

## ‘The new messiah of the battlefields’: The Body as Discursive Strategy in Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*

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### Abstract

This article discusses the discursive significance of the body in Dalton Trumbo’s classic anti-war novel, *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939). With its political rants, depictions of working-class life, symbolic imagery, and vivid descriptions of the dismembered torso of its protagonist, the human body emerges in Trumbo’s novel as our primary vehicle for being-in-the-world, as well as the figurative weight that grounds us in it. Following this logic, human freedom and autonomy appear to be curtailed by our own corporeal limitations, coupled with our involvement in a world of oppressive hierarchal systems and reified social relations. Building on the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mikhail Bakhtin, Georg Lukács and others, this study reveals a dialectic at work within *Johnny* between what can best be described as the phenomenal, reified, and grotesque bodies. While the phenomenal body of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology emphasizes relative autonomy and embodied subjectivity, the reified body represents humankind in a completely objectified state. My analysis illustrates how Trumbo’s text creates a tension between these two conceptions of being, while employing grotesque realism—a subversive literary mode utilizing the degraded image of the body—to inspire change in the real world.

Keywords: corporeality; Dalton Trumbo; *Johnny Got His Gun*; phenomenology; reification; grotesque realism; Marxism; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Mikhail Bakhtin

Despite a political witch-hunt that resulted in its author’s blacklisting and imprisonment, Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939) remains one of the most enduring antiwar statements in American literature. The novel, which is said to be partially based on the true story of a World War I amputee (Blackmore 2000: 1), tells the story of Joe Bonham, a working-class soldier who survives an explosion that costs him his arms, legs and face, as well as his ability to see, speak, hear, eat, and breathe for himself. As Joe comes to terms with his new limitations, he begins envisioning himself as part of a long tradition of ‘little guys’ who are exploited and silenced by those in power (Trumbo 2007: 190-191). After relearning how to use his mind and body as a unit, he taps the Morse

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code with his head and asks to be put on display in a carnival-like environment, hoping to become ‘the new messiah of the battlefields’ (Trumbo 2007: 246)—i.e. a symbol threatening to undermine the abstract ideals coaxing the proletariat to fight for their oppressors.

*Johnny* won the American Booksellers Award upon publication (Pospisil 2012: 142), then went on to inspire countless activists, writers and artists over the century—from acclaimed author/activists such as Ron Kovic, to thrash metal icons the likes of Metallica. The novel has also inspired many critically acclaimed adaptations and artistic projects over the years, the most recent being Michael D. Fay’s *Joe Bonham Project*, an ongoing exhibition named after Trumbo’s limbless, faceless protagonist.

One would think that a novel as influential as *Johnny Got His Gun* would be the subject of countless scholarly articles, but up to this date, the world of literary criticism has remained relatively silent. According to Eugene Torisky’s article ‘Literature in the Philosophical Classroom’ (2000), *Johnny* has been wrongly dismissed in literary circles as a ‘disturbing but amateurish one-note antiwar tract written by a moderately talented screenwriter and activist’ (257).

While the few who have written about *Johnny* praise the novel for its courage, style and originality, they offer little insight into what makes it so effective as an antiwar statement. For example, in his article ‘Johnny Got His Gun: A Depression Era Classic’ (1993), James Demuth overlooks the novel’s political and existential concerns, focusing primarily on its censorship history and prose style. Other articles, such as Tim Blackmore’s ‘Lazarus Machine: Body Politics in Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*’ (2000), discuss the text’s modern and postmodern elements, but have little to say about Joe Bonham’s body or the politics that led to its destruction and rebirth. The aim of this current article is to build off of the aforementioned studies, while addressing what is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Trumbo’s text—i.e., its use of the body for discursive ends.

As phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘The body is our general medium for having a world’ (2002: 146), but as Trumbo’s text reveals, the body is also the figurative weight that grounds us in it. Joe Bonham’s freedom and autonomy appear to be curtailed by his own corporeal limitations, coupled with his involvement in a world of oppressive hierarchal systems and reified social relations. Building on

the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mikhail Bakhtin, Georg Lukàcs and others, this article will reveal a dialectic within *Johnny Got His Gun* between what can best be described as the phenomenal, reified, and grotesque bodies.

While the phenomenal body of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology emphasizes relative autonomy and embodied subjectivity/lived experience, the reified body represents humankind in a completely objectified state. In this article, I will illustrate how Trumbo's novel creates a tension between these two descriptions of being, while employing grotesque realism—a subversive literary mode utilizing the degraded image of the body—to inspire change in the real world.

The first section of *Johnny Got His Gun*, entitled 'The Dead,' sees Trumbo's protagonist returning to the world of the living through the awakening of what can best be described as his phenomenal (or lived) body. According to Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenal body is an organic unity, existing ambiguously as both subject and object, thus undermining the popular Cartesian dualism of mind and body, as well as Sartre's notion of for-itself and in-itself. While Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body has deep ontological and epistemological implications, what is most important to this study is the level of importance granted to the body by both Trumbo and Merleau-Ponty, as well as Merleau-Ponty's well-argued notion that the body cannot be conceived as a mere object or thing-in-itself: 'In the first place it was stated that my body is distinguishable from the table or the lamp in that I can turn away from the latter whereas my body is constantly perceived. It is therefore an object which does not leave me. But in that case is it still an object?' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 103). Merleau-Ponty elaborates further, 'But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather *I am it*. [...] We do not merely behold as spectators the relations between the parts of our body, and the correlations between the visual and tactile body: we are ourselves the unifier of these arms and legs, the person who both sees and touches them' (173). In other words, we are not mere objects or a collection of parts, but rather embodied subjects who perceive and experience the world. Although we can behold and imagine the individual parts of our bodies, we can never fully transcend it in its totality, for our embodiment is our permanent condition that makes perception possible and reality accessible. We are *it*, and it is already immersed in the world.

Joe Bonham's unique condition as a 'living piece of meat' (Trumbo 2007: 61-64) puts him in a predicament where he must slowly come to grips with the world through the limited capacities of his war-ravaged self. All aspects of his being—time, space, freedom and even memories—appear to be curtailed by his body's involvement in-the-world. But what serves as both a vehicle and an encumbrance for Joe, becomes allegorical and almost didactic for the reader. As we bear witness to the reawakening of Joe's phenomenal body, we begin sympathizing with 'average Joe's' position as an individual, who, despite his sentience and agency, is silenced and forced to endure a thing-like existence after the war.

Waking up in a hospital bed after surviving an explosion that costs him his eyes, mouth, ears, nose, arms and legs, Joe initially has difficulty distinguishing between dream and reality because he often mistakes himself as being pure mind or consciousness: 'He was trapped in his own brain tangled in the tissues and brain-matter kicking and gouging and screaming to get out' (Trumbo 2007: 189). At one point, Joe even has a moment of ontological uncertainty, proclaiming, 'He had a mind left by god and that was all' (102). The loss of his eyes, ears, and mouth cause him to confuse past with present, and dream with reality. For example, memories of his mother's comfort fade into the realization of his current, infantile state:

Mother you've gone away and forgotten me. Here I am. I can't wake up mother. Wake me up. I can't move. Hold me. I'm scared. Oh mother sing to me and rub me and bathe me and comb my hair and wash out my ears and play with my toes and clap my hands together and blow my nose and kiss my eyes and mouth like I've seen you do with Elizabeth like you must have done with me. (65)

Passages like the one above have a tremendous emotional impact, while never removing the reader from the body parts and sensations intimately connected to Joe's most cherished memories. Such juxtapositions also help bring to the forefront the central role that his body plays in everyday life, thus making Joe's gradual discovery of his lost capacities even more dramatic and impactful. Joe's predicament also illustrates how lived experience can be confusing, thus one's initial perception of a situation can be unreliable.

