

A Grotesque Paradise
The Roots of Culture in the Visual Ontology of Chaos
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Abstract

Why are the Power Rangers and Pokemon so irresistible to children and so annoying to adults? A Comparative analysis of the Power Rangers the Roman Grotesque, and archaic paradise myths reveals a parallel aesthetic realm, with its own internal logic, myths and ethics. The workings of this pre-lingual ontology are examined, focusing on its use in the construction of such master narratives as “Nature”, “Culture”, and “Technology”.

How pleasant were our bodies in the days of Chaos.
Needing neither to eat or piss!
Who came along with his drill,
And bored us full of these nine holes?
Morning after morning we must dress and eat
Year after year, fret over taxes.
A thousand of us scrambling for a penny,
We knock our heads together and yell for dear life.
(trans. Burton Watson)¹

The Taoist monk Han Shan penned this observation over twenty five hundred years ago. When I encountered it I was struck by just how contemporary it sounded. Substitute the words “good old days” for “the days of Chaos”, and in place of a sharpened stick, visualize the EMF radiation from a cell phone boring the nine tiny, cancerous voids into delicate gray matter and it becomes pretty easy to imagine Han Shan on *Charlie Rose* plugging his self help book, and commenting in measured, monkish tones on the folly of hordes of young, upwardly mobile technophytes jockeying for the corner office or the .com stock option. Even in 500 BC there were those who were amazed and a bit alarmed by the pace of progress and cultural change and pined away a familiar, if only imagined past.

Poets and artists of all ages have perceived what they felt to be the decadence and excesses of their present, “fallen” state, leading them to escapist reminiscences of the good old days or disturbing, cataclysmic fantasies of the future. A survey of just a few of the major trends of the past fifteen years appears to support this. We saw the rise in popularity and visibility of political conservatism, Christian fundamentalism and Civil war reenactment groups, the proliferation of historical documentaries on the small screen and period pieces on the large. All of these can be squared with a nostalgic wish to return to a simpler, more innocent and noble past. And why not look to the

past? The present, it seems, is a pretty confusing and frightening place-- and the future looks bleaker. Witness the millennial blips currently on the cultural radar. Fear of or fascination with: falling meteors, (*Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*); clones and genetic mutations, (Dolly the sheep, test tube babies, E.U. moratorium on genetically altered crops and livestock); alien invasion, (*X- Files*); and the ever popular fear of technology failure, (Y2K), or domination, (*The Matrix*).

Since the time that the legends of Dr. Faustus began to capture the imagination of central Europe, cultural anxiety has been increasingly linked with science and technology, specifically with human meddling in the “natural” state of affairs. However, if we allow the definition of science and technology to move outside of the lab to include the arts of agriculture, animal domestication, transportation and architecture, all of the skills that “civilized” our species, I would argue, and I’m sure Han Shan would agree, that the relationship goes back much further. In our millennial longings for a more innocent past and preoccupations with impending catastrophe, are the reverberations of an archaic “Paradise” paradigm—a general model common to cosmological myths dealing with the creation, first ages, and subsequent debasement of the world. To fully appreciate the complex relationship that technology anxiety has to Paradise mythology we must look past the relatively late and highly rationalized Christian conception of Paradise.

The imagery that developed in the innumerable pagan variations of this mythic cycle are more ambiguous, vivid and complex than those that developed in the Christian tradition. In fact, nearly all of the colorful pagan iconography was vilified as beastly, grotesque and corrupt by the church fathers and rabbinical literati and was intentionally stripped away or reassigned to the dominions of Hell. The resulting sanitized, skeletal Paradise was yoked to a salvational religious tradition that would eventually nearly eclipse its pagan predecessors in much of the

world. However, in most of the communities that eventually converted to one of the great monotheistic religions, suppressed grotesque elements of the Paradise theme remained vital and circulated as apocryphal versions of canonical texts, popular legends and folk traditions.

