

Mysterious Images¹ – Grimacing, Grotesques, Obscene, Popular: Anti- or Commentary Images?

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Even today's art historians are astonished and confused: "For a modern viewer they are not easily understood."² "It makes you wonder how they could be accepted as a suitable decoration in the church."³ "The painter must have been a dreamer."⁴ "The images are so incredibly repulsive, it almost makes you wish you could paint it over". "The painter was certainly psychotic - perhaps schizophrenic". "This means that we are not able to interpret his images satisfactorily". "But it also means that we do not have to spend any more time poring over them to find a deeper theological meaning."⁵ These are some of the assertions about a group of motifs in Danish medieval wall-painting. Assertions that the "real" religious motifs never would have generated.

The motifs are the so-called grotesque or anti-iconographical pictures. Images showing obscenities, mocking and grimacing faces, people dancing and demonstrating uncontrolled behaviour, fable-creatures and strange beings that seem to belong to a different world. The fact that they are found in church, the house of God, right next to the religious motifs, only enlarges the astonishment. They would have been easier to

¹ J. Kornerup wrote in 1870 an article "Om nogle af de gaadefulde mennesker- og dyreskikkelser, som forekommer i vor middelalders kunst"; This is where the title "Mysterious images (Gådefulde billeder)" comes from, because even though Kornerup is surprised by the images, he never uses the word grotesque, while describing the images, contrasting many later descriptions. J. Kornerup. "Om nogle af de gaadefulde menneske- og dyreskikkelser som forekomme i vor middelalderens kunst", *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*. 1870, p. 217-35.

² Ulla Haastrup (ed.), "Danske kalkmalerier 1475-1500", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 5, 1991, p. 46.

³ Hans J. Frederiksen, "Troens kunst", *Ny Dansk Kunsthistorie* Vol. 1, 1993, p. 217.

⁴ Mogens Larsen, "Træskomaleren", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 5 (ed. Ulla Haastrup), 1991, p. 82.

⁵ Lise Gotfredsen, "Nogle sære billeder...", *ICO* 3-4, 1977, p. 17 & 29.

accept and to understand if they were found in a more profane, a more suitable place, and might not have brought about the aforementioned assertions. These images form a neglected group of motifs – especially among art historians, since they are not properly registered in the existing iconographic indexes of Danish wall-paintings. Which of course is logical if the images are considered non-iconographical and have been assigned a marginal importance in the religious imagery.

But images can be ambiguous. Just like commercials today interrupt serious movies in our modern universe of television, the grotesque images were an integrated part of the visual universe in the medieval church. And just like commercials, the grotesques connote many different levels of meaning.

I will try to look at the motifs differently by indicating that they were not just characterised by negative meanings. This means that the grotesque and the sacred, the earthly and the heavenly were not always contrasts, but together formed a symbiosis within the world of Christian imagery.

Iconography, Semiotics and History

Historians usually work with text, not with images, and even though this is old news, it is still a fact. The methods for handling visual source material are found in art and literary history.

When working with images, Erwin Panofsky's iconographic model of analysis is traditionally used. It consists of three levels of meaning: The pre-iconographic, the iconographic and iconological level. Iconography has, without doubt, been an essential instrument for classifying religious medieval imagery.

But Panofsky, and especially his iconological level has been criticized. Panofsky interpreted history and images, as being controlled by a 'Zeitgeist', mainly hidden in the literary and philosophical ideas of society.⁶ This shows an idealistic view of history, which means that history is reduced simply to the history of ideas. As Norman Bryson has pointed out, "Panofsky's third iconological level of meaning – though for us it may throw the gates open to "context" when we consider works of art – seems in the argument to reduce whatever may lie beyond the second, iconographic level to the psychology of an epoch."⁷

Another more useful method of analysis comes from Roland Barthes. His semiotic method makes it possible to understand the ideology of a

⁶ Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology", *Meaning in the visual arts*, 1955, p. 9-21 ; Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art", *Studies in Iconology*, 1939, p. 26-54.

⁷ Norman Bryson, "Semiology and Visual Interpretation", *Visual Theory* (eds. Norman Bryson, Michael A. Holly & Keith Moxey), 1991, p. 62.

His semiotic method makes it possible to understand the ideology of a society. Viewing images as part of sign systems leads to the notion that they are shaped and controlled by the culture they belong to.⁸ Furthermore, the stressing of historical context is important, and as Keith Moxey says, "Whereas the resemblance theory maintained that representation was based on a constant and thus a historical relation between the artists and the world, a semiotic theory would define representation within the historical horizon in which it occurred."⁹

Using a semiotic starting point I suggest that images are part of several different sign systems. This means that they consist of different levels of meaning. The grotesques can symbolise a moral and allegorical view within the Christian universe and at the same time refer to other aspects of life. Consequently the images are open to different interpretations depending on which sign system they refer to. Francis Klingender has proposed that the medieval imagery had different levels of meaning, depending on who saw them: a simple level for the greater part of the population and a more complex theological level for the educated and skilled viewer.¹⁰

The perception of images – the relation between image and viewer – is therefore an important side to understanding medieval wall-paintings. The peasants in the countryside were not educated viewers, considering art history and foreign styles when in church. They had a far more matter-of-fact experience of the images relating to everyday life.

Image and Beholder

The eyes send ten million bits to the brain every second; the skin sends one million, the ears 100.000, the sense of smell only 1000 bits a second.¹¹

The sight is by far the strongest of our senses, and a wealth of information are received and processed, when the beholder stands in front of an image. Off hand it seems impossible to understand how the wall-paintings influenced the medieval worshiper. But in a world where most people were exposed to very few images, and where imagery were not a mass production like today, the sculptures and colourfully painted vaults had to be an impressing and overwhelming experience, an experience that must have brought about the beholders' reaction. A fully painted Gothic church – from the cathedrals to the small Danish parish churches – can

⁸ Bent Fausing & Peter Larsen (eds.), *Visuel kommunikation* Vol. 1, 1980, p. 44; Roland Barthes, "Rhétorique de L'image", *Communications* 4, 1964, p. 44-57.

