

M/C Journal, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2014) - 'gothic'**Gothic: New Directions in Media and Popular Culture**<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/880>

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In a field of study as well-established as the Gothic, it is surprising how much contention there is over precisely what that term refers to. Is Gothic a genre, for example, or a mode? Should it be only applicable to literary and film texts that deal with tropes of haunting and trauma set in a gloomy atmosphere, or might it meaningfully be applied to other cultural forms of production, such as music or animation? Can television shows aimed at children be considered Gothic? What about food? When is something "Gothic" and when is it "horror"? Is there even a difference?

The Gothic as a phenomenon is commonly identified as beginning with Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which was followed by Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1778), the romances of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). Nineteenth-century Gothic literature was characterised by "penny dreadfuls" and novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Frequently dismissed as sensational and escapist, the Gothic has experienced a critical revival in recent decades, beginning with the feminist revisionism of the 1970s by critics such as Ellen Moers, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. With the appearance of studies such as David Punter's *The Literature of Terror* (1980), Gothic literature became a reputable field of scholarly research, with critics identifying suburban Gothic, imperial Gothic, postcolonial Gothic and numerous national Gothics, including Irish Gothic and the Gothic of the American South. Furthermore, as this special edition on Gothic shows, the Gothic is by no means limited to literature, with film, television, animation and music all partaking of the Gothic inflection.

Indeed, it would be unwise to negate the ways in which the Gothic has developed to find fertile ground beyond the bounds of literature. In our media-centred twenty-first century, the Gothic has colonised different forms of expression, where the impact left by literary works, that were historically the centre of the Gothic itself, is all but a legacy. Film, in particular, has a close connection to the Gothic, where the works of, for instance, Tim Burton, have shown the representative potential of the Gothic mode; the visual medium of film, of course, has a certain experiential immediacy that marries successfully with the dark aesthetics of the Gothic, and its connections to representing cultural anxieties and desires (Botting). The analysis of Gothic cinema, in its various and extremely international incarnations, has now established itself as a distinct area of academic research, where prominent Gothic scholars such as Ken Gelder—with the recent publication of his *New Vampire Cinema* (2012)—continue to lead the way to advance Gothic scholarship outside of the traditional bounds of the literary.

As far as cinema is concerned, one cannot negate the interconnections, both aesthetic and conceptual, between traditional Gothic representation and horror. Jerrold Hogle has clearly identified the mutation and transformation of the Gothic from a narrative solely based on "terror", to one that incorporates elements of "horror" (Hogle 3). While the separation between the two has a long-standing history—and there is no denying that both the aesthetics and the politics of horror and the Gothic can be fundamentally different—one has to be attuned to the fact that, in our contemporary moment, the two often tend to merge and intersect, often forming hybrid visions of the Gothic, with cinematic examples such as Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) playing testament to this. Indeed, the newly formed representations of "Gothic Horror" and "Gothic Terror" alerts us to the mutable and malleable nature of the Gothic itself, an adaptable mode that is always contextually based.

Film is not, however, the only non-literary medium that has incorporated elements of the Gothic over the years. Other visual representations of the Gothic abound in the worlds of television, animation, comics and graphic novels. One must only think here of the multiple examples of recent television series that have found fruitful connections with both the psychologically haunting aspects of Gothic terror, and the gory and grisly visual evocations of Gothic horror: the list is long and diverse, and includes *Dexter* (2006-2013), *Hannibal* (2013-), and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-), to mention but a few. The animation front—in its multiple incarnations—has similarly been entangled with Gothic tropes and concerns, a valid interconnection that is visible both in cinematic and television examples, from *The Corpse Bride* (2005) to *Coraline* (2009) and *Frankenweenie* (2012). Comics and graphics also have a long-standing tradition of exploiting the dark aesthetics of the Gothic mode, and its sensationalist connections to horror; the instances from this list pervade the contemporary media scope, and feature the inclusion of Gothicised ambiances and characters in both singular graphic novels and continuous comics—such as the famous *Arkham Asylum* (1989) in the ever-popular *Batman* franchise. The inclusion of these multi-media examples here is only representative, and it is an almost prosaic accent in a list of Gothicised media that extends to great bounds, and also includes the worlds of games and music.

The scholarship, for its part, has not failed to pick up on the transformations and metamorphoses that the Gothic mode has undergone in recent years. The place of both Gothic horror and Gothic terror in a multi-media context has been critically evaluated in detail, and continues to attract academic attention, as the development of the multi-genre and multi-medium journey of the Gothic unfolds. Indeed, this emphasis is now so widespread that a certain canonicity has developed for the study of the Gothic in media such as television, extending the reach of Gothic Studies into the wider popular culture scope. Critical texts that have recently focused on identifying the Gothic in media beyond not only literature, but also film, include Helen Wheatley's *Gothic Television* (2007), John C. Tibbetts' *The Gothic Imagination: Conversation of Fantasy, Horror, and Science Fiction in the Media* (2011), and Julia Round's *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2014).

Critics often suggest that the Gothic returns at moments of particular cultural crisis, and if this is true, it seems as if we are in such a moment ourselves. Popular television shows such as *True Blood* and *The Walking Dead*, books such as the *Twilight* series, and the death-obsessed musical stylings of Lana Del Ray all point to the pertinence of

the Gothic in contemporary culture, as does the amount of submissions received for this edition of *M/C Journal*, which explore a wide range of Gothic texts. Timothy Jones' featured essay "The Black Mass as Play: Dennis Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*" suggests that although scholarly approaches to the Gothic tend to adopt the methodologies used to approach literary texts and applied them to Gothic texts, yielding readings that are more-or-less congruous with readings of other sorts of literature, the Gothic can be considered as something that tells us about more than simply ourselves and the world we live in. For Jones, the fact that the Gothic is a production of popular culture as much as "highbrow" literature suggests there is something else happening with the way popular Gothic texts function. What if, Jones asks, the popular Gothic were not a type of work, but a kind of play? Jones uses this approach to suggest that texts such as Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out* might direct readers not primarily towards the real, but away from it, at least for a time. Wheatley's novel is explored by Jones as a venue for readerly play, apart from the more substantial and "serious" concerns that occupy most literary criticism.