Although the grotesque takes many forms in non-western and “unofficial” Christian traditions, it makes its most memorable and disturbing appearance in the form of the Monster. In the Far East the most well known example is the Dragon, the “chaos serpent” who is paradoxically the harbinger of good fortune. India possesses a veritable pantheon of hideous demons and grotesque deities. Chief among these is Kali, “The Destroyer”, who among her many attributes, also happens to be one of the most powerful creative forces. Here in the West it is Frankenstein who reigns supreme as our monster king.

I recently heard a radio commentator state rather flatly that *Frankenstein* is the myth of our century. Most days I do not think I would choose to challenge his claim. If nothing else, the sheer proliferation of versions of this story, so numerous as to almost completely obscure the original, point to the imprint the monster has made on the popular consciousness. In Shelly’s original it is Frankenstein alone who feels the full weight of his monster’s revenge, but in the many and subsequent variations it is increasingly society at large that is threatened by the monster’s existence. The nameless, misshapen creature has become the unholy patchwork of our fears and anxieties about progress and technology. His B-movie rampages are the revenge that nature imposes on a culture that has overstepped its bounds. Frankenstein is the poster child for the grotesque because in his lumbering and unsubtle way he mediates and transgresses the nature/culture duality that is the primary subject of Paradise mythology and the preconscious animator of our ambivalence toward technology.

I do not wish to dwell on Shelly’s creation too long, however this may be a good time to admit that there is something distinctly Frankensteinian in what is to follow. I have assembled and loosely stitched together a few observations on the shared iconography of the grotesque, Paradise mythology, and millennial thinking. My aim is to assemble them here, and breathe just enough life into them to allow the amalgamation to roam the earth in search of a name and a companion. Don’t expect a seamless whole. There will be inadequate time to fully trace ethnographic evolutions, detail cultural contexts or establish lines of historical influence. I have limited my analytical weapons to a few long pointy sticks with which to stab at this dark unruly mass of information, and poke around in the damp corners of the mythic imagination.

Paradise Lost

According to Chinese tradition a puzzling, grotesque, and by all accounts benevolent figure reigned at the very origins of the human epoch. His name was Hun-tun. His refreshingly brief and apparently tragic story comes to us from the end of the seventh chapter of the *Chuang-Tzu*, the most recent, of three “canonical” Taoist texts, (700-300 BC).

Emperor Hun-tun of the Center

The emperor of the South was called Shu. The emperor of the North was called Hu. And the emperor of the center was called Hun-tun. Hu and Shu at times mutually came together and met in Hun-tun’s territory. Hun-tun treated them very generously. Hu and Shu discussed how they could reciprocate Hun-tun’s virtue saying: “Men have seven openings with which to see, hear, eat and breathe. He alone doesn’t have any. Let’s try boring him some.” Each day they bored one hole. On the seventh day Hun-tun died.²

Except for his lack of orifices, Hun-tun’s appearance is left largely to the imagination in the *Chuang-Tzu*. We can however get a glimpse of him by piecing together a few scraps of information served up by later commentators, popular legends, and old ritual practices. Granet supplies an important clue by relating the legends of a “sacred” Chinese game, played at important times of transition, in which archers would shoot arrows at a blood filled leather sack suspended from a tree. This sack was called a hun-tun.³ This image seems very consistent with the passive, faceless emperor of the *Chuang-Tzu*. However, the *Shen I Ching* presents Hun-tun in an entirely different guise, as an “animal” ancestor who, “always gnaws his own tail going round and round”.⁴ If we leave this disturbing anomaly for a moment and look instead at the descriptions of Hun-tun that circulated as popular legends, we will discover the most graphic and memorable images of the elusive Emperor. He is sometimes described as a watery, embryonic egg/gourd, (a somewhat scrambled and faceless Humpty Dumpty), or more grotesquely as a large clot of blood or a lump of flesh.⁵

