

WAR PICTURES: THE GROTESQUE AS A MOBILIZING TACTIC*

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This article examines the uses and effects of grotesque imagery in the antislavery and antiabortion movements and considers implications for theories of movement framing and mobilization. Grotesque images can produce strong emotions that may increase the resonance of movement frames and provide physiological “evidence” of immorality. Such images may also produce confusion and ambiguity that deeply engages readers or viewers and potentially breaks frames. But grotesque images can also be counterproductive for activists. They can cause readers or viewers to turn away in disgust, and their use can taint activists as prurient, irrational, uncivil, or manipulative. Finally, the effects of grotesque images are likely to vary across audiences, social contexts, and the skill of the activists that deploy them.

The use of shocking and gruesome images has been a much remarked-upon feature of the antiabortion movement in the United States. But such images have been utilized by many other movements as well, including those against slavery, racial oppression, child labor, war, nuclear weapons, alcohol, drunk driving, tobacco, pornography, immigration, and the mistreatment of animals. In this article, we examine uses of such images in the antiabortion and antislavery movements and consider implications for theories of movement framing and mobilization. Utilizing the literary and artistic concept of “the grotesque”—images of distorted bodies and the border between human and inhuman—we argue that this aesthetic technique is available to most moral movements and discuss its tactical strengths and weaknesses.

Over the last twenty years, scholars of social movements have made great strides in understanding the cultural frames that movements use to diagnose social problems, identify targets of action, and mobilize adherents (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). Our analysis of the grotesque in the antiabortion and antislavery movements advances this literature in three ways. First, it builds on recent work on the role of emotions in social movements and framing processes (Aminzade and McAdam 2002; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Jasper 1997; Jasper 1998; Yang 2000a). Second, it examines not just the content of frames, but their aesthetic techniques. In doing so, it builds on a growing body of work that utilizes concepts from literary and aesthetic theory to analyze social movements (Jasper 1997; Kane 2001; Polletta 2007; Somers 1994; Steinberg 1998). Finally, we suggest that the grotesque is not only an available framing technique, but it can also *break* frames (Goffman 1974: 345). By provoking strong, often contradictory, emotions and challenging natural and social categories, the grotesque may provoke feelings of confusion and ambiguity that may aid mobilization.

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TOWARD A PARTIAL THEORY OF THE EFFECTS OF GROTESQUE IMAGES

The limited work on the use of graphic images by movement activists is fairly inconclusive about their effects. Luker's (1984) classic study of antiabortion activists found that, with rare exceptions, graphic abortion images only persuaded people who had sought out such images because they were already concerned about the issue. In more recent studies, many anti-abortion activists report becoming active because of exposure to graphic images (Gorney 1998; Gorney 2004; Shields 2009). Jasper and Poulsen (1995) also found that many animal rights activists were recruited after "moral shocks" elicited by photographs of animal experimentation. However, a study of *nonactivists* exposed to graphic animal rights material found that most reacted with hostility towards animal rights activists (Mika 2006). And a study of non-activists who viewed *The Silent Scream*, an ultrasound video of an abortion, found that although support for abortion declined immediately after study participants viewed the film, this effect disappeared after they viewed another video (without graphic imagery) that supported abortion rights (Jones and Henriksen 1987). On the other hand, a 1985 television ad that showed an audience splattered with blood from a fashion model's fur coat is widely credited with destroying the British fur industry (Connett 1992; McQuiston 1993).

Most studies of graphic imagery have focused on the *recruitment* of new activists or adherents, but as Luker (1984) and Condit (1990) note, shocking images need not convert uncommitted audiences to be effective—instead, they might intensify the beliefs of the already committed, or the newly recruited, and motivate them to act. Notably, Munson (2009) found that almost half of the antiabortion activists he interviewed only developed firm antiabortion beliefs *after* they began participating in movement activities. Graphic images could potentially aid this process.

Graphic images can also be used as weapons: to shock, harass, discomfort, and stigmatize opponents without necessarily changing their minds. They can also be used to create negative associations in the minds of the public (Petchesky 1987). Some have suggested that this was the greatest success of the 1990s campaign against so-called partial-birth abortions (dilation and extraction). The campaign appears to have reduced support for abortion in general by associating it with a rare, but particularly grisly, abortion practice (Cohen and Saul 1998). In what follows, we define "the grotesque" and then theorize its potential strengths and weaknesses for activist uses. We then examine uses of the grotesque in the antislavery and anti-abortion movements. (For a discussion of the difficulties in conceptualizing the effects of movement tactics, see Amenta and Young 1999; Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999).

The Grotesque in Literary Theory

Contemporary scholars of literature and art agree that the concept of the grotesque resists a single definition. The concept has taken a wide variety of meanings since its first appearance at the beginning of the sixteenth century, its specific forms vary across cultures, and its emotional and cognitive impact varies across individuals. Thus, literary scholars typically offer a general history of the concept and then utilize the specific "mode" of the grotesque that best applies to the particular literary or artistic work under consideration.

The term originated around 1500 with the discovery of cave (*grotte*) murals of early-Christian Rome that interwove human, animal, and vegetable elements in a single painting. Imitations of this style, such as those of Raphael, were popular in sixteenth century Italy. The term was first applied to literature and non-artistic objects in sixteenth century France (for example, by Rabelais, who focused on exuberantly distorted body parts). At least since the charivari and rough music of seventeenth century France and England, activists have used the grotesque to challenge existing social arrangements (Thompson 1993). The grotesque first became the subject of a critical and aesthetic literature with the 1957 publication of Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. Numerous scholars have since offered a wide

assortment of definitions of the concept, including Mikhail Bakhtin's treatment in *Rabelais and His World* (1984). All of these attempts at establishing conceptual clarity for the term are reinforced with an often bewildering and changing array of examples. Varied as these definitions are, most combine some or all of the following elements: physical abnormality; incongruity; tension; transformation; revulsion; horror or fear combined with laughter; and extravagance and exaggeration (Gysin 1975; Thomson 1979).

For the purposes of this article, we stay close to the arresting compositional form of the Roman muralists and Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantegruel*, and to the critical analyses of Kayser and Bakhtin, focusing on distorted bodies and the border between the human and inhuman. Also following Bakhtin, we emphasize the "ambivalence" of the grotesque—its compositional structure around contradictory elements and its reception with mixed feelings by readers or viewers. Although our examples contain echoes of Bakhtin's myth of the carnival, we stay closer to Kayser's more ominous understanding of the grotesque as a presentation of an anti-world, a world frightfully turned upside down, with "human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks" (1957: 183). Structurally, the grotesque image terrifies and disorients because in it "the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable" (Kayser 1957: 185). But even in Kayser's darker rendering of it, the grotesque contains what Bakhtin describes as a "pregnant moment" that holds within it the possibility of a radical answer or reaction to the estranged world it presents. This is essential to its activist uses because as the grotesque disorients, it must also lead to an answer. As Kayser argues, the grotesque is "AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECT OF THE WORLD" (1957: 188, capitalization in original). In the intentions of antislavery and antiabortion activist uses of the grotesque, we detect an attempt to *subdue the demonic by invoking it* in the representational imagery of social protest. The horror targeted is meant to be overcome by making the reader or viewer partake in it or experience it.