⁹ Keith Moxey, *Pesants, Warriors and Wives. Popular Imagery in the Reformation*, 1989, p. 6-5.

¹⁰ Francis Klingender, *Animals in art and thought*, 1971, p. 32.

¹¹ Bent Fausing, *Synet som sans*, 1995, p. 17 & 54.

still, even for a modern viewer, seem quite staggering.

The iconographical and iconological methods of analysis have tried to explain the symbolic meaning of the motifs and their relations with the help of surviving writings.¹² This is, of course, important. But by applying, what could be called the art historians' analysis apparatus, that focusses on the development of the motifs and their relation with the artists/workshops and with the biblical writings, the power that exists between an image and a beholder is neglected. This is what David Freedberg in his book "*Power of Images*" describes as "response", defined as "the symptoms of the relationship between image and beholder."¹³ The way we look at things is controlled by what we know and what we believe.¹⁴ The reaction that is evoked by images of hell and of the devil among the people in the late Middle Ages is most likely different to that among modern viewers and the other way round. It is not at all certain that the astonishment we feel today when seeing the grotesque motifs applied to the Middle Ages.

Hans Belting points out that images are only understandable in their historical context, and that it is not possible to spontaneously understand a medieval image, as if we were the addressees. To do that would be to presume a psychological predisposition independent of time and place, and thereby to ignore the fact that perception of images changes through time.¹⁵

Images can possess magic powers far beyond their physical appearance as it is shown in the adoration of icons and in the fact that images could provide indulgence.¹⁶

The late medieval Danish wall-paintings are not to be read in one direction, but invite to be read in several different directions,¹⁷ and to consist of different levels of understanding. As Michael Camille has said about images, "being less controllable than the authorised text, images were dangerously divisive: they pretended to be what they were not. A deep-rooted distrust of the duplicitous in image-making runs through the Christian tradition."¹⁸ This represents a duplicity that is even stronger, when it comes to more profane motifs within the religious imagery like the

¹² Axel Bolvig, *Bondens billeder. Om kirker og kunst i dansk senmiddelalder*, 1994, p. 119.

¹³ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, 1989, p. xxii.

¹⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1977, p. 8.

¹⁵ Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter. Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, 1981, p. 105.

¹⁶ Anne Riising, *Danmarks middelalderlige prædiken*, 1969, p. 260-262.

¹⁷ Axel Bolvig, *Bondens billeder. Om kirker og kunst i dansk senmiddelalder*, 1994, p. 119 & 137-138.

¹⁸ Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol. Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art*, 1989, p. xxvi.

grotesques.

The medieval population did not just passively look at the images in church and accept their messages, but actively interacted with them on the basis of their conditions of life and ideas of the world.

Popular Images

The Danish medieval wall-paintings solely exist in a religious context. Their purpose was to pass on the Christian beliefs to the congregation. Consequently, the motifs are closely connected with the Bible and the saints' legends.¹⁹ Their function are mainly didactic, and they served as a visual complement to the mass.²⁰ In addition, they also worked as a way to get absolution.²¹ But how do the grotesque motifs fit in here? Most of them do not have any connections with the Bible. They just do not seem very religious. The religious imagery of the late Middle Ages becomes more lively and popular in comparison to the grand and noble images of the early Middle Ages. But does this mean that they can be seen as purely popular features? Here it is relevant to examine who painted the images and how the relationship between sender and recipient can be interpreted.

There are different opinions on this matter. In the Danish discussion there are two lines of opinion. One of them holds that in late medieval society, as in the Romanesque period, it was the elite – king, bishops and nobles – who ordered and paid for the religious imagery. The images aimed at the largest group in society – the peasants. The grotesque images are explained as scare images that were supposed to counterbalance the popular superstitions.²² The other opinion holds that the peasants, because of rising standards of living, ordered and paid the images for themselves. Therefore, the images of the grotesque reflect the mentality of the common people.²³

But the line of division between high and low is much too sharp. The assertion that the very profane motifs were supposed to function as scare images does not seem likely. They do not just occur in the parish churches, but also in churches belonging to the ecclesiastical elite, like the

¹⁹ Axel Bolvig, *Bondens billeder. Om kirker og kunst i dansk senmiddelalder*, 1994, p. 139.

²⁰ Søren Kaspersen, "Om folkelighed og ufolkelighed i senmiddelalderligt vægmaleri", *Kunst Samfund Kunst - En hilsen til Broby*, 1987, p. 28; Ulla Haastrup (ed.), "Danske Kalkmalerier 1375-1475", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 4, 1985, p. 17.

²¹ Ulla Haastrup (ed.), "Danske Kalkmalerier 1375-1475", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 4, 1985, p. 17.

²² Søren Kaspersen, "Om folkelighed og ufolkelighed i senmiddelalderligt vægmaleri", *Kunst Samfund Kunst - En hilsen til Broby*, 1987, p. 9-33.

²³ Axel Bolvig, *Bondens billeder. Om kirker og kunst i dansk senmiddelalder* 1994, p. 88-89.

Cathedrals of Roskilde and Århus and the Carmelite churches of Elsinore and Sæby.²⁴ Furthermore, the grotesques are often found in the chancel, where the worshippers were not allowed at all.

On the other hand, it seems more likely that the influence comes from below. The line between the official and the popular is thereby made more undefined. The problem is that the grotesque is often considered equivalent to the popular. But, if you look at where grotesque motifs are found, it is in literature and in manuscripts, in two media that were produced and used solely by the elite. Therefore, the influence probably flowed both ways: from the literate part of society, who owned the illustrated manuscripts and classical writings, but at the same time from the common part of society; from the popular festivals and street life that blended with churchlife and created a mixture of religion and popular mysticism.