As Merleau-Ponty shows in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), lived experience can be ambiguous and even overwhelming, but

Merleau-Ponty was mostly considering the lived experiences of people who have their bodies intact. The war robbed Joe of much of his body, forcing him to endure a thing-like existence as a living flesh: 'He was nothing but a piece of meat like the chunks of cartilage old Prof Vogel used to have in biology. Chunks of cartilage that didn't have anything except life so they grew on chemicals. But he was one up on the cartilage. He had a mind and it was thinking [...] He was thinking and he was just a thing' (Trumbo 2007: 64). Robbed of his autonomy and unable to even breathe for himself, it is easy to understand why Joe sometimes identifies more with his mind than body. Losing sight of the role his body plays in perception, he begins feeling like pure consciousness or pure mind. This causes him to fall back into the Cartesian mind/body dualism and almost lose his grip on reality. For example, as pure consciousness robbed of a body, he has difficulty determining whether he is really awake or dreaming of a rat gnawing on his wounds:

He couldn't open his eyes. In his sleep in the middle of the rat dream he might think himself out of it but how would he be able to prove he was awake if he couldn't open his eyes and look around into the darkness? He thought Jesus Joe there must be some other way. He thought it's asking very little for a man just to want to be able to prove that he's awake. (99)

Despite his new physical limitations, Joe resolves to do his best to grasp at reality with his newly acquired 'powers' of sensation: 'All he had was a mind and he would like to feel that it was thinking clearly. But how was he going to do it except when there was a nurse at hand or a rat on him? [...] Guys were supposed to develop extra powers when they lost parts of themselves' (Trumbo 2007: 102). After a few missteps, Joe finally recaptures a sense of time and place by counting and using his skin, thus it is his phenomenal body that enables him to approximate a sense of time and reality:

All he had to do was to feel with his skin. When the temperature changed from cool to warm he would know it was sunrise and the beginning of a day. Then he would check right through counting the nurse's visits to the next sunrise and then he would have the number of her visits per day and he would forever afterward be able to tell time. (136)

In the final stage of his plan to return to the world of the living, Joe must communicate with the doctors and nurses in a way that makes them

recognize in him the same agency that they possess. Robbed of the normal faculties for speech and writing, his only means of communicating is by tapping the Morse code with his head: ‘All he had to do in order to break through to people in the outside world was to lie in his bed and dot dash to the nurse. [...] Then he would have smashed through his silence and blackness and helplessness. Then the stump of a man without lips would talk’ (Trumbo 2007: 168). Thus, it is Joe’s own body that limits him and makes him a grotesque oddity, yet it is this same body that enables him to reconnect with the outside:

The doctors who brought their friends in to see him would no longer say here is a man who has lived without arms legs ears eyes nose mouth isn’t it wonderful? They would say here is a man who can think here is a man who lay in his bed with only a cut of meat to hold him together and yet he thought of a way to talk. Listen to him speak. You see his mind is unaffected he speaks like you and me he is a person he has identity he is *part of the world*. (223-224)

Joe’s struggle to be acknowledged as something more than just a mere piece of flesh is indicative of many who feel objectified, marginalized, or ignored by those in power. He desperately wishes to have his voice heard, but much like various struggles in the real world, the voice of one ‘average Joe’ is sometimes ignored. It is here that Joe embodies the conflict between a phenomenal body-subject, seeking to have its agency recognized; and an atomized, reified object, subsumed by modernity and its war.