We find Fritz Gysin's (1975) formulations of the grotesque particularly useful. He identifies the grotesque figure as

a human being that appears dehumanized because of physical deformity, the discordance of body and soul (or mind), incoherent behavior, the assumption of extraneous traits from the animal, vegetable, mineral or mechanical domain or from the domain of death, or because of a combination of these features (29),

and the grotesque object as

a part of the mineral, animal, or mechanical realm, which by means of transformation or independent motion assumes traits of one or more of the other realms, including human traits, so that it appears to have become animated, to possess an unusual amount of energy or even something akin to a human will, or to be an instrument of an ominous force. (29)

We also utilize Leonard Cassuto's (1995) more abstract formulation, which suggests a key meaning of the grotesque and a reason for its emotional impact and utility to movement organizers:

The grotesque is hard to apprehend because it doesn't fit neatly into a category. From distorted bodies to oddly twisted tree branches, it appears in the form of anomalies, departures from the norm that carry a peculiar power. These category problems disturb particularly because they question the way in which human beings impose order on the world.... The grotesque may therefore be seen as a breach of fundamental categories surrounding the definition of what is human. (114)

Because the grotesque represents a threat to order, it is often used as a way to represent a world gone terribly wrong, an anti-world. It is a moment in which the real world appears

monstrous. Philip Thomson (1979) argues that the grotesque can be used as an “aggressive weapon” to destabilize the categories of daily experience: “The shock effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective” (58). Or as Susan Corey (1997) puts it,

The grotesque has the effect of challenging or crossing over conventional boundaries, undermining the established order and exposing oppressive systems, whether economic, racial, religious or gender-based. It pushes the reader to look for meanings on the margins of our meaning systems...[It] allows the writer to challenge any final or closed version of truth, to raise questions about what has been lost or omitted from a particular view of reality, and to explore the paradoxical, ambiguous, mixed nature of human life. (229-30)

Emotional responses to the grotesque can be quite strong, but are often ambivalent. Gysin (1975) writes that these are “a mixture of anxiety and ‘spiritual superiority,’ of repulsion and fascination, of disgust and pity, of horror and amusement” (28). Bataille (1988) describes similar emotions, though he does not call them grotesque, that breach the tension between attraction and repulsion, between laughter and dread. He gives the Freudian cases of the girl who cannot refrain from laughing when she hears about the death of someone close, and the son who gets an erection at his father’s funeral. And we might add the analysand who reported that his first experience of sexual arousal occurred while reading accounts of the punishment of slaves in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Freud 1963). Grotesque images can be simultaneously anxiety-producing and liberating. Sometimes horrifying images produce laughter, but the laughter is defensive and the original smile turns to a grimace. Other times, it goes the opposite way—an initially horrifying image is undermined and disarmed by the reader or viewer’s appreciation for the comic potential of the grotesque. More often, however, an irresolvable tension between the two states remains so that tragedy is comedy and comedy is tragedy (Thomson 1979).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Grotesque Imagery for Activists

The grotesque is a potentially powerful aesthetic technique for activists. Grotesque images can produce strong emotions that increase the intensity and emotional resonance of movement frames. Such images may also *break* frames by producing mixed emotions, challenging existing schemas of social order, and producing confusion and ambiguity that deeply engages readers or viewers. Grotesque images often produce *disgust*, which readers or viewers may interpret as a physiological indicator of immorality. And grotesque imagery can reduce the complexity and dimensionality of issues by privileging “gut reactions.”

Snow and Benford (1992: 137) define a frame as “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of events within one’s present or past environment.” These same authors distinguish between diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing, which relate to identifying a problem, suggesting a course of action, and motivating action, respectively (Snow and Benford 1988). Gamson (1992) divides “collective action frames” into three sub-frames: injustice, agency, and identity, which relate to constructing moral indignation, viewing an injustice as mutable, and assigning blame. In order to recruit participants, movement organizers attempt to align movement frames with those of potential recruits. Potential recruits are more likely to accept frames if they fit with their own experiences and beliefs and are empirically credible (Benford 2000).

Jasper notes that discussions of frames and frame alignment are almost entirely cognitive, ignoring the fact that framing contains strong emotional components. Injustice and motivational frames, in particular, rely heavily on negative emotions such as “threat, outrage, anger, [and] fear” (1998: 414). These are the kinds of emotions that are often evoked by the

grotesque. Most work on framing focuses on the *content* of frames, examining the ways that frames define problems, opponents, and strategies for change. By attending to the grotesque, we focus instead on an *aesthetic technique* that may intensify the emotional impact and resonance of frames.¹

The grotesque may also *break* frames (Goffman 1974,: 345). There are at least three aspects of this potential, and they may work alone or in combination. First, the grotesque may evoke mixed emotional reactions of repulsion and attraction, disgust and pleasure, fear and/or fascination that may cause observers to flounder as they are held in suspension by the visceral push and pull of the image. Second, building on this suspension in emotional ambivalence, the grotesque may create category problems through the admixture of contrary elements. Things once taken for granted may suddenly appear monstrous. By casting the familiar in an arresting and terrifying light, the grotesque can challenge the established schemas of a social order. In this way, the grotesque may denaturalize this order, destabilize what was taken for granted, and open it to change. Once observers have stopped taking an existing category for granted, they may question the “givenness” of other categories. They may be inspired to create and disseminate new categories or systems of categorization. They may question the “naturalness” and immutability of the broader social order. As such, the grotesque offers a potential moment of “liminality” where “all is possible” (Turner 1969; Yang 2000b). On the one hand, images of the distorted bodies of slaves or fetuses may make those bodies seem less human. But on the other hand, by provoking feelings of disgust, empathy, confusion, and ambiguity, such images raise questions: What is a human? What is a person? And the “discovery” that these questions are not settled, that categories are flexible, may inspire observers to challenge existing categories and create new ones.

Third, the grotesque’s contrasting emotions and its challenge to order may produce feelings of confusion, ambivalence, and ambiguity that are deeply engaging and drive activism. Francesca Polletta (1998) suggests that such feelings may aid mobilization. She writes that participants in the 1960s sit-ins in the South repeatedly characterized the sit-ins as “spontaneous” and “like a fever” that swept over them. She wonders why this narrative of spontaneity and lack of agency did not undermine the spread of sit-ins. She writes that framing theory suggests that frames motivate action “by clearly representing the possibility, necessity and efficacy of collective action by deliberate actors” (Polletta 1998: 140). But the narratives of “spontaneity” and “fever” did not have such clarity about deliberate actors and the actual mechanics of mobilization. Instead, Polletta suggests that the sit-in stories “motivated action by their *failure* to specify the mechanics of mobilization” (Polletta 1998: 138). It was not their “clarity about the antagonists, protagonists, stakes and mechanics of struggle that made them so compelling but rather their containment of ambiguity, risk and mystery” (Polletta 1998:152). In particular, such mystery increased the engagement of listeners, caused them to participate through interpretation as they sought to fill in holes and ambiguities, and required a repeated retelling of the narrative because its conclusion did not provide clarity and hence a satisfying sense of closure.

It is also possible that the visceral feelings elicited by grotesque images may be experienced in a simpler manner that is nonetheless useful for activist purposes. Grotesque images often provoke feelings of disgust, and some have argued that this emotion is a useful guide to moral judgment. Nietzsche took disgust to be a physiological marker of powerful insight (Menninghaus 2003). More recently, some literary and legal theorists have argued that feelings of disgust on such matters as homosexuality, incest, bestiality, human cloning, and cruelty contain moral wisdom that should serve as a guide for the law (Devlin 1965; Kahan 1999; Kass 2002; Kolnai 2004; Miller 1998).² Activists using grotesque images of abortion make a similar claim—that images of abortion provoke feelings of disgust because they portray an immoral act.

Activists can also use grotesque images to simplify issues. Such images usually do not articulate an explicit argument. Instead, they condense a complicated moral message with

urgency and without advocating a specific plan. They reduce an issue's dimensionality, while deepening its emotional significance. To rely on these types of images is to privilege gut reactions and to simplify the distinction between right and wrong, while passing over how to go about, for example, getting rid of slavery, or balancing the rights of fetuses and women, or addressing fetal abnormalities or pregnancies resulting from incest.

Despite the potential power of this aesthetic technique for activists, the grotesque poses risks and dilemmas. Use of grotesque imagery can impeach the good motives of activists if they are seen as having an unwholesome, immoral, or voyeuristic interest in such images. Activists who use such imagery are often accused of incivility, demagoguery, or exploiting the victims they aim to help. Grotesque imagery often produces emotional reactions of disgust that may stick to activists or victims rather than to the injustices they portray or suffer. And repeated exposure to images of suffering may desensitize readers or viewers to that suffering. Finally, because the grotesque attempts to strike a balance between repulsion and attraction, there is always the danger that it will produce too much of one or the other.

The risks and dilemmas of the grotesque are structured in part by its compositional form, the mixed emotions that it triggers, and the confusion and ambiguity that it evokes. Ideally from the perspective of activists, the grotesque will shatter frames and motivate action to overturn a depicted anti-world. But activists also run the risk that they will be tainted by the monstrous transgression they decry. There is no easy way around this "dilemma of dirty hands" (Jasper 2006: 70-71) because the power of the grotesque, in the words of Kayser (1957), involves invoking the "demonic" in order to subdue it. Activists who work to capture and render this terrifying power for readers or viewers draw themselves close to it. The attraction of the grotesque, the seduction of the monstrous, threatens to impeach their good motives. They may be viewed as having an unwholesome, voyeuristic attraction to the images they promulgate. Users of grotesque images are often accused of indecency as they deliver "obscene" images that children or "good" people should not see. This taint of the grotesque not only threatens activists, but also those they seek to aid.