Given the Emperor’s shifting, Protean appearance, it should not be surprising to find out that “hun-tun” translates as “chaos” from the Chinese. This establishes etymological links to a whole slew of cosmogonic motifs, including the aforementioned myths of the cosmic egg/gourd, tales of animal ancestors, and legends of “the land of people without anuses”. In addition, the chaos theme revealed by Hun-tun’s name intimately connects him to the popular legend of the primordial giant, Pan K’u, who brought

the “unformed time” to an end by separating heaven from earth. Pan K’u supported the vault of heaven until he, like Emperor Hun-tun, was sacrificed in preparation for the civilized order. Unlike Hun-tun, Pan K’u’s death was self-imposed. He tore himself to pieces. These dismembered chunks of flesh came to become the “ten thousand things” that populate our world. The self-sacrifice of Pan K’u is an image expressly related to the transition from chaos to cosmos. He is the “father” of the recognizable order. If we follow this mythic logic then Hun-tun may be considered metaphorically as Pan Ku’s “son”, quite literally “the (lump of) flesh of his flesh”. Emperor Hun-tun, with his generous demeanor and pulpy monstrous appearance, is the last vestige of the undifferentiated, chaotic unity of nature that existed before Pan K’u’s heroic sacrifice.

Victor Frankenstein transgressed social norms and undertook a complex series of surgeries in order to create primal life. In the tale of Emperor Hun-tun, Hu and Shu, rulers of the North and South, performed a “boring” procedure that did just the opposite. By way of their simple operation they sacrificed primal life in the service of the social order. This was accomplished in two ways. First, boring Hun-tun a face would render him recognizable. Only with a singular, consistent identity provided by a face could Hun-tun fully enter into the civilized world of the symbolic. Second, the concept of “face” was an important feature of feudal Chinese society. “Having” or “saving face” was concerned with social acceptance, status and virtue—and more pointedly with the *appearance* of virtue. Feudal society was mediated by a complex set of rules that governed social interaction and ritual reciprocity. Here it is important to take note of the fact that Hu and Shu acted not out of malice or even kindness, but out of a sense of social obligation to repay Hun-tun’s generosity. Their repayment of an acceptable face and a consistent identity was a futile attempt to allow Hun-tun to enter fully into the social and linguistic world of men. The gift of identity and social acceptance all too eagerly given to Hun-tun was the all consuming desire of Mary Shelly’s monster in *Frankenstein*. Victor Frankenstein’s unwillingness or inability to give his creation social acceptability in the form of a presentable face, a companion, or even a name doomed both man and monster to lives lived in perpetual wandering at the margins of culture.

In fact, Hun-tun is similar to Shelly’s original conception of the monster in many ways, most notably in their mythic roles as mediators of the border between nature and culture. Both are benign loners, childlike in their ignorance in the ways of culture, but generous to those they encounter. Hun-tun is the

monumentally strange but gracious host, while Shelly’s monster becomes the hidden benefactor to a family he has adopted and secretly spies on, surreptitiously fetching firewood and water for the family who are unknowingly teaching him the ways of the world. The pivotal moment for both comes from their introduction to culture and normative behavior. As Frankenstein’s nameless creation fondly observes the family life of his unwitting hosts, he comes to desire nothing so much as to have a place in the social order-- a name, a family and some measure of acceptance. It is only when he is denied this possibility that the monster plots his revenge to deprive Victor of these same benefits of the social order by murdering his wife and engaging Victor in an endless cycle of pursuit and revenge played out on the margins of civilization.

Hun-tun on the other hand is utterly indifferent to the ways of humankind. As the personification of the original chaotic unity of nature, he neither seeks nor disdains the company of men. Hu and Shu commit the gravest of ethnocentric transgressions-- to assume that cultural convention is natural law. Rather than satisfying honor and the codes of ritual reciprocity by fully initiating Hun-tun into the social order, Hun-tun is killed. His death symbolically marks the “fall” from a natural, blessed, free, and genuine state into a cultural, mundane, constrained and artificial existence. Happily, the cycle of mythic time is much more forgiving than historic time, and nothing is irreversible. But henceforth, the way to Paradise will entail bodily death or the solitary wandering of along “a path less traveled by” through the wilds of the creative imagination.