This is also connected with religious life and the general religious development. But how Christian were the Christians actually in the Middle Ages?²⁵ Obviously the small prosperous and literate elite had easy access to the religious writings and were therefore better qualified to understand them. But in spite of this, there may not have been any essential differences in the religious observance between the high and the low. Eamon Duffy says that, "Yet within the diversity of medieval religious options there was a remarkable degree of religious and imaginative homogeneity across the social spectrum, a shared repertoire of symbols, prayers and beliefs which crossed and bridge even the gulf between the literate and the illiterate".²⁶ Duffy operates with the term "traditional religion", signifying the religion that was common to everyone in the Middle Ages.²⁷ A term that, I think, can be applied to the grotesque images.

Grotesque Images

The number of grotesque or anti-iconographical images in the Danish medieval wall-paintings is quite large. Katrin Kröll has worked most

²⁴ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: *Roskilde Domkirke & Århus Domkirke & Mariæ Helsingør & Sæby*.

²⁵ Lars Bisgaard, "Det religiøse liv i senmiddelalderen. En tabt dimension i dansk historieskrivning", *Danmark i senmiddelalderen* (eds. Per Ingemann & Jens V. Jensen), 1994, p. 357 ; John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem", *The American Historical Review* 91, 1986, p. 519-552, which describes both the older and the newer research concerning how widespread religion was during the Middle Ages.

²⁶ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400-c. 1580*, 1992, p. 3.

²⁷ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400-c. 1580*, 1992, p. 2-6.

thoroughly with this material and in her PhD-thesis she operates with 496 registered motifs,²⁸ even though further research will probably show an even higher number of images. Probably, a large number of grotesques are still hidden behind the whitewashed church walls.²⁹

The anti-iconographical pictures form an uneven group of images, with several different styles and means of expression: They are primarily found in the margin, but can also be seen in the vaults.

They may be divided into six primary types of images,³⁰ each forming a group of specific motifs:

1. grotesque masks (gargoyles);
2. fable-creatures;
3. fools, (jesters);
4. jongleurs;
5. fables;
6. major grotesques.

The groups of images are difficult to define. And a division as the above mentioned can only be applied as a guidance and a starting point to what I am going to call "Grotesque Gesture", because the forms of manifestations are mixed and combined in different ways. This goes for both the style, mode of expression and the placing in the church. Fools, for instance, can be seen as grotesque masks or jongleurs both in the vaults, in the pendentives, and so forth.³¹

Because of the large number of images, I will only examine a few motifs from each of the six primary types. Many of the chosen images are very special and unique representatives of their different groups.

The reason why I have chosen to examine these particular motifs, is that they might help us understand the more anonymous ones within the primary groups.

Grotesque Masks

The grotesque masks constitute by far the largest group of the grotesque images.³² Most of them are found in the pendentives, but they also occur in the vaults. The masks are characterised by their open mouths, often

²⁸ Katrin Kröll, *Das drölastische Universum am Rande der göttlichen Ordnung*, 1993, p. 68..

²⁹ Ulla Hastrup (ed.), "Danske kalkmalerier 1500-1536", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 6, 1992, p. 57.

³⁰ Katrin Kröll, *Das drölastische Universum am Rande der göttlichen Ordnung*, 1993, p. 56-66, is making a similar classification, but she includes certain types of devils, which I will not, because the devils make up an independent field of research and because the connotations of the devils are generally much more unambiguous.

³¹ See Internet: [http:// www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm) search: *Droleri*.

³² See Internet: [http:// www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm) search: *vrængemaske*.

emphasised by being painted round the small holes in the lower parts of the vaults. They mock and ridicule, and some of them stick out their tongues. They are depicted in the evil profile, but quite a lot of them are shown en face which normally symbolises the holy. The larger part of the grotesque masks are without bodies, though a few are depicted in full-length.³³ Evidently, it is not easy to describe this group of motifs in an unambiguous or simple way.

Because of their grimaces and putting out of tongues, the grotesque masks have been seen as odd and comic anti-images in contrast to the religious imagery.³⁴ But the mouth and especially the tongue could signify the positive as well as the negative, that is, if we are to believe the popular medieval chapbook, *Sydrak*. According to *Sydrak*, the tongue could symbolise positive things like honour, glory and wisdom, things that are not usually associated with this kind of images.³⁵

In the two high-clergy churches of St. Mariæ Elsinore and Sæby we find examples of such pictures.³⁶

Niels Haastrup has proposed that the distinctive masks in St. Mariæ Elsinor served a purpose as memory images, just like the figures in mnemotecnical didactic books. Different small figures emerge from the mouths of the masks, mostly animals and humans, but other things as well. They have been connected to Danish proverbs,³⁷ but they probably signify many different phenomena. Most important is that images and text interacted in a way that was useful to the friars.

In the church of Sæby of the Cannelite Order, another kind of

³³ Ulla Haastrup (ed.), "Danske kalkmalerier 1475-1500", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 5, 1991, p. 46.

³⁴ Katrin Kröll, *Das drölastische Universum am Rande der göttlichen Ordnung*, 1993, p. 266.

³⁵ "Menniskens twngæ ær thet bæstæ, þa legemet ær, Fforthii ath formiddelst twungen ma mennisken fa stoor ære, riigdom, kerligheet, wiisdom, loff ok gaffn, badhe til siel ok liiff, Ok aff twungen ma mennisken faa stoor skam, laast, skadhæ ok wan ære, badhe til siel ok liiff, Fforthii mennisken ma talæ the ordh, som thet ma fangæ stoor skam ok skadhæ / fore, Ok twngen hawer enge been j segh, Men hun flyyr the offtæ sa, Ath badhe been ok armæ brydes sønder". *Sydrak*, 1921, p. 89. The manuscript was known in most of Europe, and was, therefore, of significant cultural importance: Gunnar Knudsens introduction to *Sydrak*, p. XI & VII.

³⁶ To view the grotesque masks of St. Mariæ Elsinore and Sæby church, see Internet: <http://search.www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm>: search: *Mariæ Helsingør* and *vrængemaske* (in the same search) & *Sæby* and *vrængemaske* (in the same search).