Another dilemma of the grotesque is that opponents and even some allies claim that grotesque imagery violates norms of public discourse and deliberative democracy. Purveyors of the grotesque are accused of cheapening public discourse and promoting social polarization through incendiary and manipulative appeals to emotion rather than reason. Finally, Susan Sontag (1989, 2003) warns that repeated exposure to photographs of suffering may inure viewers to them. She argues that such photographs promote an aestheticized, touristic, non-interventionist attitude toward atrocities.

The strategic dilemmas of grotesque images are all the more difficult to negotiate because of their multiple audiences and contexts.³ Responses to the grotesque are likely to vary across persons, groups, and settings. Activists attempt to provoke strong reactions in their audiences, but some of their images will inevitably prove to be duds. In theory, the grotesque triggers emotional reactions that push and pull in opposite directions. It "works" when it solicits a delicate balance or tension between opposing emotions. In practice, however, the same image that draws some into the interval that shatters frames may simply repel others. It may also draw the disturbed fascination of a "lunatic fringe" that activists would rather avoid. Observers' beliefs probably affect reception as well. Both supporters and opponents of abortion rights may experience mixtures of horror and laughter at witnessing a video of an abortion, but the relative mixture of those emotions, and the eventual resolution of that mixture, will probably differ.

In what follows, we first discuss the general use of grotesque representations in the antislavery and antiabortion movements. We then turn to three particular cultural products of these movements: the antislavery tract, *American Slavery As It Is*; the antiabortion film, *The Silent Scream*; and a widely circulated cartoon depicting a dilation and extraction ("partial-birth") abortion. Before doing so, we should say a word about our methods and aims. Our use of the two cases, antislavery and antiabortion, amounts to what Skocpol and Somers (1980)

call “parallel demonstration of theory.” It is not meant to be “macro-analytic comparative history,” in which the cases are used as rough controls for particular factors. Instead, “historical instances are juxtaposed to demonstrate that the theoretical arguments apply convincingly to multiple cases” (Skocpol and Somers 1980: 176). The method aims to demonstrate “how key concepts and variables are operationalized and how the theory works ‘on the ground’” (Skocpol and Somers 1980: 191).

We should also say a word about our cases. The antislavery and antiabortion movements have some strong similarities that necessarily limit the generality of our claims. Both have roots in evangelical Christianity, both make claims that human bodies considered by some to be non-persons are in fact persons, and both believe they are called to redeem the country by bearing witness against a great national sin. Moreover, antiabortion activists have often drawn claims, tactics, and strategies from the antislavery and civil rights movements, and frequently draw parallels between their own cause and those of these movements (Cooper 1986; Gorney 2004; Willke 1984). Even critics of the antiabortion movement (such as us) must recognize the similarities between these movements.

An important difference between the two movements, however, is that antiabortion grotesques are mainly photographic while antislavery grotesques were mainly textual. In the antislavery case, we refer mainly to “word pictures” that present brief scenes featuring “dense physical description” rather than the advancement of plot or commentary. The abolitionist publications of the 1830s also included crude woodcuts to accompany these word pictures. As in other literature of the period, abolitionist writing sought an alliance with an “emergent visual culture” (Goldner 2001: 82; on a similar point, see Lasser 2008). Although Roland Barthes (1982) argues that photographs are uniquely powerful because they appear to be “a mechanical analogue of reality” and “messages without code,” opponents frequently question the veracity of antiabortion images. The distinction between photographic and textual imagery can also be overstated. Celeste Condit (1990) argues that antiabortion photographs gain much of their meaning from the text that accompanies them. For example, when Condit shows *The Silent Scream*, an ultrasound video of an abortion, to students without its accompanying soundtrack, many are unable to identify what they are viewing.

We only have limited data on the reception of the grotesque images promulgated by the antislavery and antiabortion movements, let alone their contribution to mobilization, so we do not make claims about the success or failure of these images in invoking “the grotesque” interval or in mobilizing supporters. Instead, our aim is to demonstrate that the grotesque was central to the framing strategies of the two movements, and to assess some of the strengths and weaknesses of its use. We end with a discussion of unanswered questions and avenues for future research.

THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT AND THE GROTESQUE

In the 1830s, a mass movement for the *immediate* abolition of slavery broke out across the United States. Antislavery organizing was not new to the 1830s, but during this decade, calls for immediate abolitionism gave rise to a form of antislavery activism so different in tone, method, and membership as to constitute a new movement (Dillon 1974; Donald 1956; Scott 1979). With this new movement, demands for the immediate emancipation of all slaves challenged the gradualism and colonization schemes of earlier antislavery efforts.

The start of the abolitionist movement is best marked by the appearance of William Lloyd Garrison’s antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*. On January 1, 1831, Garrison opened the first edition of the paper with calls for the *immediate* emancipation of the slave and public repentance for the national sin of slavery. In subsequent editions, Garrison predicted national calamity if Americans did not repent (Goodman 1998: 30). At first, Garrison garnered little support beyond a small New England community of African Americans and a handful of

leaders within the benevolent societies of a united evangelical front. But gradually the call for immediate abolition reverberated throughout the institutions of evangelical Christians and across the free states. By 1835, organized groups of abolitionists appeared across the North bearing witness against the sin of slavery. By the end of the decade, 120,000 Northerners had joined abolitionist societies. Support was strongest among evangelicals in northern and western New England, upstate New York, and Ohio. In these areas and among these religious Americans, the movement spread as a religious revival to save the nation from the sin of slavery (Young 2007).

The publication of grotesque portrayals of slavery emerged with the rise of immediate abolitionism in the North. Just before the emergence of popular mobilizations, abolitionist authors like Lydia Maria Child and George Bourne wrote graphic depictions of the evils of slavery that flirted with the prurient. As the historian Carol Lasser (2008) argues, these authors admitted that they “challenged the boundaries of acceptance,” but excused “their excesses by claiming that they were not seeking the emotional engagement of the audience for lascivious purposes but in the project of destroying slavery” (93-94). The 1833 publication of Child’s *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* and Bourne’s 1834 *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America* marked important departures in antislavery literature. By purposefully engaging the emotions of an evangelical audience through shocking imagery, these works broke with antislavery activism of the early nineteenth century based on rational Enlightenment principles and the counsel of patience and gradualism in reform.

Before the 1830s, the tone of antislavery was moderate and advocates generally took for granted that Southern slaveholders had inherited an evil system that they would gradually abolish. The grotesque imagery of the 1830s antislavery literature reflected a radical shift in the movement that sought to shatter the popular opinion that Southern slaveholders were good Christians who generally treated their slaves well and the assumption that this sin could be gradually reformed. The 1839 publication of *American Slavery As It Is* by Theodore Weld and Sarah and Angelina Grimké represented the culmination of this rhetorical strategy of shattering the common sense about Southern slavery, of denaturalizing the Southern order, in the hearts and minds of Northerners.

This new protest literature proved popular with the immediatists of the 1830s. As the urgency of the immediate renunciation of the sin of slavery spread among the antislavery faithful, an apparent appetite for depictions of the horrors of this sin increased. For example, Child’s *Appeal* presented a gruesome account of the cruelty perpetrated by the son of Thomas Jefferson’s sister, Lilburn Lewis, who hacked his slave George to pieces with a broad axe and threw his limbs into the fire as he lectured his other slaves on obedience. The account came from a Mr. Dickey who first wrote of it to the Ohio abolitionist John Rankin. Rankin published it in 1826 with a series of antislavery letters. Child reproduced it in her 1833 *Appeal* with this preface: “Reader, what follows is very shocking; but...we must not allow our nerves to be more sensitive than our consciences.” It appeared again in 1839 in *American Slavery As It Is*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe references it in her 1853 publication of *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As the history of this particular account suggests, as immediatism emerged as a movement, antislavery rhetorical strategies featured the wide circulation of grotesque imagery. (We reproduce the full account of this particular grotesque at the end of this section).