Samantha Jane Lindop's essay foregrounds the debt David Lynch's film *Mulholland Drive* owes to J. Sheridan le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) thus adding to studies of the film that have noted Lynch's intertextual references to classic cinema such as Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966). Lindop explores not just the striking similarity between *Carmilla* and *Mulholland Drive* in terms of character and plot, but also the way that each text is profoundly concerned with the uncanny. Lorna Piatti-Farnell's contribution, "What's Hidden in *Gravity Falls*: Strange Creatures and the Gothic Intertext" is similarly interested in the intertextuality of the Gothic mode, noting that since its inception this has taken many and varied incarnations, from simple references and allusions to more complicated uses of style and plot organisation. Piatti-Farnell suggests it is unwise to reduce the Gothic text to a simple master narrative, but that within its re-elaborations and re-interpretations, interconnections do appear, forming "the Gothic intertext". While the Gothic has traditionally found fertile ground in works of literature, other contemporary media, such as animation, have offered the Gothic an opportunity for growth and adaptation. Alex Hirsch's *Gravity Falls* is explored by Piatti-Farnell as a visual text providing an example of intersecting monstrous creatures and interconnected narrative structures that reveal the presence of a dense and intertextual Gothic network. Those interlacings are connected to the wider cultural framework and occupy an important part in unravelling the insidious aspects of human nature, from the difficulties of finding "oneself" to the loneliness of the everyday.

Issues relating to identity also feature in Patrick Usmar's "Born To Die: Lana Del Rey, Beauty Queen or Gothic Princess?", which further highlights the presence of the Gothic in a wide range of contemporary media forms. Usmar explores the music videos of Del Rey, which he describes as Pop Gothic, and that advance themes of consumer culture, gender identity, sexuality and the male gaze. Jen Craig's "The Agitated Shell: Thinspiration and the Gothic Experience of Eating Disorders" similarly focuses on contemporary media and gender identity, problematising these issues by exploring the highly charged topic of "thinspiration" web sites. Hannah Irwin's contribution also focuses on female experience. "Not of this earth: Jack the Ripper and the development of Gothic Whitechapel" focuses on the murder of five women who were the victims of an assailant commonly referred to by the epithet "Jack the Ripper". Irwin discusses how Whitechapel developed as a Gothic location through the body of literature devoted to the Whitechapel murders of 1888, known as "Ripperature".

The subject of the Gothic space is also taken up by Donna Brien's "Forging Continuing Bonds from the Dead to the Living: Gothic Commemorative Practices along Australia's Leichhardt Highway." This essay explores the memorials along Leichhardt's highway as Gothic practice, in order to illuminate some of the uncanny paradoxes around public memorials, as well as the loaded emotional terrain such commemorative practices may inhabit. Furthering our understanding of the Australian Gothic is Patrick West's contribution "Towards a Politics & Art of the Land: Gothic Cinema of the Australian New Wave and its Reception by American Film Critics." West argues that many films of the Australian New Wave of the 1970s and 1980s can be defined as Gothic and that international reviews of such films tended to overlook the importance of the Australian landscape, which functions less as a backdrop and more as a participating element, even a character, in the drama, saturating the mise-en-scène. Bruno Starrs' "Writing My Indigenous Vampires: Aboriginal Gothic or Aboriginal Fantastic" is dedicated to illuminating a new genre of creative writing: that of the "Aboriginal Fantastic". Starrs' novel *That Blackfella Bloodsucka Dance!* is part of this emerging genre of writing that is worthy of further academic interrogation. Similarly concerned with the supernatural, Erin Mercer's contribution "'A Deluge of Shrieking Unreason': Supernaturalism and Settlement in New Zealand Gothic Fiction" explores the absence of ghosts and vampires in contemporary Gothic produced in New Zealand, arguing that this is largely a result of a colonial Gothic tradition utilising Maori ghosts that complicates the processes through which contemporary writers might build on that tradition.

Although there is no reason why the Gothic must include supernatural elements, it is an enduring feature that is taken up by Jessica Balanzategui in "'You Have a Secret that You Don't Want To Tell Me': The Child as Trauma in Spanish and American Horror Film." This essay explores the uncanny child character and how such children act as an embodiment of trauma. Sarah Baker's "The Walking Dead and Gothic Excess: The Decaying Social Structures of Contagion" focuses on the figure of the zombie as it appears in the television show *The Walking Dead*, which Baker argues is a way of exploring themes of decay, particularly of family and society.

The essays contained in this special Gothic edition of *M/C Journal* highlight the continuing importance of the Gothic mode in contemporary culture and how that mode is constantly evolving into new forms and manifestations. The multi-faceted nature of the Gothic in our contemporary popular culture moment is accurately signalled by the various media on which the essays focus, from television to literature, animation, music, and film. The place occupied by the Gothic beyond representational forms, and into the realms of cultural practice, is also signalled, an important shift within the bounds of Gothic Studies which is bound to initiate fascinating debates. The transformations of the Gothic in media and culture are, therefore, also surveyed, so to continue the ongoing critical conversation on not only the place of the Gothic in contemporary narratives, but also its duplicitous, malleable, and often slippery nature. It is our hope that the essays here stimulate further discussion about the Gothic and we will hope, and look forward, to hearing from you.

References

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