it doesn't the status quo serves as something to rail against. If it was better then, it is horrible now. The followers are fed up and ready to revolt, or at least they feel ready. The grotesque leader tends to position themselves as an outsider and feeds upon this disgust with the establishment.

All of which is to say that it takes a certain fertile ground for grotesque leadership to work. It takes a world where feeling rules reason, where we live in fear, where we feel estranged, and disillusioned with the established systems. Given those conditions it is perhaps inevitable that the mangled apricot hell beast was elected president of the United States.

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About the Author

Steve Taylor is a professor of leadership and creativity and the head of entrepreneurship, marketing, and management at the WPI Foisie Business School. His research is focused in two areas: organizational aesthetics and reflective practice. The former applies art-based scholarship and practice to management and organizations. The latter focuses on the ability to analyze our own actions and learn how to be more effective, ethical, and artful as managers and leaders. His research has been published in academic journals including *Organization Studies*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, and *Journal of Management Studies*. Taylor is the author of the books: *Leadership Craft*, *Leadership Art*; *You're a Genius: Using Reflective Practice to Master the Craft of Leadership*; and *Staging Organization: Plays as Critical Commentaries on Workplace Life*. He is also the founding editor of the journal *Organizational Aesthetics*. Steve is a playwright, whose plays have been performed in England, France, Poland, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, Australia, and the United States. He received a PhD in management from Boston College; an MA in performing arts from Emerson College; and a BS in humanities from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.