Among the most important early converts to the new immediatist movement were western evangelicals in Ohio and upstate New York. Through their efforts, the call for the immediate emancipation of slaves spread throughout the churches, benevolence societies, and seminaries of evangelical Christianity. An early and influential moment of this western spread occurred in February of 1834 at Lane Seminary, a nationally prominent school located outside of Cincinnati, close to the border of the slave state of Kentucky. Theodore Weld led the event that started as a debate on slavery and turned into a student revival against the sin of slavery and a rebellion against the administration of the school. Weld had gained a national reputation

as a temperance lecturer and as an assistant to the famous revivalist Charles Grandison Finney. Under Finney, he learned what were called the “new measures” for religious revivals. Finney rejected the old style sermons of the educated clergy that sought to impress through careful exegeses of scriptural passages. He taught Weld to speak plainly to a congregation, to drive home by “the facts” that we are all sinners, to stoke anxiety about damnation, and to get “a verdict upon the spot” (Finney 1989: 86).

In the early 1830s, Weld became convinced that slavery was a sin that demanded immediate repentance. Before the debate at Lane, where Weld was enrolled as a student, he found “not a single immediate abolitionist in the seminary” (letter to Lewis Tappan, March 18, 1834, in Barnes and Dumond 1934: 132). In private, he had pressed some of his fellow students to recognize the sin of slavery. Key among them was William T. Allan, who had been raised in a slaveholding family. Allan began the debate arguing that slavery had to be understood before action could be taken against it: “We must know what we are attempting to cure, before we give the medicine” (Lesick 1979: 107). Allan provided a litany of eyewitness accounts of the cruelty of slavery. Other students from the South followed Allan relating “gruesome tales of debasement, torture, and murder” (Lesick 1979: 107).

On May 3, 1834, the *Liberator* published four of these eyewitness accounts given by Lane students—all of them “sons of slavery”—including the following:

Mr. ———, of Missouri, amongst others, related the following: “A young woman, who was generally very badly treated, after receiving a more severe whipping than usual, ran away. In a few days she came back, and was sent to the field to work. At this time the garment next her skin was stiff like a scab, from the running sores made by the whipping. Towards night, she told her master that she was sick, and wished to go to the house. She went; and as soon as reached it laid down on the floor exhausted. The mistress asked her what the matter was? She made no reply. She asked again; but received no answer. ‘I’ll see,’ said she, ‘if I can’t make you speak.’ So taking the tongs, she heated them red hot, and put them upon the bottoms of her feet; then upon her legs and body; and finally, in a rage, took hold of her throat. This had the desired effect. The poor girl faintly whispered. ‘Oh. Misse, don’t—I am most gone;’ and expired.”

By the end of the debate, almost every student at Lane Seminary converted to immediate abolitionism.

After their conversion to immediatism, the students organized an abolitionist society and started working closely with the African-American community in Cincinnati. The school administration, wishing to avoid controversy, cracked down on these antislavery activities. In response, the “Lane Rebels” quit the school, taking with them almost the entire student body and some of its faculty. Over the next few years, Weld and as many as half of his fellow Lane Rebels worked as itinerant agents for immediate abolitionism. This band of agents came to be known as the “Seventy”—named after the seventy Disciples of Christ sent out to spread the Gospel. In the mid- to late-1830s, they made up over half of all the agents working for the central organization of the abolitionist movement, the American Anti-Slavery Society. Working in regional circuits, they spread the gospel of immediatism as Weld had taught it to them and as they had experienced it at Lane.

Weld lost his powerful speaking voice in 1836 and was forced to turn to the pen to support the principles of abolitionism. In 1838 he was commissioned by the American Anti-Slavery Society to write a pamphlet “to be filled with facts and testimony as to the actual condition of the Slaves” (letter to Gerrit Smith, November 28, 1838, in Barnes and Dumond 1934: 717). With the aid of Sarah and Angelina Grimké, sisters from South Carolina with first-hand experience of slavery, Weld collected “a thousand testimonies.” *American Slavery As It Is* interspersed three sections of long personal narratives by Southerners, or people who had lived in the South, with hundreds of short reports from newspapers or public documents evidencing a particular kind of atrocity. The personal testimonies included five to ten detailed

accounts revealing the day-to-day treatment of slaves, including how poorly they were fed, how frequently they were flogged, paddled, maimed, and branded, and how they were sometimes murdered with impunity. After the first personal narrative section, *American Slavery As It Is* presented a survey of the food, working conditions, clothing, and shelter of slaves. After the second narrative section, the pamphlet surveyed the many forms of torture used by slaveholders and the effects these left on the bodies of slaves. Hundreds of short quotes from public officials and newspapers provided evidence of how extensive these atrocities were. To establish the widespread prevalence of whipping, branding, maiming, and torture by iron collars and handcuffs, the pamphlet used scores of advertisements for the sale of runaway slaves. In these advertisements, the descriptions of slaves included notable physical features like scars from whipping, teeth knocked out, ears notched, and brandings. They also described iron collars, shackles or head frames welded to the bodies of runaways. The last section of the pamphlet addressed possible objections to this catalog of suffering: If slaves were not in a comfortable position, why were they multiplying? Is it not in the interest of the masters to treat their slaves well? Aren't Southerners famous for their kindness? Why do most Northerners who have visited the South testify that the slave is well treated?

The testimonies that Weld and the Grimké sisters collected aimed to evoke repulsion but also fascination. Weld and the Grimké sisters were dealing in the grotesque. As Weld described the book in an 1838 letter, it would provide “facts that would thrill the land with horror” (letter to Gerrit Smith, November 28, 1838, in Barnes and Dumond 1934: 717). *American Slavery As It Is* presents endless accounts of monstrous deformities and distortions of the body; discordances of the body and soul; and mixtures of the human form with the animal, the mechanical, and the vegetable.

The pamphlet provides numerous detailed accounts of whipping, the most common form of torture, and its mutilating effects. According to the account given by Rev. Horace Moulton,

When the slaves are whipped, either in public or private, they have their hands fastened by the wrists, with a rope or cord prepared for the purpose: this being thrown over a beam, a limb of a tree, or something else, the culprit is drawn up and stretched by the arms as high as possible, without raising his feet from the ground or floor: and sometimes they are made to stand on tip-toe; then the feet are made fast to something prepared for them. In this distorted posture the monster flies at them, sometimes in great rage, with his implements of torture, and cuts on with all his might, over the shoulders, under the arms, and sometimes over the head and ears, or on parts of the body where he can inflict the greatest torment.... While under the lash, the bleeding victim writhes in agony, convulsed with torture. Thirty-nine lashes on the bare back, which tear the skin at almost every stroke, is what the South calls a very *moderate punishment!* Many masters whip until they are tired—until the back is a gore of blood—then rest upon it: after a short cessation, get up and go at it again; and after having satiated their revenge in the blood of their victims, they sometimes *leave them tied, for hours together, bleeding at every wound.* Sometimes, after being whipped, they are bathed with a brine of salt and water. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 20)

In some cases, paddling replaced flogging:

Others punish by fastening [slaves] down on a log, or something else, and strike them on the bare skin with a board paddle full of holes. This breaks the skin, I should presume, at every hole where it comes in contact with it. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 21)

Punishment also involved the sadistically creative use of animals:

Others, when other modes of punishment will not subdue them, *cat-haul* them—that is, take a cat by the nape of the neck and tail, or by the hind legs, and drag the claws across the back until satisfied. This kind of punishment poisons the flesh much worse than the whip, and is more dreaded by the slave. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 21)

The pamphlet is shot-through with accounts of the physical suffering caused by these punishments. In these accounts, the eyewitnesses frequently draw incongruous juxtapositions in this suffering. From Angelina Grimké the reader gets this account:

I will first introduce the reader to a woman of the highest respectability—one who was foremost in every benevolent enterprise, and stood for many years, I may say, at the *head* of the fashionable élite of the city of Charleston, and afterwards at the head of the moral and religious female society there.... After the “revival” in Charleston, in 1825, she opened her house to social prayer-meetings. The room in which they were held in the evening, and where the voice of prayer was heard around the family altar, and where she herself retired for private devotion thrice each day, was the very place in which, when her slaves were to be whipped with the cowhide, they were taken to receive the infliction; and the wail of the sufferer would be heard, where, perhaps only a few hours previous, rose the voices of prayer and praise.... One poor girl, whom she sent there to be flogged, and who was accordingly stripped *naked* and whipped, showed me the deep gashes on her back—I might have laid my whole finger in them—*large pieces of flesh had actually been cut out by the torturing lash*.... Her men servants were sometimes flogged there; and so exceedingly offensive has been the putrid flesh of their lacerated backs, for days after the infliction, that they would be kept out of the house—the smell arising from their wounds being too horrible to be endured. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 53-54)