³⁷ Niels Haastrup, "Sporgarbejdere - med og uden bøger", *Bogvennen* 1982, *Skrift, Bog og Billede i Senmiddelalderens Danmark* (eds. Christian Ejlers & Erik C. Lindgren), 1982, p. 93; Niels Haastrup, "Hvad kan der ikke komme ud af munden på et menneske", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 5 (ed. Ulla Haastrup), 1991, p. 116-119; Niels Haastrup, "Die Masken in der Marienkirche von Helsingør", *Mein ganzer Körper ist Gesicht* (eds. Katrin Kröll & Hugo Steger), 1994, p. 335-41.

depicted in the pendentives, eight in every vault.³⁸ The friars are depicted standing in calyces, and above every one of them a piece of writing can be seen. But the interesting and overlooked feature is the fact that the stalks of the flowers all emerge from the mouths of full-figure grotesque masks (fig. 1).

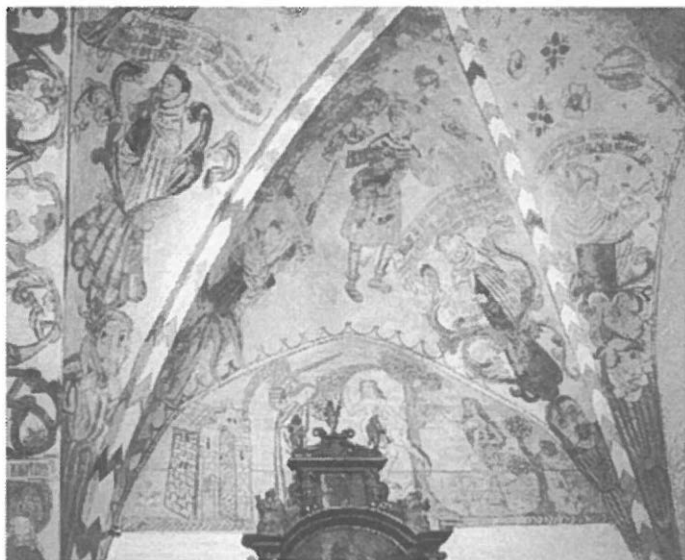


Fig. 1: Carmelite monks and grotesque masks in the church of Sæby

In the standard work of Danish wall-paintings, *Danmarks kalkmalerier*, vol. 6, four chapters deal with the church of Sæby, and the grotesque masks are only mentioned once in a note to an illustration.³⁹ In all of the mentioned literature in *Danmarks kalkmalerier*, vol. 6, the masks are only referred to once or twice, but they are never examined more closely, even

³⁸ Kaare Rübner Jørgensen, "Karmeliterne i Sæby Kirke", *Kirkehistoriske Samlinger* 1978, 1978, p. 10.

³⁹ Eva L. Lillie, "Sæbyværkstedet", p. 150-53; Karen Sorgenfrey, "Joachim og Annas historie", p. 155; Karen Sorgenfrey, "Marias Tempelgang", p. 158-59; Dorthe F. Møller, "Musicerende munke", p. 160-61, all in *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 6 (ed. Ulla Haastrup), 1992.

though the rest of the images of the church are thoroughly described.⁴⁰ Furthermore, it seems that the masks and the friars were understood as two different motifs without any connection.

In contrast, I regard the friars, the flowers and the masks as part of the same motif (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Carmelite monks and grotesque mask in the church of Sæby

It has been shown by Kaare Rübner Jørgensen that every friar represents learned foreign men of the Order. And if we look closely at the pendentive mask-figures, it turns out that these are friars as well, ordinary Carmelite monks modestly dressed in comparison with their famous and learned brothers in the vaults.

Honour, glory and wisdom are thus communicated directly, through the tongue and through the mouth of the friars. Most of the distinguished

⁴⁰ Francis Beckett, *Danmarks Kunst* Vol. 2, 1927; Kaare Rübner Jørgensen, "Karmeliterne i Sæby Kirke", *Kirkehistoriske Samlinger* 1978, 1978; Mette Erlandsson, "Sæby kirkes kalkmalerier", *Vendsyssel Årbog* 1980, 1980, p. 73-90; Hans Gregersen, *Karmeliterklostret i Sæby. Baggrund og historie*, 1982, p. 67-68; Eva L. Lillie, "Lærdommens billeder. Sæbyværkstedets udsmykning i fem nordjyske kirker", *Kirkehistoriske Samlinger* 1988, 1988, p. 33-83, do not mention them. Mogens Bencard, "Carmelite Art and Architecture in Denmark", *Carmelus* vol. 4, 1957, p. 76. The grotesque masks are not mentioned in the register of Danish medieval wall-paintings of the Danish National Museum.

monks in the calyces were precisely characterised by the fact that they had written books of sermons. Probably many of these books could be found in the Carmelite library.⁴¹

The Carmelite friars who frequented the church in the beginning of the 16th century, were not thinking of deadly sins when seeing a grotesque mask. On the contrary, they were reminded of the fact that they themselves by sedulous study and dissemination of Christianity, could reach as high as the exalted monks depicted in church; and that it was their duty to disseminate the message of Christianity.

Fable Creatures

Fable-creatures and strange beings have fascinated man in all times.⁴² Today it is UFOs and creatures from outer space. In the Middle Ages, it was strange animals and fantastic fable-creatures who, just like the extra-terrestrials, did not belong to the known world. The fable-creatures originated from the works of antique writers, such as the journey-accounts of Pliny, Physiologus' and Mandeville's travels.⁴³ *Lucidarius*, a popular book of the Middle Ages, also mentions a number of fantasy and fable-creatures when describing *Asia*. In a chapter concerning the difference between good and evil, the disciple asks the master, why God created animals that were not useful to mankind. The master responds that lions, bears and other gruesome creatures were created as to scare men and women in order to punish them for their sins.⁴⁴ Many of the fable-creatures can be interpreted as dangerous monsters threatening the sinful.

But the meaning of images can be altered, and they could be put to use in quite a different manner, that is as a form of political criticism or satire.

