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## Sites for Contemporary Gothic

Recently, I had a strange conversation. A very interested and keen person asked me about the Gothic. Specifically, the question was: “what is the Gothic?”. I was immediately thrown by the question, as many probably would be. What is, indeed, the Gothic? After a momentary panic – as many would probably experience, presented with such a task – I ventured into giving an answer, or, at least, whatever kind of answer can be squeezed into five minutes of conversation. I tried to shoehorn in all the terms I could think of that would be useful: uncanny, grotesque, terror, sublime, and many of their similar counterparts. I quickly recounted narrative examples from all sorts of disciplines, just to be on the safe side, knowing that the list was too short and reductive, and that I would not be doing justice to over two hundred and fifty years of scholarship. As my “answer” ended, and I drew a breath of quasi-relief, my interlocutor nodded. Suddenly, however, he said: “I get the general idea, but I am confused...isn’t the Gothic just about literature?”.

I was stunned. My first reaction was to shout “No, it’s not!” to the top of my lungs, but I did decide against it. Nonetheless, how could anyone suggest such a thing? True enough, I had started my journey into the Gothic via literary studies, but as a humble scholar of other narrative forms such as film, animation, and comics, I was outraged. Still, I did not shout, nor did I launch into a philosophical treatise of why “the Gothic” is certainly not “just about literature”. I was shocked by the suggestion, but I

could not form an articulate response that would encompass what I saw to be all the multi-faceted varieties of Gothic discourse, all its incarnations, all its mutations. So, in the end, I just limited myself to smiling back and answering: “Not anymore”.

In truth, “the Gothic” has not just been about literature for quite some time. Centuries, even. There is no denying, of course, that its inception finds its roots in the literary world, and that the relationship that the Gothic holds with literature is more than just a legacy: it is still a fertile and apt territory for expansion and development. So the marriage with literature is still strong. If one wanted to delve into the expressions of the Gothic into cultural narratives, however, one would need to reach even further into history, where the worlds of folklore and mysticism prove the existence of the “narrative of terror” long before the publication of Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. As Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville have recently claimed, via the use of the term “living Gothic”, the Gothic exists in the fabric of the everyday, and manifests itself in the structures of life, as well as death (Piatti-Farnell and Beville, 1).

The Gothic, therefore, is not just a literary concern. It is to be found in the cells of film and animation; it lingers in the speech bubbles of comics and graphics novels; it spreads in the digital pixels of videogames; it beats in the notes of music; it runs along the lines of fashion design. The Gothic has the potential to be, as it has often been claimed, “everywhere”, and it enjoys this ability by showing itself in often unexpected places. Justin Edwards and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet have successfully shown that the Gothic is entangled with the narratives of popular culture, through what they call “Pop Goth”, a term that is used in reference to “a strand of cultural production that appears in cinema, television, young adult fiction, visual culture and even dark tourism” (Edwards and Monnet, 1). The Gothic has placed itself within the reach of the everyday in many ways, moulding itself into the needs and desires of our 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, the Gothic is not “just about literature”: it would be perhaps more apt to say that the Gothic is “about narrative”, whatever form that narrative might take, in whatever cultural context.

The question of where to find “the Gothic” is, of course, entangled with the definition of what we call “contemporary Gothic”. In spite of the fact that this is an intrinsically controversial term, it also points us in the direction that, as far as the Gothic is concerned, its manifestations are about re-elaboration as well as invention. Therefore, scholarship focused on contemporary Gothic will be centred primarily on three core ideas: firstly, that the Gothic is not a static concept, but it is mouldable and adaptable to changes in time, place, and, naturally, medium; secondly, that “contemporary” does not mean only focusing on what has been produced in our contextual moment, but re-visiting texts from previous historical times, in view of re-considered knowledge; and thirdly, that the Gothic always has the potential to be about both canon and revolution, and that a flexible understanding of the term is necessary in order to fully capitalise on

its reach. The Gothic is as much about literature as it is about other media and their connection to the ways in which we live, dream, and fear.

This issue of *Aeternum* has been developed in the spirit of this approach to “contemporary Gothic”. The articles that have been included offer revisions and re-considerations, as well as new insights, into the Gothic medium, from literature to film, and even music. The scholarship the authors propose highlights the connection between Gothic representation and contextual preoccupations, from the here and now of culture, to the weight of historical and folkloristic narratives. In her article, “‘I once more tasked my understanding and my senses’: Sensual Stimuli in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly*”, Emily Petermann explores the representation of sensorial stimuli in 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic fiction, reaching beyond the supremacy of sight alone. Focusing on Charles Brockden Brown’s novels *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntly* (1799), Petermann examines the role of non-visual perception and the way it is presented by the autodiegetic narrators, questioning the 18<sup>th</sup> century empiricist hypothesis that rational decisions can be made based on the evidence of the senses. Petermann proposes a re-evaluation of well-known Gothic fiction, introducing an innovative way of exploring its structures and thematics. The unreliability of “knowledge”, and its inevitable connection to dreaming and the uncanny, is also the centre of David Punter’s article “Alan Bilton: Sleepwalking on the Moon”. Punter surveys how Bilton offers a reinterpretation of everyday language and cliché, which serves to offset and contrast with the progressively disturbing worlds in which the protagonists find themselves. Instances of *déjà-vu*, hallucinations, and nightmares are surveyed by Punter, discovering how Bilton’s “dream world” often resembles “real” scenarios, but seen through a distorting mirror. Punter’s article uncovers the dangers of over-familiarisation, and the place the Gothic occupies in this context. While the narrative cores of Petermann’s and Punter’s articles were produced in different centuries, both authors engage with a re-evaluation of the Gothic in relation to contemporary preoccupations, proving that the thread of Gothic narratives transcends time, even if its manifestations are contextual.

The third article of the issue, Alan Gregory’s “Fabricating Narrative Prosthesis: Fashioning (Disabled) Gothic Bodies in Tim Burton’s *Batman Returns*”, continues the exploration of contemporary cultural preoccupations into the realm of popular culture. Gregory offers an exploration of the representation and implications of deformity in Burton’s film, evaluating notions of both normality and abnormality in their socio-cultural contexts. Questions of identity and cultural coding animate Gregory’s discussion, as well as a re-consideration of corporeal politics in relation to the Gothic and visual media. A desire to re-examine Gothic structures in disciplinary areas that were previously left unexplored is also at the centre of Vittorio Marone’s article “A Winterhorde in a Ravenrealm: Immortal’s Lyrics as an Expression of Northeroic Gothic”. Marone examines the lyrical themes of Norwegian black metal band Immortal, and contends that the specificity and uniqueness of the lyrics is embodied by the fusion of Gothic, Nordic, and heroic themes. This original style, which Marone labels

“Northeroic Gothic”, creates a cohesive emotional landscape that represents Immortal’s personal concept and mythology. Both Gregory and Marone engage with analyses of the Gothic that are dependent on cultural scrutiny and media fusion, confirming the need to re-examine the Gothic beyond its traditional metaphorical structures.

This issue of *Aeternum* also includes two book reviews, written by Roslyn Weaver and Sarah Baker. The two texts under review continue the analysis of the Gothic in our contemporary moment, renewing the interest in its aesthetic, political, and narrative influences. The reviews are a useful way to conclude this volume as they draw attention to matters that are both contemporary and historical, contextual and transcendental, and expose the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary reach of the Gothic in our multi-media, 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

## References

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## Editor Details

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