The horrors of this account are structured around paradoxical projections of religious revival and flogging, naked bodies in rooms of prayer, and the stench of putrid flesh in the parlors of genteel Christians. Another image contrasts the high calling of a physician, bound by the Hippocratic oath to “do no harm,” with his use of medical knowledge to increase the pain he inflicted on his slaves:

He had sent a youth of about eighteen to this horrible place to be whipped and *afterwards* to be worked upon the tread-mill. From not keeping the step, which probably he COULD NOT do, in consequence of the lacerated state of his body; his arm got terribly torn, from the shoulder to the wrist. This physician said he went every day to attend to it himself, in order that he might use those restoratives, which *would inflict the greatest possible pain*. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 55)

In the accounts of punishment emphasizing the physical deformity or bodily distortions left behind, witnesses regularly describe the physical mixing of human body parts with extraneous elements:

[S]everal years since [the witness] was in Columbia, South Carolina, and observing a colored man lying on the floor of a blacksmith’s shop, as he was passing it, his curiosity led him in. He learned the man was a slave and rather unmanageable. Several men were attempting to detach from his ankle an iron which had been bent around it. The iron was a piece of a flat bar of the ordinary size from the forge hammer, and bent around the ankle the ends meeting, and forming a hoop of about the diameter of the leg. There was one or more strings attached to the iron and extending up around his neck, evidently so to suspend it as to prevent its galling by its weight when at work, yet it had galled or griped till the leg had swollen out beyond the iron and inflamed and suppurated, so that the leg for a considerable distance above and below the iron, was a mass of putrefaction, the most loathsome of any wound he had ever witnessed on any living creature. The slave lay on his back on the floor, with his leg on an anvil which sat also on the floor, one man had a chisel used for splitting iron, and another struck it with a sledge, to drive it between the ends of the hoop and separate it so that it might be taken off.... Such was the diseased state of the limb, that at every blow, the bloody, corrupted matter gushed out in all directions several feet, in such profusion as literally to cover a large area around the anvil. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 75)

As in this last account of physical distortion, the pamphlet provides many examples of the painful and humiliating mixture of metal devices with the body. Take for example the following account from a Mr. Curtis, a journeyman from Marietta:

In September, 1837, at "Milligan's Bend," in the Mississippi river [sic], I saw a negro with an iron band around his head, locked behind with a padlock. In the front, where it passed the mouth, there was a projection inward of an inch and a half, which entered the mouth. The overseer told me, he was so addicted to running away, it did not do any good to whip him for it. He said he kept this gag constantly on him, and intended to do so as long as he was on the plantation: so that, if he ran away, he could not eat, and would starve to death. The slave asked for drink in my presence; and the overseer made him lie down on his back, and turned water on his face two or three feet high, in order to torment him, as he could not swallow a drop.... The slave then asked permission to go to the river; which being granted, he thrust his face and head entirely under the water, that being the only way he could drink with his gag on. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 75)

Another example comes from Major Horace Nye relating something he heard from a Mr. Armstrong:

While laying at Alexandria, on Red River, Louisiana, he saw a slave brought to a blacksmith's shop and a collar of iron fastened round his neck, with two pieces riveted to the sides, meeting some distance above his head. At the top of the arch, thus formed, was attached a large cow-bell, the motion of which, while walking the streets, made it necessary for the slave to hold his hand to one of its sides, to steady it. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 74)

These accounts of admixtures of the human and the inhuman also included organic material. For example, the pamphlet gives Angelina's account of seeing the chopped-off head of a runaway slave stuck on a wooden pole in the middle of a field to deter others. It also includes the following eyewitness from a Mr. Dustin:

[The runaway slave] was scourged, until his flesh, mangled and torn, and thick mingled with the clotted blood, rolled from his back. He became apparently insensible, and beneath the heaviest stroke would scarcely utter a groan. The master got tired, laid down his whip and nailed the negro's ear to a tree; in this condition, nailed fast to the rugged wood, he remained all night! (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 66)

And there is this account of barbaric ingenuity from Gerrit Smith:

My informant...saw a shockingly cruel punishment inflicted on a couple of slaves for the repeated offence of running away. Straw was spread over the whole of their backs, and, after being fastened by a band of the same material, was ignited, and left to burn, until entirely consumed. The agonies and screams of the sufferers he can never forget. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 86)

Possibly the most horrific account, one on which we will end this survey of the grotesque in slavery, had already appeared twice in print: first in Rankin's *Letters* and then again in Child's *Appeal*. It was likely presented orally on many occasions as Weld invited Rankin to join the "Seventy" and speak on the abolitionist circuit in the late 1830s. The account mixed the image of tortured slave with cooked meat. It also exposed that there was something festive and self-indulgent in all this cruelty. Lilburn Lewis, "a sister's son of the celebrated Jefferson," badly mistreated his slaves and they frequently ran away. After a slave, George, broke a valuable pitcher, Lewis summoned his slaves to the largest slave house, barred the door, and put on a roaring fire:

He bound [George] with cords; and by the assistance of Isham Lewis, his youngest brother, laid him on a broad bench, the *meat-block*. He then proceeded to *hack off George at the*

ankles! It was with the *broad axe!* In vain did the unhappy victim *scream and roar!* For he was completely in his master's power; not a hand among so many durst interfere: casting the feet into the fire, he lectured them at some length.... He next *chopped him off below the knees!* George *roaring out* and praying his master to begin at the *other end!* He admonished them again, throwing the legs into the fire—then, above the knees, tossing the joints into the fire—the next stroke severed the thighs from the body; these were also committed to the flames—and so it may be said of the arms, head, and trunk, until all was in the fire! He threatened any of them with similar punishment who should in future disobey, run away, or disclose the proceedings of that evening. Nothing now remained but to consume the flesh and bones; and for this purpose the fire was brightly stirred until two hours after midnight; when a coarse and heavy back-wall, composed of rock and clay, covered the fire and the remains of George. It was the Sabbath—this put an end to the *amusements* of the evening.... When he returned home and retired, his wife exclaimed, “Why, Mr. Lewis, where have you been, and what were you doing?” She had heard a strange *pounding* and dreadful *screams*, and had smelled something like fresh meat *burning*. The answer he returned was, that he had never enjoyed himself at a ball so well as he had enjoyed himself that night. (Weld, Grimké, and Grimké 1839: 93)

The impact of the strategy of publicizing grotesque images of slavery is difficult to gauge. The appearance of the strategy in the works of Child, Bourne, and Weld corresponded with a rise in popular support for the movement, but this is merely suggestive. After 1840, the historian Lasser (2008) argues that abolitionists became more cautious or delicate in their rhetoric. What she calls the “voyeuristic abolitionism” of the 1830s “was effective in mobilizing *some* antislavery advocates,” but it raised questions of “respectability” for others and exposed “fault lines” within a fragile abolitionist alliance (Lasser 2008: 104). In 1839, this alliance fell apart and the abolitionist movement splintered, but the influence of these grotesque pictures continued.

A prominent and powerful example of the influence of *American Slavery As It Is* can be found in Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1983) 1852 antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the best selling book of the nineteenth century after the bible. In a letter to Angelina Grimké, Stowe wrote that she kept *American Slavery As It Is* “in her work basket by day and slept with it under her pillow by night till its facts crystallized into Uncle Tom” (quoted in Barnes 1933). Soon after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in print, Southerners charged that the novel was filled with distortion and deception. Stowe (2005) defended the accuracy of the book by publishing *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* that cited the evidence she drew upon in creating the novel. *American Slavery As It Is* was referenced multiple times in the *Key*, in particular to justify her portrayal of the character Simon Legree's brutality. But more than providing evidence or actual support for the novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also owed a stylistic debt to *American Slavery As It Is*. The novel, like the pamphlet, presented repetitious images of horror and distress because, as Stowe put it, “there is no arguing with pictures”—or as the narrator of the novel puts it, there is “magic” in the “real presence of distress” (Goldner 2001).