In the church of Voldby,⁴⁵ in the second vault, to the north, two fighting fable-creatures can be seen. They are both wearing crowns. The smaller creature to the left consists only of a head and two legs attached, where the ears would normally be found. The larger creature to the right has arms as well and is threateningly holding a spear. Behind these two, a man is lying on the ground, his legs widely spread. He is wearing a hat and

⁴¹ Kaare Rübner Jørgensen, "Karmeliterne i Sæby Kirke", *Kirkehistoriske Samlinger* 1978, 1978, p. 22-23.

⁴² See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: *Fabelvæsen*.

⁴³ Dorrit Lundbæk, *Fabelvæsner i sengotisk kalkmaleri i Danmark*, 1970, p. 2-3; Ulla Hastrup (ed.), "Danske kalkmalerier 1500-1536", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 6, 1992, p. 56.

⁴⁴ *Lucidarius*, 1909, p. 118. In the chapter about *Asia*, p. 135-50.

⁴⁵ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: 11/73.

striped pants. In one hand he is holding a bludgeon, with the other he is spreading his legs.

The fight between the two crowned creatures can be seen as a symbol of the mutual fight for power between different secular authorities. The crowned creatures hardly represent the vices, since it is very rare for one vice to be attacking another.⁴⁶ Rather, they should be seen as symbols of the royal powers.

The looks and gestures of the two creatures can be seen as representing a struggle for political power, showing the larger one as the winner. The smaller one is shown in profile, a way of depiction that is usually applied for negatively loaded images like Judas or the Devil. Furthermore, he is elegantly dressed as a negative sign of vanity.

In contrast, the larger creature is depicted en face, a position mostly applied to the depiction of the most holy beings. He is not wearing anything but his crown. And he is barefoot like Christ.

The small man in the background can be seen as a sarcastic remark to the struggling kings, whose fight did not benefit the common people.

Dorrit Lundbæk holds to be able to trace a certain likeness to portraits, thereby indicating that the image shows the royal fight for power during the Reformation. The small figure would then show King Christian II, the larger winning one with the spear King Frederik I. The wall-painting can hardly be interpreted as specific portraits because of their uncertain dating. The images are not documentary depictions of reality, but they do actively respond to the social and cultural context that they visualise.

The image in the church of Voldby is thus an example of how fable-creatures in some instances can connote a meaning that goes beyond the Christian-allegorical one, a meaning that refers to the political reality of the sixteenth century; a reality close to the churchgoers of the late Middle Ages, which, therefore, naturally found its way into the church as well.

Fools⁴⁷

In the cathedral of Roskilde, in the chapel of King Christian I, consecrated in 1460, a depiction of a fool is found straight in the middle of the southern part of the first vault.⁴⁸ The fool is sitting in a calyx,⁴⁹ playing a one-hand

⁴⁶ Dorrit Lundbæk, *Fabelvæsner i sengotisk kalkmaleri i Danmark*, 1970, p. 34-35.

⁴⁷ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: *Nar*.

⁴⁸ To view the fool in the Chapel of King Christian I, see Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: *st/ 160*.

⁴⁹ Persons were frequently depicted sitting in calyces, no matter whether they were fools, secular characters, as for instance Hans Pothorst in St. Mariæ church in Elsinør,

flute and a drum. He is wearing a two-coloured costume, a hood with donkey ears, bells and a comb of a cock.

The fool, which is even visible from the nave of the church, is a prominent feature of the chapel. He is the first thing one sees when entering the chapel. And he was put alone in the vault in the same size as the music playing angels around him. Consequently, his appearance in the cathedral has been seen as unlogical and unreasonable. And the meaning of his appearance has been explained as a mocking counter-weight to the opposite scene of the Carrying of the Cross, because of the traditional interpretation of the fool and his instruments as a personification of evil.⁵⁰

But this is not a popular, marginally placed fool. On the contrary, he is a well dressed, centrally placed court jester, probably the personal court jester of Christian I.⁵¹ He is a court jester not representing evil, but appearing as a secular counterpart – not against – but to the holy and music playing angels.

In the Middle Ages, the nature and role of the fool was saturated with ambiguity. On the one hand, the fool entertained with jokes and games at court. On the other hand, the fool had unlimited freedom of speech, which gave him considerable power. Within the church, the fool was also known. All through the Middle Ages, fools' masses and fools' feasts were celebrated, and the festivities assumed grotesque forms, both in and outside the church. All levels of society took part in the celebrations, from clergy to peasants. The festivities were usually lead by young clerks, engaging in rude and unseemly games. In a book on early Danish theatre, a vivid account of the feasts is given: "The church was turned into a ballroom, the altar to a bar, the mass to nonsense words in Latin mixed with harsh jokes, well, the clerks played skittles in the church loft and had a drop too much wine."⁵² The fool and the fools' feasts turned society upside down. And as the Bible says, "the last shall be the first."

It is, therefore, not reasonable to consider the fool a merely negative symbol. His role within the Christian universe was considerably more complex, and this also goes for his appearance on the church walls.

friars like the ones in Sæby, or even holy angels like the ones in the chapel of king Christian I, who sit in calyces similar to the one of the fool.

⁵⁰ Dorthe F. Møller, "Musiksymbolik på kryds og tværs", *ICO*, 3-4, 1977, p. 30-37; Dorthe F. Møller, "Musikinstrumenter", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 4 (ed. Hastrup), 1985, chapter 67.

⁵¹ Vivian Etting, "Narren", *Skalk* nr. 5, 1985, p. 21-30; Klaus Neiendam, "Spilleute in zwei spätmittelalterlichen Wandmalerien", *Mein ganzer Körper ist Gesicht* (eds. Katrin Kröll & Hugo Steger), 1994, p. 373-84.

⁵² Torben Krogh, *Ældre dansk Teater - En teaterhistorisk Undersøgelse*, 1940, p. 314, my translation.