A Bit of Spelunking

In Chinese society the Taoist sage was a “sacred fool”, passive and immovable, yet wildly free and chaotic in thought. Through inactivity and inward dwelling on the Principle (Tao) the sage spurned society and “closed up his face”. By way of his purposelessness he became “a lump of flesh”. The imagery here is overtly fetal, (“How pleasant were our bodies ...Needing neither to eat or piss”), so it seems only natural that the sage’s preferred hermitage was a cave. In the womb of the earth the Sage practiced the arts of Emperor Hun-tun, thereby regressing in space and time to the beginnings of all things. His way, The Way (also Tao) returned to the chaotic unity and natural flux of a grotesque paradise.

Up to this point I have been careful to pepper my essay with the well timed “grotesque” in a blatant effort to support my thesis that there is a convergence in the imagery of archaic paradise mythologies, and the iconography of the grotesque, and that the frequency and potency of these motifs can be correlated to times of transition. Unsubtle as this strategy may be, I have tried to use “grotesque” in its narrow technical sense.

“Grotesque” literally translated from the Italian means, “of or belonging to the cave”. The word was coined during the Renaissance to describe the newly discovered decorative arts of the late Roman period. Excavations carried out in Rome and Pompeii revealed wonderfully preserved frescoes and mosaics depicting lushly painted landscapes and familiar mythological themes. Surrounding these customary scenes were borders, frames and *tromp l’oeil* architecture that consisted largely of chaotic entanglements of animal, plant and human forms. These figures sinuously flowed and mutated into each other producing an effect that was at once both intricately decorative and profoundly disturbing. An educated Italian of the fifteenth-century was not prepared for the *horror plentitudinous* that confronted him. Here was a world that was too full, too disorderly and too fecund to submit to his well-honed sense of clarity and logic.

The term “grotesque” came to be applied to this surprising imagery as a result of an understandable, yet quite revealing misattribution made during this period. It was assumed that the chambers, baths and passages that were being unearthed were artificial caves or grottoes constructed in honor of Diana, or were the subterranean temples of the secretive mystery cults that proliferated in late antiquity. This seemed a reasonable assumption given that Diana, goddess of the hunt, had strong associations with nature, wildness and transformation. As goddess of the moon, she was associated with the dark, the mysterious, and the irrational, (e.g. lunatic). In the central myth surrounding her, Actaeon lead a party of hunters into the forest in search of game. He became separated from his compatriots and wandered into a thick and unfamiliar wood. Penetrating its leafy depths, he discovered a secret grotto. Here he spied Diana bathing in a pool. Upon sensing the presence of the interloper, the nymphs sent up a cry and attempted to shield the goddess from Actaeon’s amazed stare. The proud Diana returned his gaze unflinchingly, and replied to his transfixed silence, “Now you are free to tell, if you can, that you have seen the goddess nude!” whereupon she splashed water into his face. At that moment Actaeon was transformed into a deer. Terrified, he bounded away, but soon his own dogs caught his scent and pounced on the great stag. Drawn by the sounds of the dogs, the rest of the hunting party quickly caught up with the wounded Actaeon, and failing to recognize him, delivered the finishing blows.⁶

Actaeon suffered a fate often reserved in myths for those who have seen too much. He had witnessed a rare sight. Nature, in the personae of the goddess, had lay bare before him in all its beauty and unfathomable wildness. As a result of this vision he was himself made wild. Actaeon, like the faceless Hun-tun, was destroyed by his well-meaning companions because

they couldn’t recognize him. Estranged from culture, Actaeon and Hun-tun were strangers to men.

Revealed in the misattribution, then, is the very definition, and many of the principle themes that have come to be associated with the grotesque: conflation of nature and culture, fecundity, transformation, obscurity and revelation. Since my approach has been somewhat oblique up to this point, it may be useful to detail the current understanding of the word “grotesque”, and list the formal techniques identified with grotesque iconography.