THE ANTIABORTION MOVEMENT AND THE GROTESQUE

Grotesque images of fetuses have been used extensively by antiabortion activists. They have appeared in slide and film presentations, in legislative and court testimony, at abortion clinic “rescues” and “sidewalk counseling,” in media campaigns, and on the Internet (Condit 1990; Daniels 1993; Mall 1981; Petchesky 1987). Photographs of aborted fetuses were first used in the late 1960s by members of Right to Life of Southern California and New York Right to Life. Many abortion opponents also made use of photographs of a developing fetus that had appeared in *Life* magazine (January 15, 1965: 45-46). One of the first widely distributed abortion photos was the “bucket shot,” taken in 1969 by a St. Louis pathologist who received an aborted fetus in a plastic container but placed it in a metal bucket along with some bloody

gauze to make the picture better. He gave the photograph to a member of the Missouri antiabortion coalition and the picture was passed from hand-to-hand, eventually circulating throughout the country.

The main distributors of abortion images in the late-twentieth century were a Cincinnati couple, John and Barbara Willke, a doctor and nurse respectively. The Willkes first used abortion pictures in their national lecture tours on sexual behavior and individual responsibility. In 1971 they wrote a slim question-and-answer book called *Handbook on Abortion* (Willke 1984) that contained four abortion pictures in color. After these photographs caused a stir at the 1971 Ohio State Fair, the Willkes collected more photographs and began distributing a slide show nationally through Cincinnati Right to Life. It became the single most popular visual tool of antiabortion activists. The Willkes also published large amounts of material through their own publishing company, Hayes Publishing (Gorney 1998: 242).

The Willkes privately call their abortion grotesques “war pictures.” They are images of bodily deformity, distortion, and dismemberment. They include what John Willke called “candy apple babies” (fetuses with red skin from saline abortions), cut or ripped pieces of fetuses from first trimester abortions, and a heavily magnified hand holding two tiny dismembered feet between thumb and forefinger. The “Tiny Feet” image has become one of the antiabortion movement’s most popular, having been reprinted thousands of times and cast as a silver lapel pin (Gorney 1998: 261).

Grotesque abortion representations took on new importance and a new form in the early 1980s. After the defeat of a constitutional amendment banning abortion and the Supreme Court’s decision reaffirming abortion rights in *City of Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health*, prospects for antiabortion policy change looked slim (Halfmann forthcoming). Movement activists strengthened their focus on affecting mass culture. In 1985, the half-hour film *The Silent Scream* (Nathanson 1984), which included a seven-minute ultrasound video of an abortion, drew national attention. The film was developed and narrated by Bernard Nathanson, a New York obstetrician-gynecologist who helped found the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) and ran the largest pre-*Roe* abortion clinic, but later joined the antiabortion movement. The film received wide coverage in newspapers, magazines, and talk shows. It aired on major television networks at least five times in a single month. A transcript of the film was introduced into the *Congressional Record*. President Reagan screened the film at the White House and said that he prayed that every member of Congress would watch it. The film was also disseminated to high schools and colleges (Givner 1994; Gorney 1998; Petchesky 1987). We examine the grotesque elements of the film in more detail below.

With the 1990s battle against so-called “partial-birth” abortion, antiabortion activists moved grotesque imagery to the center of their political strategy. In 1992, Dr. Martin Haskell presented a paper at the annual National Abortion Federation (NAF) meeting that outlined a new procedure for abortions after twenty weeks that he called “dilation and extraction” (D&X). For most late-term abortions (between thirteen and twenty weeks), doctors used “dilation and evacuation” (D&E). In D&E, the doctor uses instruments to dismember the fetus inside the uterus and then removes it in pieces. However, after twenty weeks, it becomes difficult to dismember the fetus because fetal tissues are tougher. Instead, the doctor typically uses a drug to induce a miscarriage or, in some cases, administers a feticide and then leaves the fetus in the uterus until it softens enough for a D&E (Gorney 2004; Haskell 1992). In Haskell’s method, D&X, the fetus is not dismembered, but instead removed from the uterus intact. After the cervix has been dilated for two days, the surgeon, guided by ultrasound, uses a forceps to grasp the leg of the fetus and pull it into the vagina. The surgeon then extracts the remainder of the body by hand, with the exception of the head, which usually lodges at the opening of the cervical canal. The surgeon pushes scissors into the base of the skull, opens them in order to enlarge the opening, and then removes the contents of the skull with a suction catheter. The surgeon then removes the fetus and the placenta and finally scrapes the walls of

the uterus (Haskell 1992). Another surgeon, James McMahon, had performed a similar procedure, which he called “intact dilation and evacuation.” Haskell and McMahon contended that their methods were less risky than classic D&E because they reduced bleeding and did not involve extracting sharp bone fragments that could perforate the uterus. In addition, McMahon had developed the technique to keep the fetus intact so that he could show the fetus to women who had asked to see it after the operation (Gianelli 1993; Gorney 2004).

Jenny Westberg (1993), an antiabortion activist who had infiltrated the NAF mailing list, received the proceedings of the Dallas NAF meeting and wrote an article on Haskell’s presentation for the small Portland-based antiabortion magazine, *Life Advocate*, in February 1993. To accompany the article, Westberg drew a cartoon depicting the D&X procedure (Gorney 2004). This cartoon would become one of the central texts of the campaign against the procedure. It became widely distributed over the coming years, appearing in ads and brochures, on web sites, and on the floor of Congress. We examine the grotesque elements of Westberg’s cartoon in more detail below.

At the time that Westberg’s article was published in *Life Advocate*, Congress was considering the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA), an attempt to legislatively codify the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Antiabortion organizations, such as the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), used Westberg’s cartoon to oppose the Act, claiming that it would make such procedures more common. Ads containing the cartoon ran in approximately five newspapers, and brochures were distributed in a dozen more (Gianelli 1993; Siegel and Blustain 2007).

In 1995, Representative Charles Canady (R-FL) developed the first federal bill to ban “partial-birth” abortions. Over the next few years, President Clinton vetoed two such bans. Thirty states passed their own bans by June 2000, when the Supreme Court struck down Nebraska’s ban because it did not contain a health exception (*New York Times*, June 29, 2000: A1). Congress again passed the ban in 2003, and President Bush signed it. The Supreme Court upheld the ban in 2007. Perhaps more important than the legislation itself was the change in abortion opinion it prompted. Support for a ban on “partial-birth” abortion rose from 55 percent in March 1997 to 64 percent in January 2000 (CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll in Simon 2003). A report from the abortion rights think tank, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, also conceded that bills seeking to ban the procedure had succeeded in shifting “the focus of the abortion debate away from women to a ‘personalized’ fetus by concentrating on abortions ‘late’ in pregnancy” (Cohen and Saul 1998).

Today, the main organizations disseminating grotesque abortion images are the Center for Bio-ethical Reform, Justice for All, and Operation Rescue (West). The Center for Bio-ethical Reform (CBR) sends its Genocide Awareness Project, a set of large signs comparing abortion to lynching, the holocaust, and animal experimentation, to college campuses in an attempt to “stimulate a dialogue” with students (Shields 2009: 43). CBR also produced the film *The Harder Truth* (1995), which contains ultrasound images of abortion. It is a popular part of antiabortion presentations and is often used during sessions at antiabortion crisis pregnancy centers. CBR also sends out trucks emblazoned with anti-abortion imagery and even sent a plane with such images to President Obama’s May 2009 commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. Justice for All (JFA) sends 18-foot high signs with grotesque photographs to college campuses. Despite the provocative and emotional nature of its signs, the organization takes pains to justify its position in civil and reasoned terms. Shields (2009) writes that “combined JFA and CBR have reached well over one million students at more than one hundred different college campuses” (71). Operation Rescue sends “Truth Trucks” with grotesque photographs around the country. The Midwestern groups, Pro-Life Action League and Missionaries to the Preborn, have also displayed large placards containing such images at busy intersections (Fell and Thompson 2006; Shields 2009).