*Reification* is a very old concept within Marxist discourse, first appearing in volume one of *Capital* (1867), but mostly associated with Georg Lukàcs’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). In its least convoluted form, it describes a process, precipitating from commodity relations, whereby human beings and social relations are reduced to the objective, calculable properties of things. Lukàcs finds real life examples of reification in the theories of Frederick Taylor, a mechanical engineer who advocated a popular form of labor management that synthesized workflows to assure labor productivity and economic efficiency. Under what would later be called *Taylorism*, workers and managers became mere cogs in the machine: ‘In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first. [...] the first *object* of any good system must be that of developing first-class men; and under systematic management the best man rises to the top more certainly and more rapidly than ever before’ (Taylor 1919: 7). Frederick Taylor’s *The*

*Principles of Scientific Management* (1919) would go on to influence everyone from Henry Ford to Lenin (Want 2001: 161), and marked a form of total reification where both physical bodies and human mental faculties become objects for industrial labor and exploitation. Trumbo's narrative and symbolism allude to this process quite vividly, as many of Joe's flashbacks consist of vignettes of hard labor, juxtaposed with the sounds and images of machinery:

He'd heard it above the click-click-click of the Battle Creek wrappers and the rattle of the belt conveyors and the howl of the rotary ovens upstairs and the rumble of steel route bins being hauled into place and the sputter motors in the garage being tuned up against the morning's work and the scream of dollies that needed oil why the hell didn't somebody oil them? (Trumbo 2007: 4)

From the outset, the reader gets a sense of who Joe is, where he comes from, and how he feels about himself. The fact that this first flashback begins with him walking by the machinery at his former job suggests that he strongly identifies with the industrial labor of the time, as well as feeling like a cog in a production process. This is driven home even further as Joe comes to grips with his injuries: After discovering the loss of his arm, Joe identifies with its utility in the workplace first: 'So they cut off my arm. How am I going to work now?' (Trumbo 2007: 28), and its metaphysical significance second: 'Oh sure I had an arm I was born with one I was normal just like you and I could hear and I had a left arm like anybody [...] it's a part of a man a very important part of a man and it should be treated respectfully' (28-29). Once again, this suggests that Joe strongly associates his body with being an object in a production process.

According to Mandel and Novack, reification also entails a transformation of everyday language and human interactions where people 'see their fellows only as customers or through the lenses of whatever economic relations they have with them' (2010: 28-29). This is perhaps why many of Joe's memories are comprised of nameless, faceless 'hamburger men' (Trumbo 2007: 18), 'washerwomen' (49), 'drivers and bums' (67) and soldiers being 'shipped in by the truckload' (86). Even some of the novel's more developed characters such as Old Mike and Jose reveal the importance that social-economic status and occupation play. For example, Joe's memories of Old Mike are of a beaten down former coalminer who is reluctantly working a 'filthy' job

as a ‘railroad bull’ (37). So much of Mike’s identity is defined by his occupation, and his trademark hatred and cynicism also seem to be connected to years of hard labor. While working at a bakery, Joe encounters Old Mike’s antithesis, Jose. Jose is portrayed as an optimistic and somewhat naïve migrant who desperately wishes to work at the movie studios in order to earn enough status to win the hand of a rich girl he used to chauffeur (Trumbo 2007: 68). Seen through Jose’s eyes, the rich girl’s identity is overshadowed by the dowry attached to her. Like a railroad bull, bakery worker, or washerwoman, she is reduced to her calculable objective qualities, while Jose’s own value as a husband is contingent upon his ability to crack the glass ceiling.

A young Joe Bonham initially admires the naïve optimism of Jose, but the horrors of war help him empathize more with the cynicism of Old Mike. For example, before leaving for boot camp, Old Mike jokes about Joe’s expendability as a soldier: ‘Hurry up you damn kids. You’ll miss the train and then Joe will be shot by Americans instead of Germans’ (Trumbo 2007: 37). Ironically, Old Mike’s joke turns out to be prophetic as Joe’s identity and nationality are erased after surviving the explosion: ‘a blast strong enough to tear his arms and legs off must have blown all identification to hell and gone. When you have only a back and a stomach and half a head you probably look as much like a Frenchman or a German or an Englishman as an American’ (151). One explosion brings him closer to feeling what guys like Old Mike learned through years of hard labor—that he and all the other ‘little guys’ like him are just expendable units.