When used as a noun, Webster’s definition of “grotesque” deviates little from the description I provided earlier in reference to the late Roman mural borders. It does however include the words “fanciful” and “fantastic” which I chose to avoid for reasons I will spell out later. As an adjective, the dictionary lists, “absurdly incongruous; departing markedly from the natural, the expected or the typical”.⁷ Another definition, which I encountered on the Internet, offered, “The grotesque is the estranged world.”⁸ This definition proves especially useful if we qualify the “world” to mean the world that is established, mediated and understood in social terms. The grotesque should not be thought of as “unnatural” in the sense that it goes against Nature, but in the sense that it goes against the norm, what is “expected” and “typical”. The grotesque presents us with Nature as an anti-world to all that is established, sanctioned, canonical, and orthodox-- in other words, cultural. This anti-world, for all its strangeness, constitutes a consistent ontology and cosmology (chaosmology?) put forward to rival the prevailing worldview. In this way it is distinguishable from the fanciful, the fantastic or the simply odd.

There is a considerable amount of heterogeneity in the outward appearance of grotesque artworks, despite the fact that grotesque depictions tend to be symbolically consistent. This is due to the consistency of method and approach that grotesque artists have employed in the treatment of a wide variety of subjects and themes. Ewa Kuryluk has identified the relatively small number of formal techniques utilized by grotesque artists.⁹ I have grouped these techniques into two broad categories, Radical Editing and Shift of Focus.

Radical Editing includes the processes of separation, mixture and reassembly. All of these serve to render the familiar as ambiguous, unrecognizable and startling. The effects of separation, mixture and reassembly can be amplified through the use of duplication and multiplication. Archimboldo’s “portraits” of the seasons provide a fine example of Radical Editing. In his paintings, fruits of the field and tools of the farmers’ trade are ripped from their normal contexts and reassembled into disturbing portraits. The

sheer plentitude of the objects used to create these amazing busts intensifies the effect.

Shift of Focus includes the techniques of enlargement, miniaturization, simplification, overcrowding, reversal and projection. Any major change in the relative scale or density of detail of an object implies a shift of focus. Seen alone in a room, a peanut looks small and nearly featureless. Limiting one's field of vision to a two inch square dramatically alters its appearance. Its surface reveals a convoluted pattern of divots arranged in rows that follow the topology of the bifurcated form. Lacking any clear meaningful context conceptually liberates the object from its normal associations and allows it to become a visual metaphor. The peanut remains a peanut but may also be identified as something sharing a similar form but is either smaller or much larger. Smaller, it becomes a dividing cell. Bigger, the peanut becomes a fetus. Or bigger still, the peanut may be envisioned a binary star system. I think I may have carried my example a bit too far, but this illustrates the increasing role that projection can play in the process of perception as one shifts focus. Freed from our normal mental habits, our minds will establish new connections and forge startling metaphors.

These grotesque techniques form the basis of the visual logic that gives rise to most mythic imaginings, however in descriptions of Paradise or "the time before", the use of these procedures seems more insistent and overtly transgressive of the prevailing order. The Taoist conception of paradise was balanced and whole, yet unformed, chaotic and pregnant with potential. Roman artists working during the reign of Nero shared this basic vision. They reimagined this protean condition as, "a chaos of floral, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic creatures in eternal pursuit of each other, (that) was denounced by Christianity as beastly and corrupt, lacking in spirit and soul."¹⁰

I have lifted the last quote from Kuryluk's discussion of the resurgence of grotesque imagery at the end of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. She envisions the grotesque as a response to the rationalizing and "civilizing" projects of the Church, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In fact, all of these forces had much to do with obscuring the relationship between the grotesque and images of Paradise. They systematically transformed this primal theme into the popular images of noble savages cavorting about in a pristine and picturesque garden, where all was clarity and light, harmony and tranquility.