A leading proponent of graphic imagery, Father Frank Pavone of Priests for Life, argues that such images help to unveil the violence of abortion:

The word abortion has lost practically all its meaning. Not even the most vivid description, in words alone, can adequately convey the horror of this act of violence. Abortion is sugar-coated by rhetoric which hides its gruesome nature. What a pro-life person has in mind when he speaks about abortion and what the average American has in mind when he hears the word are two very different things. One of the key reasons the pro-life movement is not making more progress is that we so often assert before the public that abortion is an act of violence, but do not produce the evidence which would lead people to this conclusion. Photographic evidence is the most trusted source of information in any discipline. It transcends language and logic, and goes straight to the heart, where people are motivated to take action, instead of merely to the head, where people passively entertain all sorts of concepts without any commitment necessarily following. (Pavone 2009)

The Grotesque in The Silent Scream and Westberg's "Partial-Birth Abortion" Cartoon

The Silent Scream and Westberg's "partial-birth abortion" cartoon deal heavily in the grotesque. Nathanson begins *The Silent Scream* by describing the wonders of ultrasound technology as the screen shows the ultrasound examination of a pregnant woman and an ultrasound image of a fetus in its twelfth week of development. He then displays eight plastic models of fetuses at different stages of development, using a pointer to emphasize the continuity between stages. Using surgical instruments, he performs a mock abortion on the twelve-week-old plastic fetus as the film cuts intermittently to a group of surgeons at work. He then shows an ultrasound video of an abortion, describing the procedure in language that alternates between clinical detachment and emotionally-laden personification of the fetus. He concludes by offering statistics on the prevalence and profitability of abortion, as the screen shows images of abortion clinics, fetal carnage, crying women, and finally a late-term fetus (Petchesky 1987; Several Sources Foundation 1998).

The film contains many grotesque elements. When Nathanson performs the mock abortion, he practices surgery on a doll, a frequent object of the grotesque, since it is an inanimate object with human form. The grotesque element is strengthened by the realistic surgical instruments, examination table, and Nathanson's lab coat donned for the purpose of a bloodless operation. These help bring the plastic doll to life so that Nathanson can "kill" it.

When the operation is completed, Nathanson brings the doll back to his office and shows an ultrasound video of an abortion. He holds the doll up to the video screen and points to its mouth in order to help the viewer identify a mouth in the fuzzy ultrasound image. At one point, Nathanson pauses the video and taps his pointer on a spot in the image:

Once again we see the child's mouth wide open in a silent scream in this particular freeze frame. This is the silent scream of a child threatened imminently with extinction. Now the child's heart rate has speeded up dramatically, and the child's movements are violent at this point. It does sense aggression in its sanctuary. It is moving away; one can see it moving to the left side of the uterus in an attempt, a pathetic attempt, to escape the inexorable instruments which the abortionist is using to extinguish its life. (Several Sources Foundation 1998, p. 6)

Here Nathanson animates the fetus, suggesting that it is screaming and attempting to escape the surgical instruments, a claim which was hotly contested in rebuttals of the film by abortion rights organizations (see below). Bakhtin (1984) argues that depictions of open mouths and other bodily openings are characteristic of the grotesque—they suggest the opposites of becoming and dying—the birth canal and the mortal wound.

The video then provides images of the methodical dismemberment and removal of a body from "its sanctuary" until nothing is left but the head:

The body is no longer discernible. The body has been torn from the head. Now this head which I am outlining here on this twelve-week child is simply too large to be pulled in one piece out of the uterus. The abortionist is going to have to employ this instrument, the polyp

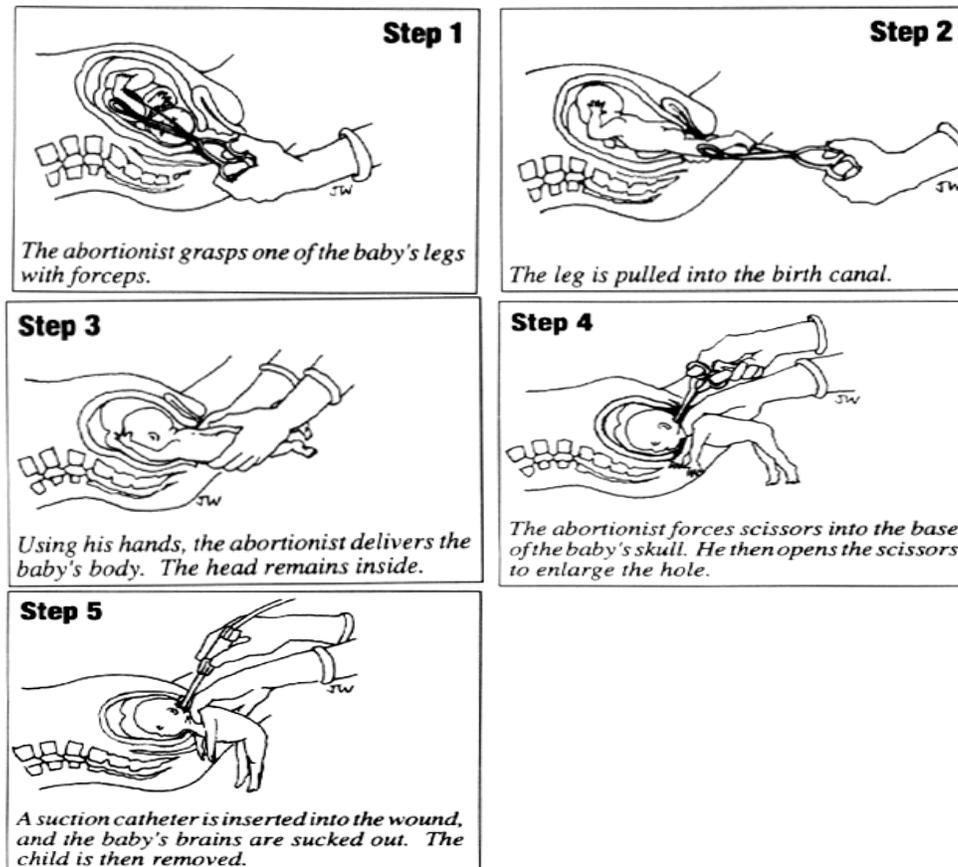
forceps, in an attempt to grab the head. The abortionist will attempt to crush the head with this instrument in this manner and remove the head piecemeal from the uterus. (Several Sources Foundation 1998, p. 7)

Notably, the film does not simply represent what it calls pain or death. Instead, especially in the treatment of the head, it depicts the mutilation and distortion of the human form. This may be disturbing or disgusting to viewers whether they are antiabortion or not, but anti-abortion activists frame this as a moral argument, claiming that if a viewer truly believes that the fetus is not a person, then they should not have this emotional reaction. Near the end of the film, the screen shows several abortion war pictures: fifteen plastic buckets filled with aborted fetuses, two dismembered feet, a dismembered hand, an aborted fetus that appears broken—its head and feet touching—and a large pile of various body parts.

Westberg’s “partial-birth abortion” cartoon is a series of five simple line drawings, each with a caption (see figure 1). As Cynthia Gorney (2004) points out, the cartoon images differ from other antiabortion pictures in that they are “gruesome but not gory”(9) They do not cause viewers to avert their eyes in disgust, they can be reproduced in family newspapers, and most importantly, they make the fetus look human. Despite the lack of gore, they still contain strong elements of the grotesque.

First, the fetus is animated in a way that implies consciousness. The cartoon depicts the fetus as plump and cute and suggests that it is upset by, and even attempts to resist, the procedure. In the second panel, the fetus places its hands on the sides of its face, suggesting

Figure 1. Dilation and Extraction (D&X) Cartoon by Jenny Westberg



alarm. In the third panel, the fetus appears to be holding on for its life. The cartoon also focuses on the creation of a hole in the fetus's body and the extraction of its brains. The fourth and fifth panels depict the penetration of the baby's skull first by scissors, which are then opened to enlarge the hole, and then by a suction catheter. The cartoon also depicts the intermingling of the organic, human fetus and inorganic elements such as forceps, scissors, and suction catheter. In the fifth and final panel, the "baby's brains are sucked out" and the previously animated body suddenly becomes limp. Thus, the cartoon portrays the exact moment when the fetus crosses the boundary between life and death. It is transformed from a moving, living "baby" to an inert corpse. The cartoon also juxtaposes incongruent elements: the comic and the tragic, birth and death. Cartoons usually convey humor, but this one portrays a gruesome surgical procedure. The cartoon also draws analogies between the abortion procedure and birth. The caption of the third frame says that "using his hands, the abortionist *delivers* the baby's body" [emphasis ours]. In Westberg's original article, the abortion procedure was referred to as D&X. But antiabortion activists would later pick up Westberg's comparison of the procedure to birth by calling it "partial-birth abortion." Abortion rights activists contested the name, noting that there was no such medical procedure, but antiabortion activists insisted on it, arguing that the procedure was outrageous precisely because it resembled birth and was thus infanticide. Antiabortion activists repeatedly highlighted the similarities between D&X and birth. They claimed that the procedure placed the fetus in position for "a breach birth," and Representative Canady's House Judiciary Committee (1995) argued that "the difference between partial-birth abortion and infanticide is a mere three inches" (11).