Feeling like an appendage of the machine,<sup>1</sup> Joe draws parallels between the ‘little-guys’ like himself and the slaves who were blinded by their Carthaginian lords; the countless others forced to build monuments for dead Egyptian kings; and even the Roman Gladiators who fought to the death for the entertainment of the ‘big guys’ (Trumbo 2007: 190-191). After a number of procedures and amputations, Joe even begins thinking of himself as part of a military medical experiment: ‘The doctors were getting pretty smart especially now that they had three or four years in the army with plenty of *raw material* to experiment on’ (85). As a piece of raw material, Joe and others like him become expendable units in the production of wealth, empire, and medical

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 614.

technology. Tim Blackmore writes of Joe, 'Science may have created him, but, he hopes, it does not control every part of him. The soldier begins to understand science (including medicine) from a mechanic perspective. While the mind thinks, the body machine confronts pressures, stresses, wheels, belts, gears—a panoply of industrial forces' (2000: 5). Thus, Joe the appendage fears that the very machine he has worked and fought might eventually swallow him whole.

Robbed of his humanity and transformed into a grotesque man-machine, Joe wishes to use what little remains of his body to undermine the forces that made him that way. In this regard, Joe's body begins to mirror many of the characteristics associated with the *grotesque realism* of the carnival, in particular, the grotesque *double-body* and its emphasis on open orifices, genitalia, and universality.

Due to murderous new technologies and the horrors of trench warfare, the First World War left no shortage of ghastly images in its aftermath. Bearing this in mind, Dalton Trumbo could have chosen from a litany of gruesome images when describing his protagonist, but instead describes Joe as a limbless common man with 'a chewed up hole that used to be a nose and a mouth that used to be a living human face' (Trumbo 2007: 164).

Whereas descriptions of the face play an important role in what Bakhtin describes as the 'official bodily canon,' the grotesque realism of the middle ages emphasized the parts of the body that are open to the world and capable of merging with others. This often included the mouth, anus and phallus, as well as open wounds. Years later, the development of capitalism would see the 'open' and 'universal' character of the body suppressed once again in what Bakhtin calls the 'new bodily canon':

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade. (Bakhtin 1984: 320)

Although Joe is portrayed as an individual with his own backstory, the description of his body certainly invokes the subversion of the new bodily canon's 'universal character' described by Bakhtin. While

descriptions of Joe's open wounds dominate much of *Johnny's* imagery, there are also many references to Joe's belly, buttocks, and phallus:

Her hands sought out the far parts of his body. They inflamed his nerves with a kind of false passion that fled in little tremors along the surface of his skin. Even while he was thinking oh my god it's come to this here is the reason she thinks I'm tapping goddam her god bless her what shall I do?—even while he was thinking it he fell in with her rhythm he strained to her touch his heart pounded to a fast tempo and he forgot everything in the world except the motion and the sudden pumping of his blood... (174)

Of the phallus, Bakhtin writes, 'The phallus and codpiece (as a substitute for the phallus) constantly appear within the open sphere. The grotesque body has no facade, no impenetrable surface, neither has it expressive features. It represents either the fertile depths or the convexities of procreation and conception. It swallows and generates, gives and takes' (1984: 339). In Trumbo's grotesque system of imagery, this universalization of the body is both negative and positive: On one hand, the war robs Joe of any physical characteristics that might distinguish him from any other soldier rescued from battle, but it also enables him to become both a subversive and universal symbol for every man. In fact, Joe eventually begins identifying with the slaves whose bodies had been 'mutilated and branded forever' (Trumbo 2007: 191), as well as other 'little guys' whose bodies have been consumed or experimented on during the war:

There were whole rooms filled with men who breathed through tubes and other wards where men ate through tubes and would eat through them the rest of their lives. Tubes were important. Lots of guys would piss through tubes as long as they lived and there were plenty who had had their rear ends shot off. Now their bowels were connected up with holes in their sides or stomachs. The holes were covered with absorbent bandages because they had no muscles there to control themselves.  
(Trumbo 2007: 87-88)

As with the universalism described by Bakhtin, Trumbo's emphasis on Joe's lower regions and commonality is meant to both draw readers in and upset the status quo. Like a confrontational punk rock anthem, *Johnny's* imagery is both shocking and offensive. The novel's imagery certainly disrupts the prevailing 'bodily cannon' of its time, but in true Bakhtinian fashion, it then rebuilds what it has destroyed.

Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of grotesque realism is what Bakhtin describes as the carnivalesque spirit of degradation and renewal, which is also personified in what he describes as a *double body* and *pregnant death*. Bakhtin writes:

The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. More over, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world. This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new second body... (1984: 317)

Bakhtin links this imagery to ‘the change of epochs and the renewal of culture’ (1984: 325), which, like the image of Christ on the cross, sees what would typically be considered a negative or disturbing image transformed into something positive and life affirming. Of Joe’s double body, Tim Blackmore writes, ‘Joe Bonham is a conscious corpse—awake, alive, and embedded in a flesh coffin’ (2000: 4). Superficially speaking, the description of Joe’s body alone suggests a strong connection to the Bakhtinian grotesque; however, there is an even greater Bakhtinian dynamic at work beneath *Johnny*’s blood-soaked surface.

As I have mentioned previously, Joe Bonham wishes to use what little he has left to undermine the very forces that transformed him into a grotesque oddity:

He would make an exhibit of himself to show all the little guys what would happen to them and while he was doing it he would be self-supporting and free. [...] He would show himself to the little guys and to their mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and wives and sweethearts and grandmothers and grandfathers and he would have a sign over himself and the sign would say here is war and would concentrate the whole war into such a small piece of meat and bone and hair that they would never forget it as long as they lived. (Trumbo 2007: 233)

Even though Joe’s wishes are denied in the fictional world of the novel, they are constantly being fulfilled as each new generation of readers encounter *Johnny Got His Gun*. In fact, this seems to be the one sentiment that most critics agree on, even though none have connected it to the grotesque realism described by Bakhtin. For example, in his article, ‘As Crippled As It Gets’ (1970), Tomas Pospisil writes:

*Johnny*’s surviving disfigured body becomes a sign threatening to subvert the traditional rhetoric mobilizing the masses to fight for their king, democracy,

humanity, etc. Therefore it has to be rendered invisible [...] If the hero has been deprived of the possibility to bring home to the people the messages of the madness of modern warfare, the novel has not. (140)

In other words, the novel *Johnny Got His Gun* represent its protagonist's wishes being fulfilled as his life, thoughts, and degraded body are transformed into a cautionary tale for all who read it.

In the *Gospel of John*, there is the classic line about 'the word becoming flesh,' and in a way, the complete opposite is at work in novels that employ grotesque realism. Much like the works of Francois Rabelais, Trumbo's novel is the literary embodiment of the grotesque. For example, the text itself parallels its protagonist's own corporeal experiences through acts of dismemberment and body modification, crowning and uncrowning, death and resurrection. Even the structure of the novel is closely tied to its protagonist's own corporeal journey and grotesque degradation (the novel is divided into two sections, *Book I The Dead*, and *Book II The Living*). Following this logic, the structure of *Johnny* has a lot in common with the carnivalesque *double body*—simultaneously living and dead, negative and positive, horrific and inspiring.

As I mentioned earlier, the degraded image of the body has a dualistic nature in the carnival's system of imagery. The body is never closed or complete; its debasement is not seen as being entirely negative, while its death is always followed by rebirth. This dualistic nature is what separates the grotesque body from other representations of the body, and this particular Bakhtinian feature seems to permeate all aspects of Trumbo's novel. For this reason, the many references to Lazarus and Christ are very important when decoding the meaning behind its imagery.