This idyllic picture contrasts sharply with most Paradise mythologies that come from non-western traditions. Most pagan myths agree with the Christian conception of Eden in that paradise was a blessed place with plenty to eat and little to want. But almost all

non-western versions of Paradise paint a picture of a much more dynamic and confusing place. Heaven was very close or mixed with the Earth and could be reached from a convenient rooftop, tree, or mountain. Gods mingled with, mated with, and transformed into people. The inhabitants of paradise spoke to, married, and changed into animals. The animals, for their part, shared in the general confusion. They did not keep to their species, breeding all manner of hybrid, from the ferociously monstrous to the amusingly whimsical. Even the vegetation, insects and the earth itself had generative and transformative powers. The "ancient ones" lived in or emerged from gourds, squashes, clumps of earth, or the eggs of chickens, snakes, or flies.¹¹ The references to a fluid and "chaotic" paradise time are so abundant and diverse that I can only hint at theme here and would refer the interested reader to investigate some of the wonderful ethnographic studies. We must satisfy ourselves with the general recognition that Paradise was a place and time of dynamic mutability and extreme fecundity. It was a place virtually indescribable apart from the iconography of the grotesque.

Paradise Revisited

Angel Grove 1994. This idyllic suburban community awakens to find a monster in its midst. This mutant, cobbled together from 100 bloodshot, Styrofoam eyes and green rubber tentacles, has been beamed to Earth from a spacecraft in high orbit beyond the moon to terrorize the residents of the local park with heat rays, fire sprays and adolescent taunts. Meanwhile five high school students, apparently chosen on the sole basis of their racial and gender diversity, assemble at their secret retreat to combat the rampaging beast. Donning colorful suits and motorcycle helmets these bright and shiny youths transform themselves into faceless, androgynous avengers who battle the monster's minions with miraculous weapons and martial arts skills. Pressed onto the defensive, the monster appeals to the orbiting spaceship for help. Assistance arrives in the form of an energy stream that fortifies the flagging monster and causes him to grow to gargantuan proportions. Somehow, (we never find out how), the battleground has changed from the paradisaal surroundings of the park to a (any) large cosmopolitan megalopolis. The monster, true to its B-movie roots, proceeds to level buildings, trample cars and down high-tension wires.

Faced with the escalation in hostilities, our sexless and featureless heroes retreat to their futuristic, heavily armed vehicles. En rout to the fray, and following a few ineffectual volleys, these transform into mechanized, mythical animals. This, it appears, is mere bestial bravado, because these creatures are, in

turn, transformed into humanoid robots. This too seems to be merely an intermediate morphological state in the complete metamorphosis, for these robots soon twist and grind their way into synergistic fusion, coalescing into the Megazoid, a super robot uniquely equipped in scale and firepower to meet the behemoth toe to toe.

With a single sweep of its mighty sword the Megazoid cleaves the monster in two with attendant explosions and pyrotechnics. The unfortunate beast is not only vanquished but completely vaporized, gone without a trace. And with the threat momentarily contained, (it is understood by all that another evil monstrosity will make its appearance tomorrow), we are once again inexplicably transported from the twisted, smoldering cultural wreckage of the metropolis to the bucolic paradise of Angel Grove. Here our heroes, now children once more, sip sodas and exchange pleasantries.

--Synopsis of the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*

It's pretty easy to dismiss the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* as simply another example of Saturday morning fantasy drivel that producer Hiam Saban has produced in a cynical and calculated effort to exploit the youth market and take full advantage of multinational distribution and lucrative product tie-ins. All of this is undeniably true. Saban's genius (if it may be called that) is to adapt the long-standing genre of Japanese *sentai* programs for a western market. *Sentai* are an eternally popular genre of live action shows which feature superhero teams made up of five to seven teenagers who unify themselves into a single monster-fighting being which must repeatedly save the world from destruction. In fact, most of the fighting and transformative scenes in *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* are re-edited sequences from these series. *Zyu Rangers* and *Dai Rangers* supplied only enough footage for only the first two seasons of *MMPR*. Thereafter, the program itself was forced to continually mutate in order to make use of footage lifted from entirely different *sentai* series. Thus *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* reenacts the endless mutability of its heroes, becoming in turn *Power Rangers Turbo*, *Power Rangers Lost Galaxy*, *Power Rangers in Space*, *Power Rangers Light-speed Rescue* and, of course, *Power Rangers: The Movie*.