The use of grotesque images has been a subject of debate within the antiabortion movement. Some activists have argued that such images are inappropriate for children, disrespectful to the unborn, and un-Christian because they offer condemnation rather than love and compassion. Arguing against this last point, David Lee of Justice for All proposes that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was itself an example of graphic imagery and that Mel Gibson's gruesome 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* has rightly increased Christian acceptance of such imagery (Fell and Thompson 2006). Some activists have also argued that graphic images are painful and alienating to women who have miscarried or had abortions and may, as a result, increase repeat abortions. Still others argue that the images harden hearts and make women with unwanted pregnancies more intent on following through with their plans to get abortions (Burke and Burke 2009; Fell and Thompson 2006; Klusendorf 2009a; Klusendorf 2009b). In particular, antiabortion crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) have debated the use of such images. Birthright and Care Net, two large national networks of CPCs, refuse to use them (Shields 2009). The directors of another national network believe that such images might sometimes prevent abortions but caution that the images should be used in a way that does not manipulate, coerce, or traumatize clients. The directors also argue that such images make it more difficult to combat Planned Parenthood's depiction of CPCs "as places that use deception, intimidation and scare tactics" (Klusendorf 2009a: 5). Similarly, Leslee Unruh, the leader of the 2006 and 2008 referenda campaigns to ban abortion in South Dakota, asked trucks carrying pictures of "dead babies" to stay away. She argued that the pictures turned off voters, traumatized post-abortive women, and detracted from the campaign's focus on protecting women (rather than fetuses) from abortion (Palosaari 2008; Siegel and Blustain 2007).

The grotesque images of the antiabortion movement have also been subject to counterframing by abortion rights activists. Many denounce the war pictures as inflammatory shock tactics. Others dispute their veracity. Activists contested *The Silent Scream's* representation of abortion, arguing that a twelve-week fetus is much smaller than that portrayed in the film, that a fetus of that age cannot experience pain, that the ultrasound was sped up to represent fetal distress, that the fetus moved as the result of reflex rather than fear, and, most importantly, that a fetus cannot scream. In fact, they contended that the mouth of the fetus could not be

identified with certainty at all (Cooper 1986; Emmens 1986; Gorney 1998; Planned Parenthood 1985; Planned Parenthood of Seattle-King County 1985).

Other activists believe that the abortion rights movement needs to counter with an emotional response. About *The Silent Scream*, one activist says: “We always tried to keep the rational high ground: they were emotional, we were thoughtful, we told the truth, we went to Capitol Hill with facts. But it was so clear that you had to respond emotionally with this” (Gorney 1998: 399). One response was to “meet shock with shock” (Lader 1973). Explicit and grisly stories of botched abortions were often utilized in the pre-*Roe* years. Sometimes these would contain laundry lists of illegal abortion equipment, such as “turkey quills, knitting needles, hairpins, rattail combs, [and] plastic bottles,” or “a straightened out wire coat hanger inserted into a catheter” (Condit 1990; Davidson 1963). The coat hanger, of course, eventually became the best-known symbol of the abortion rights movement. Another variant of this strategy involves focusing on extreme cases where continuance of a pregnancy would have particularly distasteful physical or emotional consequences, such as cases of rape, incest or fetal deformity (Gorney 1998). Abortion rights activists sometimes use photos of women who have died during botched abortions, but such photos are controversial within the movement as many activists find them exploitive of the victims. Such images also became less resonant over time as deaths from illegal abortions declined (Gorney 1998: 400-401). In recent years, Dr. George Tiller, the Kansas abortion provider and activist assassinated in May 2009, showed photos of deformed, aborted fetuses to legislators in order make the case for access to late-term abortions (Barstow 2009).

A final emotional counterframe is a *normalizing* discourse that seeks to attach the faces and voices of ordinary women to abortion. NARAL’s 1985 “Abortion Rights: Silent No More” campaign urged affiliates to use themes such as: “We are your mothers, your sisters, your daughters, your friends, and we have chosen abortion” (Gorney 1998: 402). The campaign sought letters from ordinary women detailing their abortion experiences and staged “speak-outs” in which women told their personal stories and read from the letters.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we showed how activists in the antislavery and antiabortion movements attempted to further their causes through the use of grotesque imagery. Building on theories of framing and the aesthetics of the grotesque, we theorized how such imagery might work for and against activist purposes. Literary theories of the grotesque suggest that it can be quite powerful. When confronted by images of distorted bodies that mix human and inhuman elements, readers or viewers may be brought up short, repulsed yet attracted, and confused. These strong emotions can heighten and intensify movement frames and may also serve as physiological “evidence” of immorality. The grotesque may shatter what readers or viewers take for granted about that which they now confront in frightful but fascinating form. A first reaction to the grotesque may be “this cannot be” and a desire to turn away in disgust. But the grotesque may also seduce, activating dark desires that draw the viewer closer for a longer look or listen or read. An observer may find herself more intimately implicated in the shocking affair: disoriented, confused, but gripped. For activists dealing in the grotesque, the hope is that this emotional involvement will trigger moral commitments to change the situation. They hope that the immediate reaction of “this cannot be” will pass over to the resolve of “this must not be.” At the same time, the grotesque carries many risks and dilemmas. Readers or viewers may turn away in disgust and repulsion or view activists who use the grotesque as prurient, uncivil, or manipulative.

We have only begun collecting data on the reception of grotesque antislavery and antiabortion images by their various audiences. There is little historical data available on the reception of the grotesque in the antislavery movement. We do know that the accounts in

American Slavery As It Is were rejected by many Northerners, dismissed as “deceptions, exceptions!” The mainstream press refused to publish excerpts from it or review it. It is also likely that the use of the grotesque confirmed in the minds of many Americans that the abolitionists were fanatics and their macabre sensibilities only confirmed that they were incendiaries working to trigger a race war. And yet, the pamphlet became a sensation, selling over one hundred thousand copies in its first year. It was the most widely read antislavery publication of its time and remained so until the appearance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the 1850s—a book that borrowed many of the pamphlet’s grotesque stories and techniques. The success of *American Slavery As It Is* surprised some in the antislavery ranks who thought the public would recoil from the endless accounts of suffering. Weld, from the beginning, thought otherwise. There is more promise in studying reception and reactions to the grotesque in the antiabortion movement. In future research, we plan to interview college students after they have viewed one of the traveling campus exhibits sponsored by the Center for Bio-ethical Reform or Justice for All.

Many activists are uncertain about the impact of the grotesque across its various audiences. They are impressed by its apparent power but also wary of the reactions that it might produce. Like sociologists, they have a poor understanding of the reception of the grotesque. What is clear is that the grotesque has and continues to mark moral protests in the United States. It is an available aesthetic technique for many movements and one that has been used during decisive periods of American contentious politics. This article demonstrates how its use marked two prominent American social movements. Future research on the uses and effects of the grotesque should further our understanding of emotional and cultural processes that shape movement mobilization and impact. Such research should examine the reception of these images over the many audiences that encounter them: radical activists who are wholly committed to the cause no matter the consequences; central activists who worry about maintaining the movement’s reputation and limiting risk; and bystander publics weakly identified with the issue. Such research should also examine reception of these images in differing historical and cultural contexts (Polletta and Amenta 2001; Walder 2009).

NOTES

¹ An anonymous reviewer suggests that the grotesque might also motivate action through a Freudian logic. A viewer might suffer a rebuke from the superego for deriving pleasure from a grotesque image and then take action in order to expiate his or her guilt.

² Legal theorist Martha Nussbaum (2004) strongly contests the “wisdom of repugnance,” noting that dominant groups frequently transform subordinate ones into objects of disgust.

³ Recently, scholars have paid increased attention to the multivocality and interactional construction of frames and other cultural materials (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Krinsky 2005; Mische 2003; Platt and Williams 2002; Steinberg 1998).

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