Much like the crucified body of Christ, Joe Bonham's body is a co-product of the political and historical forces of his time. Whereas Christ had the Romans and the Sanhedrin, the capitalist system and its war machine exploit Joe. Like crucifixion, reification and dismemberment are very negative; however, upon entering the figurative world of the carnival, the negative and horrific undergo a positive transformation.

*Book I The Dead* begins with Joe figuratively being returned to the womb: 'It was like a full grown man suddenly being stuffed back into his mother's body. [...] Somewhere sticking in his stomach was a tube they fed him through. That was exactly like the womb except a baby in its

mother's body could look forward to the time when it would live' (Trumbo 2007: 83). The novel's many references to pregnancy and the womb are juxtaposed with flashbacks of soldiers diving into the trenches and Joe being swallowed by the earth: 'All he knew was that on a day in September in 1918 time stopped. There was a howl somewhere and he dived into a dugout and things blotted out and he lost time' (130). Joe even compares his condition to being 'dead while alive like a man who has been buried in a casket deep in the ground' (220). Such imagery perfectly mirrors the Bakhtinian *double body* and *pregnant death*. Of this grotesque duality, Bakhtin writes:

In contrast to modern canons, the age of the body is most frequently represented in immediate proximity to birth or death, to infancy or old age, to the womb or the grave, to the bosom that gives life and swallows it up. But at their extreme limit the two bodies unite to form one. The individual is shown at the stage when it is recast into a new mold. It is dying and as yet unfinished; the body stands on the threshold of the grave and the crib. (1984: 26)

Within Trumbo's system of imagery, the earth is both grave and crib for his newly infantilized protagonist. Joe even fantasizes about one day being resurrected from the grave and figuratively reborn: 'He could hear her voice as she told them that up in a little room far away from the rest of the hospital a lid had been lifted from a coffin a stone had been rolled away from a tomb and a dead man was tapping and talking' (Trumbo 2007: 224). Joe's pregnant death is not entirely negative, for it is not until being swallowed up by the earth/womb and dismembered that he begins dissecting and challenging the historical forces responsible for his condition: 'He knew all the answers that the dead knew and couldn't think about. He could speak for the dead because he was one of them. He was the first of all the soldiers who had died since the beginning of time who still had a brain left to think with. Nobody could dispute with him' (122).

*Book II, The Living* begins with Joe foreshadowing his desire to become the 'new messiah of the battlefields' as he remembers the body of a dead German soldier the Americans dubbed 'Lazarus' (Trumbo 2007: 154). Lazarus hangs on the wire for many days, rotting and stinking so bad that the soldiers attempt to destroy the corpse with shelling. After many failed attempts, they are finally ordered to bury the corpse in no mans land, but after a shell hits the grave, Lazarus is figuratively resurrected. According to Tim Blackmore's analysis, this

episode forces the soldiers to ‘confront their physical future in all its corruption’ (2000: 4). In addition to this, I would also like to point out how the Lazarus episode parallels Joe’s own corporeal journey, and reveals the distinctly Bakhtinian nature of the text. In other words, through the grotesque images of both Lazarus and Joe, *Johnny* exposes the ugly reality of war and then transforms this ugliness into something positive by summoning the carnival’s theme of ‘the change of epochs and the renewal of culture’ (Bakhtin 1984: 325).

*Book II, The Living* also sees Joe trying to think himself back into existence and communicate with the outside world (Torisky 2000: 258). After spending what seems to be an eternity tapping the Morse code with his head, Joe finally breaks through. In an unusual example of redemptive suffering, our hero is resurrected from the grave/womb, returning to the world enlightened and optimistic:

It was as if all the people in the world the whole two billion of them had been against him pushing the lid of the coffin down on him tamping the dirt solid against the lid rearing great stones above the dirt to keep him in the earth. Yet he had risen. He had lifted the lid he has thrown away the dirt he had tossed the granite aside like a snowball and now he was above the surface he was standing in the air he was leaping with every step miles above the earth. He was like nobody else who had ever lived. He had done so much he was like god. (Trumbo 2007: 222)