The *Pokemon* phenomenon shares the Power Rangers' penchant for transformation. What began as a wildly popular video game created by Nintendo was released several different versions, each named for a color. This was quickly developed into a television series and a complex trading-card game utterly unfathomable to adults. From these, spun off a movie, CD-ROMs, books, stickers and innumerable baubles

and trinkets. Unlike the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, the hero of *Pokemon* does not possess the protean faculty for endless transmutation, (in the video game the hero is, of course, you). Instead, this ability falls solely to the monsters, called *pokemon*, which transform in times of crisis, when they receive enough power or sometimes simply in response to their normal life cycle. *Pokemon* are wild creatures that must first be captured, and then trained to respond to their trainer's commands. Trainers wander the wilderness collecting *pokemon*, returning to the city to pit their skill against other trainers by engaging their *pokemon* in ritualized battles. The *pokemon* fall into various taxonomies, each characterized by a specific alchemic combination of elements or attributes such as rock, water, fire, psychic, electric, grass, or poison. Through the training of their *pokemon* the players effectively gain control over these elements. The ultimate goal of the *Pokemon* game player, and of Ash, the hero of the television series, is to collect and master all 155 *pokemon* and become the world's greatest trainer.

What makes the Japanese invasion of shows like the *Power Rangers* or *Pokemon* unique is their phenomenal and lasting appeal to a global youth market. Both programs have dominated the airwaves for over six years, and have spawned a proliferation of look-alike programs such as *Digimon*, *Monster Rancher*, *VR Toopers* and *Beast Wars*. Of course, none of these programs simply appeared out of a vacuum. The *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* can trace the lineage of its basic aesthetic at least as far back as 1967 with the Japanese airing of *Ambassador Magma*, dubbed *Space Giants* when it finally appeared in the U.S. in 1978. Goldar, his wife Silvar, and son Gam were the first shape-shifting, monster-fighting robot family, locking antenna with the inter-galactic dictator Rodan and his evil creations for 52 episodes. *Space Giants* was followed in the 1980s by shows such as *Voltron* and *Transformers*. *Pokemon* combines the cuteness of *Pacman* with some of the complex role playing and ritualized battles characteristic of such fantasy games as *Dungeons and Dragons*, but it owes its basic plot structure to the innumerable low budget samurai films produced in Japan since the 1960s.

However, none of these programs even approached the degree to which *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Pokemon* have captured and retained the imaginations of children on both sides of the Pacific. Much of this popularity can be attributed to the increased saturation and sophistication of marketing aimed at this age group, and while I fully acknowledge the powerful market forces at work here, it is my belief that these alone cannot account for the hold these programs have on pre-teens. What sets these programs apart from their predecessors is the extraordinary clarity and insistence with which *Mighty*

Morphin Power Rangers and *Pokemon* utilize the visual symbolism of the grotesque to look beyond the narrow mythic paradigm of the conquering hero, the bread and butter of most youth drama, following instead a more complex and archaic cosmological model, one in which the theme of the “conquering hero” plays a central but more ambiguous role. *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Pokemon* recreate an archaic, mythic and specifically pagan universe, “an overall animated continuum with no ruptures between plants animals and humans, a place of transition and transformation.”¹² Here, battles are continually fought by along the borders between nature and culture. Strip away all of the adolescent dialog, campy costumes and choppy, low budget production values, and one clearly perceives the aesthetics of the grotesque employed in a plot structure which reenacts the mythic themes found cross-culturally in paradise mythologies.

We should not find it particularly surprising that these programs hold a peculiar fascination for pre-teens given that the cosmological trope of the Paradise theme reenacts on a cosmic scale the process of birth, individuation and enculturation that we all experience as children. This is especially apparent in the embryonic imagery of Emperor Hun-tun who, as an unformed lump of flesh, was at one in chaotic unity with all things. Hu and Shu acted as “parents” by wresting him from this undifferentiated unity with nature, and establishing the process of enculturation by providing him the orifices with which to experience the world as a singular identity with a consistent “face”. In other words, they attempted to give Hun-tun the gift of subjectivity, based as it is in the polarization of the consistent sensing subject from the objects of his attention. As a Taoist parable, this story emphasizes what was lost: the visual, grotesque “logic” of similarity, flux and unity-- a sympathetic participation of all things in all other things. But Hu and Shu understood just what was to be gained: linguistic logic-- and no paltry gift this, for with it comes the potential for mastery over an ordered and rational universe and the promise of clarity and structure in social discourse. Hun-Tun was unable to make the transition from a grotesque, visual logic to a rational, linguistic logic, making him one of the first, and perhaps the most literal, counter-culture martyr.