Jongleurs⁵³

In the Middle Ages the jongleurs formed a small mobile group at the edge of society. They were professional entertainers outside the prevailing set of norms, free travellers without masters and, therefore, without any legal rights whatsoever. In the legislation they were regarded as outcasts from society.⁵⁴

The church condemned them, of course. The preachers gave tongue about the fun of the fair and stressed that any Christian man should place his money on the altar and not spend it on jongleurs.⁵⁵ This shows that both travelling and local jongleurs were probably not a rare thing. As fools they were part of society and naturally occurred inside church as well as outside. Even though the church despised the jongleurs, the ideals of the literate clergy were far from the facts of life in the villages. Out there, the festivities meant a welcomed opportunity to lose the daily routine for a short while. The priests probably did not strictly enforce the rules of prohibiting jongleurs in or outside church. Many of the priests were poorly educated, and it is stressed several times that on feast days the priest should preach to the congregation⁵⁶ – probably instead of just celebrating. During the late Middle Ages jongleurs and minstrels began to organise and settle themselves. This is seen in an example from the Danish city of Århus round 1500. A minstrel – Jes Lassen – was not allowed to work outside town, unless the mayor granted him permission.⁵⁷ And in 1579, one of King Fredrik II's jongleurs – Jacob Seefeld – was given an annual allowance, since he could no longer work because of old age.⁵⁸ This indicates that jongleurs and minstrels were not simply ill regarded outcasts of society. They were also able to obtain certain privileges.

In the tower-vault, north and west vault cell of the church of Vigersted two jongleurs are found.⁵⁹ One of them is juggling with two knives, the other one is dancing. This scenery takes place right underneath a representation of St. Nicholas' legend. In the church of Nørre Herlev, St.

⁵³ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: Gøgler.

⁵⁴ Wolfgang Hartung, *Die Spielleute. Eine Randgruppe in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, 1982, p. 4-5.

⁵⁵ Anne Riising, *Danmarks middelalderlige prædiken*, 1969, p. 362.

⁵⁶ Anne Riising, *Danmarks middelalderlige prædiken*, 1969, p. 21 & p. 35-43; P.G. Lindhardt, "Det religiøse liv i senmiddelalderen", *Den Danske Kirkes Historie* Vol. 3 (eds. Niels K. Andersen & P.G. Lindhardt), 1965, p. 119, mentions how it is stressed that the partying of the priests should be restricted; at the first mass only 32 guests for dinner were allowed!

⁵⁷ J. R. Hüberty (ed.), *Aktstykker Vedkomende Staden og Stiftet Aarhus. Vol. I*, 1845, p. 240.

⁵⁸ *Nye Danske Magazin*, 1836, p. 47-48.

⁵⁹ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: 22/ 198.

Nicholas is depicted as well.⁶⁰ In the first vault of the nave, St. Nicholas is shown saving three girls from prostitution. In the pendentives below, two jongleurs are seen, one playing the bagpipes, the other dancing and drinking (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: One of the jongleurs of the church of Nørre Herlev

⁶⁰ See Internet: [http:// www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm](http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm) search: *Nørre Herlev* and *gogler* (in the same search).

Are images like these to be understood as deadly sins opposed to the sacred deeds of St. Nicholas? Or could they be a symbol of the importance of the medieval jongleurs and the medieval drama. The mass can be seen as a drama, where the congregation entered into the spirit of the holy books.⁶¹ The medieval religious theatre was extensive and found its stories in the bible or the lives of the saints. The legend- and mystery-plays, performed on the feast-days, were very popular because of their dramatic stories.⁶² The lives of the saints were full of violent and dramatic incidents and the plays naturally held coarse scenes. From France we know of a play of the legend of St. Nicholas – *Le Jeu de saint Nicholas* – written by the writer of the Fabliaux, Jean Bodel. The play consists of farcical scenes of game and play, of drinking and fighting.⁶³

Off hand, the images of the pendentives seem strange in association with the legends,⁶⁴ but they probably refer to legend plays like the above mentioned. Nicholas was a very popular and celebrated saint. He had two annual festivals, the day of his death, December 6, and the day of his enshrinement, May 9.⁶⁵ Most likely the villagers of Vigersted and Nørre Herlev celebrated especially May 9 in their church with festivities, games and religious drama.

Fables

The fables originate from antique writings like Aesop's, writings that the sermons of the Christian church could still use.⁶⁶ They were widespread in oral as well as in written form. The fables feature animals acting and behaving just like humans. The medieval population had a totally different relationship towards animals than we have today. Humans and livestock lived close together in a way we can hardly imagine. The animals were an important part of everyday life, and human qualities were often ascribed to them. This is especially seen in the fables that were used as a didactic and critical means

The wall-paintings depict the fables of The Fox and the Stork and of The Fox Preaching to the Geese. The medieval view of the fox was that of a sly and dangerous vermin, hunting the farmers' hens and geese.

⁶¹ Hans Hertel (ed.), *Verdens Litteratur Historie*, Vol. 2, 1994, p. 323-24.

⁶² Torben Krogh, *Ældre dansk Teater - En teaterhistorisk Undersøgelse*, 1940, p. 18-23.

⁶³ Hans Hertel (ed.), *Verdens Litteratur Historie*, Vol. 2, 1994, p. 325.

⁶⁴ Ulla Haastrup (ed.), "Vigerstedværkstedet", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 4, 1985, chapter 49.

⁶⁵ Hans Olrik, *Danske Helgeners Levned* Vol. II, 1968, p. 265.

⁶⁶ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: *Fabel*.

It became a symbol of deceit and fraud and of the devil himself. To the contrary, the geese were thought of as stupid and naive. In the Fable of the Fox and the Stork, the cunning fox gives the stork liquid food from a plate. The stork answers by inviting the fox to dinner serving the food in a high pitcher. The moral is obvious – do to others what you want them to do to you.