Joe then recounts the story of the birth of Christ, alluding to the massacre of the innocents and his eventual sacrifice for humanity. It is even hinted that Christ’s existence will be a threat to the established order of Rome: ‘Away in Rome a man in a palace stirred in his sleep. He almost awakened and then drowsed off again wondering in his dreams why he was so nervous. Mary listened to the angels and didn’t seem to feel as happy as when she first saw her child [...] Her eyes filled with pain and fear for the little baby’ (Trumbo 2007: 216). This episode, like the Lazarus episode, hints towards Joe’s final endgame:

Carry me in my glass box down to the aisles where kings and priests and brides and children at their confirmation have gone so many times before to kiss a splinter of wood from a true cross on which was nailed the body of a man who was lucky enough to die. Set me high on your altars and call on god to look down upon his murderous little children his dearly beloved little children. Wave over me the incense I can’t smell. Swill down the sacramental I can’t taste. Drone out the prayers I can’t hear. Go through the old holy gestures for which I have no legs or arms. Chorus out the hallelujahs I can’t sing. Bring them out loud and strong for me your

hallelujahs all of them for me because I know the truth and you don't you fools. You fools you fools you fools. (240)

The above passage embodies almost every characteristic of grotesque realism that I have outlined in this section. Joe is mocking and abusing the established order while sarcastically describing himself as a dismembered savior, who, unlike Christ, was not lucky enough to really die. Of this episode, Tim Blackmore writes, 'Joe then imagines himself as the main event in a carnival that Bakhtin would recognize. In the world of misrule, the freak will be human, the clown would be king' (2000: 16). This passage not only reveals Joe's plan, but also hints to the dualistic and distinctively Bakhtinian nature of *Johnny Got His Gun*.

Trumbo's protagonist wishes to use the destruction of his own body as a means of disrupting the Roman Empire of his era while inspiring positive social change: 'He had a vision of himself as a new kind of Christ as a man who carries within himself all the seeds of a new order of things. He was the new messiah of the battlefields saying to people as I am so shall you be' (2007: 246). This passage, which does not occur until the very end of the novel, seems to explicitly link *Johnny's* imagery with the Bakhtinian grotesque, only further illustrating the text's seemingly simple, yet complex use of the body for discursive purposes.

### *Conclusion*

Although I have dissected Joe Bonham into three seemingly separate bodies, it is important to remember that they are all interacting as soon as you open the first chapter of Trumbo's text. While the phenomenal body is the ontological constant, it undergoes a process of reification when coming into contact with the historical forces portrayed in the novel. It is the tension between the reified and phenomenal body that then gives way to a subversive act of defiance, which, in the case of *Johnny Got His Gun*, can best be described as the grotesque body.

As I have suggested, it is Trumbo's use of the body for discursive ends that might explain why such an unusual novel remains so popular and inspiring. Regarding this final point, Iraq-war activist Cindy Sheehan puts it best in her 2007 introduction to the novel:

Trumbo made me feel for a horribly maimed soldier who used to be a son, a brother, a bakery worker, and a lover. [...] Joe, Average Joe, of course struck a chord with my soul and broke my maternal heart. [...] I also understood Average Joe's anguish

as he tapped his head up against his headboard, trying to get someone to listen to him and let him out to the world. I understand his frustration when he was shut down and shut out of using his tragedy for the betterment of humanity. (viii-x)

Thus, it is this tragic image of ‘average Joe’—whose freedom and autonomy is curtailed by his body’s involvement in-the-world—that serves as a deceptively complex symbol capable of drawing empathy from a wide range of readers. But what Joe Bonham fails to accomplish in the fictional world of the narrative, *Johnny Got His Gun* sees fulfilled as it becomes part of the social discourse in the real world. In this sense, Joe Bonham is still defiantly tapping away, warning each new generation of readers, ‘as I am so shall you be.’

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