Happily, nearly all children navigate this transition from visual logic to linguistic logic with much less dramatic side effects. However, this shift in perception and worldview is neither immediate nor without struggle. The visual narrative structure employed so effectively in programs such as *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Pokemon* play out these conflicts in a parallel aesthetic realm that is dominated by the remnants of the visual ontology that exists prior to, and is coextensive with, the world as represented

and informed by language. In this world of ever-shifting identities, enlargement, miniaturization, simplification, overcrowding, separation, mixture and reassembly, children endeavor to tame, control or destroy the monsters of confusion and uncertainty without by harnessing these same monsters within.

Interestingly enough, just as our children making this transition from a primarily visual ontology to a linguistic one, thereby coming to grips with our positivist and pragmatic culture, it seems our culture, in the name of mercantile pragmatism, is becoming increasingly less positivist, resembling more and more the grotesque reality that the Power Rangers and pokemon inhabit. Media commodities and telecommunications companies mutate as fluidly Pikachu or the Dragonzord, combining into forms as startling and monstrous as any found in Angel Grove. We need only to turn our attention to any of the different dimensions of contemporary existence-- from multinationals to the Internet to artificial life-- to discover that all are organizing themselves along the lines of distributed networks-- decentered, shifting entities in which it is the union that counts, the individual becoming simply a transitory node in the collective. Virtual Reality and “reality programs” like *Cops* and *Real World* are causing once useful distinctions like truth and fiction, public and private to blur into meaninglessness or implode entirely. Cars and trucks are cross breeding, giving rise to all manner of hybrid “sport-utilities” and monstrous SUVs. Convergence technology is turning my television, my house and my cell phone into a computer, (or is it the other way around?). I can surf at random in an undifferentiated stream of information pausing occasionally to “chat” as a biker named Butch or assuming the identity of a forty-six year old mother of four.

It seems that the ways in which we are currently refiguring our environment follow many of the patterns outlined by the Paradise paradigm. A change has been steadily taking place in the way in which technology is envisioned. Technology, which has traditionally been written under the sign of culture, is shifting. It increasingly resembles the chaotic unity and fluid appearance that has traditionally been associated with nature. Perhaps it is in the realm of technology that we adults will find ourselves struggling like our children with the demons of change along the frontier where nature meets culture.

The present is a pretty complex and confusing place, and the future proves to be only more so. Any attempt to explain it with a single model, even if that model fully embraces complexity and revels in confusion, is reductionism at its most self-delusional. But if I squint hard so that only the broad outlines are visible, then I think that I can make out the form a hazy

arc that moves from the well-lit temples of culture, back towards to the dark, watery grottos of nature. I cannot help but see the long anamorphic shadow of Emperor Hun-tun stretch across the final decade of this

last century, linking our technological present to the cycle of mythic time to a grotesque Paradise.

¹ N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), p.21.

² Ibid., p. 81.

³ Ibid., p. 92

⁴ Ibid., p.275.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 77-112.

⁶ Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (New York: MJF Books, 1949), pp.111-112.

⁷ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 150th Anniversary ed., s.v. "grotesque"

⁸ The site is apparently no longer active. The paragraph in which the definition appeared was attributed to Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, page 185. It is unclear if it is a direct quotation or a paraphrase.

⁹ Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987), pp. 301-307.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, "The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive Tradition", *Myth and Mythmaking*, Henry A. Murry ed., (New York: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 61-71.

N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp.311-328.

¹² ¹² Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987), p. 316.