In the north and south ends of the tower arch of Ottestrup church the fables of the Fox Preaching to the Geese is seen. One fox is standing in a pulpit wearing a cowl and keeping a flock of geese occupied. Meanwhile, another fox is running off with a goose in his mouth. To the north, opposite the preaching fox, the geese are getting their revenge. The two foxes are clinged up and hanged by the joint geese.⁶⁷ The moral is obvious here as well; The stupid geese – the naive human souls – are being fooled and seduced by the fox – the devil – who just wants to eat them. But justice is done, and the cunning foxes are hanged. The images have also been explained as a warning to the congregation not to listen to false preachers. Since the fox is dressed in a cowl, this can be seen as the clergy's criticism of the preachings of the mendicant friars.

But the moral could also be extended to more general aspects of society, where criminal and sinners were punished just as palpably and corporally as the foxes for their wrong doings. And the sentence could be passed by the ecclesiastical court as well as the secular one. In Vinderslev church, a very clear and unique image of what happens to people behaving fox-like is shown.⁶⁸ Here, two humans are seen dangling on the gallows, being punished for their crimes. The gallows definitely had a very concrete symbolism both in and outside church. Because the ecclesiastical courts had to show Christian mercy, they never passed or executed death sentences, but left it to the secular powers.⁶⁹ Perhaps that is the reason, why it is mostly animals – like the foxes – and not people who are hanging in the gallows on the church walls?

Major Grotesques

The term "major grotesques" signifies the small group of motifs that cannot be described as part of the other five types of images.⁷⁰ Their characteristics are, so to speak, that they cannot be included into the framework of the grotesque. They are not animals or other mixed beings, but humans behaving very secularly on the church walls. They are full-

⁶⁷ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: 9/ 70 & 9/71.

⁶⁸ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: sh/ 243.

⁶⁹ Troels Dahlerup, *Studier i senmiddelalderlig dansk Kirkeorganisation*, 1963, p. 143.

⁷⁰ See Internet: <http://www.kalkmalerier.dk/english/search.htm> search: Grotesk.

figured persons in the pendentives, and a small group even expand up into the vaults, occupying space right next to the sacred images.

The wall-paintings in Smørum are some of the most notorious in Denmark and are mentioned in most art historical writings. They have been called giant-grotesques⁷¹ depicted in a crude and primitive manner.⁷² They are doing the exact opposite of Bakhtin's assertion that, "in medieval art a strict dividing line is drawn between the pious and the grotesque; they exist side by side but never merge."⁷³ In Smørum grotesque and obscene images definitely mix with the religious ones.



Fig. 4: The Last Supper in Smørum, chancel, west vault cell

The late medieval images date to around 1500 and illustrate Christ's passion. It is the cunning and exceptional depiction of The Last Supper that rightly creates wonder (fig.4. Since the image is found in the chancel it has not been visible to the worshippers, only to the priest and the rest of the clergy.

Jesus and his disciples are placed around a set table. Judas is seen to the left of Jesus across the table. The disciple left of Jesus is missing his

⁷¹ Katrin Kröll, "Die Komik des grotesken Körpers in der christlichen Bildkunst des Mittelalters" (Einführung), *Mein ganzer Körper ist Gesicht* (eds. Katrin Kröll & Hugo Steger), 1994, p. 43.

⁷² Søren Kaspersen, "Bildende Kunst, Theater und Volkstümlichkeit im mittelalterlichen Dänemark. Zur Wechselwirkung von Wandmaleri und Spielkultur", *Popular Drama in Northern Europe in the Later Middle Ages, a Symposium at Odense University, November 1986* (eds. Flemming G. Andersen et al), 1988, p. 246.

⁷³ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 1986, p. 96.

halo – it has probably disappeared during the years.

Above Jesus and the disciples, a lively scenery is taking place. Two men are tied together by a rope round their necks. One of them is standing on the shoulders of another man, who is drawing at his legs at the same time. The other one's foot is held tightly by a woman, while she is whipping him with a birch rod. The man being whipped also empties his gut onto a urinating man standing below him. This scene with two men tied together drawing ropes is called *Dra granja*.⁷⁴

But is the depiction of The Last Supper grotesque and obscene? Is it not just a modern notion of what is considered shameful when we are disgusted by the fact that one man is defecating and the other one urinating. It is our own moral and religious ideas that block our understanding of images like these. That is why they have only been perceived within a moral-religious context, as a symbol of *civitas terrena* – the earthly city – in contrast to *civitas dei* – the heavenly city.

The physical and the religious were not contrasts in the Middle Ages. The organism was a mystic and ambiguous thing, consisting of both soul and body; two constantly battling elements. On the one hand, the body was seen as the prison of the soul, on the other hand salvation could only be obtained through the body. But the body was also a physical reality. For most people the body was a hard working mechanism and was often subject to illness and injury. The physical mechanisms were abstract and intangible and were, therefore, only explainable through a religious and mystic view of the world.

Medieval man had a very different relationship to the physical and especially to faecal matters to the one we have today. As Michael Camille points out: "The first assumption we have to rid ourselves of is that 'earthy' medieval folks were, like children, innocent and anal obsessives. But second, and even more important, we have to forget our modern post-Freudian notions of excrement linked with decay, infection and death."⁷⁵ It is notions like these that make the depiction of The Last Supper seem strongly blasphemous.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Søren Kaspersen, "Bildende Kunst, Theater und Volkstümlichkeit im mittelalterlich Dänemark. Zur Wechselwirkung von Wandmaleri und Spielkultur", *Popular Drama in Northern Europe in the Later Middle Ages, A Symposium at Odense University, November 1986* (eds. Flemming G. Andersen et al), 1988, p. 247; Søren Kaspersen, "Fastelavnskultur og kalkmaleri. Stege, Drigstrup, Tåning, Ågerup og Smørum kirker o. 1500-20", *Danske kalkmalerier* Vol. 6 (ed. Ulla Haastrup), 1992, p. 225; Katrin Kröll, "Die Komik des grotesken Körpers in der christlichen Bildkunst des Mittelalters" (Einführung), *Mein ganzer Körper ist Gesicht* (eds. Katrin Kröll & Hugo Steger), 1994, p. 38.

⁷⁵ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge*, 1992, p. 111.

⁷⁶ Katrin Kröll, "Die Komik des grotesken Körpers in der christlichen Bildkunst des Mittelalters" (Einführung), *Mein ganzer Körper ist Gesicht* (eds. Katrin Kröll & Hugo

Scatology was a part of medieval culture and was found in art as in literature.⁷⁷ The lavatory world was very different 500 years ago. And it is hard to imagine what it was actually like, but it definitely did not smell nice neither in church nor at home.⁷⁸ Excrements from both humans and animals were used in agriculture as manure⁷⁹ and, thereby, had an important place in the cycle of life, from birth till death and re-birth. It is as part in this process of transformation that the excrements are important, in the idea that everything changes from one material form to another.

In the Middle Ages, the Eucharist was one of the most important sacraments and a sacrament build on the power of mystic transformation. During mass the bread and wine transsubstantiated into the flesh and blood of Christ. And the blood and flesh was transformed once more inside the human body.⁸⁰

The depiction of The Last Supper in Smørum shows a juxtaposition between two processes of transformation. The religious one of bread and wine to flesh and blood and the secular one, where the consumed foods are transformed into excrements ultimately to be used as fertilizers. Perhaps that is why the excrements in the image are put into a bucket – as a symbol of recycling.

The games taking place above Christ and the disciples, and the woman with the birch rod can be understood in connection with the Eucharist and the Easter ritual. Maundy Thursday was followed by the darkness of Good Friday, a day of sorrow and self-torture. In some places

Steger), 1994, p. 38 holds that the reason why the grotesque image is placed right next to (is put on the same foot with) the Last Supper in the vault, is to enlarge the blasphemous dimension.

⁷⁷ Karl P. Wendersdorf, "The Symbolic Significance of *Figurae Scatologicae* Gothic Manuscripts", *Word, Picture, and Spectacle* (ed. Clifford Davidson), 1984, p. 1-21 mentions that the Gothic manuscripts are filled with scatological images. Lillian M. C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*, 1966, p. 192-194 similarly notes a variety of scatological images in the manuscripts. Howard R. Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 1986, p. 11, 35, 52-55 shows that the subject also appears in the fabliaux. Anne Clark, *Beast and Bawdy*, 1975, p. 124-126, mentions that animal faeces was eaten as medicine, especially the faeces of the she-goat was considered a good remedy for different kinds of eye-diseases.

⁷⁸ The large number of funerals inside the church also contributed to making the stench unbearable. T. F. Troels-Lund, *Dagligt liv i Norden i det sekstende Aarhundrede* Vol. 1, 1968, p. 299.

⁷⁹ Nils Hybel, "Klima, misvækst og hungersnød i Danmark 1311-1319", *Historisk Tidsskrift* 97 hæfte 1, 1997, p. 36; Bruce M. Campbell, "Agricultural Progress in Medieval England: Some Evidence from Eastern Norfolk", *The Economic History Review*, 2 ser. Vol. 36, 1983, p. 32-36.

⁸⁰ Anne Riising, *Danmarks middelalderlige prædiken*, 1969, p. 229-241.

it was tradition to whip each other to feel the suffering of Jesus.⁸¹ The woman in Smørum can be understood in this connection. Saturday was a day of rejoicing and preparation for the coming feast. The priest blessed the seed and food of the peasants. On Sunday the resurrection of Christ was celebrated by everyone. The two men drawing rope can be seen as a symbol of the joy and wildness characterising the festival.

The depiction of The Last Supper in Smørum is not grotesque. On the contrary, it distinctly shows the Easter-rituals and celebration.

The character of the image can be understood by the words of Aron Gurevich: "Medieval grotesque was rooted in a specific kind of dualist view of the world in which heaven and earth stood face to face. The medieval mind brought these oppositions together, drew the unapproachable close, united the fragmented, and, occasionally, for a moment produced a very real synthesis."⁸²

Conclusion

Were those images that we today call grotesques considered grotesques in the Middle Ages? And is it at all a suitable word to use for the anti-iconographic motifs?

Above I have tried, from a semiotic point of view, to see the images as bearers of different layers of meaning. I think that the images do not just connote levels of meaning within a moral-religious universe, but had a far broader frame of reference; a frame of reference containing both the secular and the religious world, which could not clearly be distinguished. Just like the boundary between the high and the low were not unambiguous.

The grotesque images have traditionally been understood as symbols of the vices, that is as moralising images contrasting the religious ones. But when seen in connection with the religious images, it seems likely that the grotesques were part of an interplay and not contrasting with the religious imagery. This is obvious in The Last Supper in Smørum where the secular and the religious images refer to the same phenomena – that is the Eucharist and the Easter ceremonies; and as well in Nørre Herlev and Vigersted where games and juggling were not necessarily in contrast to the holy legend of St. Nicolaus.

⁸¹ T. F. Troels-Lund, *Dagligt liv i Norden i det sekstende Aarhundrede Vol. 4*, 1968, p. 187.

⁸² Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*. Cambridge, (1988) 1990, p. 183.

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VON GERHARD JARITZ

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Vorwort

Medium Aevum Quotidianum legt mit Heft 39 einen Band vor, welcher sich schwerpunktartig mit der Analyse von Bildquellen, vor allem Wandmalerei, auseinandersetzt. Die Autoren der Beiträge stammen aus zwei Institutionen, in denen Bilddokumentation und Analyse konzentriert betrieben werden: dem Department of History an der Universität Kopenhagen und dem Department of Medieval Studies an der Central European University, Budapest. Das erstgenannte Institut ist besonders durch seine Digitalisierung des Gesamtbestandes dänischer Wandmalerei bekannt geworden, der über das Internet allgemein zugänglich geworden ist und als Basis für umfassende qualitative und quantitative Bilduntersuchungen herangezogen werden kann. Das Department of Medieval Studies der CEU konzentriert sich in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften auf die Sammlung, Katalogisierung, Dokumentation und Analyse zentraleuropäischen Bildmaterials. Die Verfügbarkeit des aufgearbeiteten Bestandes via Internet ist in Vorbereitung.

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