

# **Gothic-postmodernism**

## **Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity**

Maria Beville



Amsterdam - New York, NY 2009

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## Introduction

In the current climate of literary experimentalism, 'Gothic' may seem to soe, an anachronistic term. Having spent most of the nineties as a buzz-ord in literature and culture, its haunting presence appears to have ided somewhat. With the end of TV serials such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* and the current lack of interest in the so-called Gothic images that used to inundate media and popular culture, the question arises yet again as to what significance the Gothic bears for contemporary literature?

Having exploded in the last two decades (considered broadly as part of the postmodern era) to cross disciplinary and cultural boundaries beyond the 'literary' into music, film, TV, fashion and even the web, a lack of literary importance in the genre was heralded by many, who considered the intensity of the mode diluted, having been mixed with so many varieties of popular entertainment. In spite of this the Gothic of the postmodern era continues to be analysed in detail by literary critics. Significantly, however, this analysis is mostly confined to studies of horror film and fiction and consensus tends to fall with the idea that the Gothic in postmodern literature and film is a result of a 'diffusion' of the genre (Botting 2003, 14). Its literary importance is regarded as having been depleted and the focus remains far from the literary, with recent popular films such as *Van Helsing* (2004), *Blade Trinity* (2004) and *Underworld* (2004) (Spooner 2008, 136). Importantly, what remains to be taken into account by such criticism is the presence of fundamental Gothic elements in literary postmodernist texts. By this, I refer to works definable under the paradigm of postmodernism; experimental, radical and often metafictional literature which problematises the relationship between reality and fiction, reader and text. The main purpose of this book is to fill this gap in literary criticism by proposing a theoretical approach to postmodernist texts that are definitively Gothic. By defining the genre, Gothic postmodernism, it will assert the intrinsic links that tie the Gothic and the postmodern in literary and cultural terms and declare

the Gothic as the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity; a mode that is far from dead and in fact rejuvenated in the present context of increased global terrorism.

In doing so, the message that this work seeks to communicate is that, first of all, 'the Gothic' is a term that has been over-used and over-creatively interpreted in recent times. Due to this misrecognition of the Gothic, it is less obviously distinguishable in postmodern work: in which its more subtle qualities come to the fore. Popular culture and its critics alike seem to have immersed themselves in a romantic notion of Gothic as a style or aesthetic defined by a number of emotive characteristics and standard devices.

Secondly, and related to the first message, is that the core of the genre, its terror, has been greatly overlooked and its relevance to contemporary culture and society has not yet been fully acknowledged. From this perspective, it is not surprising that much of the critical work that has been done on the genre observes the Gothic in modern culture as 'having lost its older intensity', 'saturating contemporary culture' to the point where it provides normative images of 'Vampire teens' and soul-hunting cyborgs to the modern consumer (Hogle 2002, 287).

It can be argued that the postmodern audience that is or was the consumer of the popular Gothic, tends now only to appreciate the superficial 'Gothic' veneers of certain works, of which, many have been accurately categorised by critics like Fred Botting as 'candygothic' (Botting 1996, 134). As Catherine Spooner puts it 'while we all may think that we can recognise the Gothic...we are all amateur Van Helsing's, well versed in the characteristics of the Vampire and its fellow creatures of the night' (Spooner 2006, 8). This discussion, in providing a definition of the Gothic in a new literary form, seeks to offer a fresh perspective on contemporary Gothic and also to highlight the survival of the Gothic in literature, by addressing the question: what is the essence, if any, of the genre?

Moreover, in defining a new genre, Gothic-postmodernism this study will present an articulation of the psychological and philosophical implications of terror in postmodernist literature analogous to the terror of early Gothic works. Emphasising the role of the Gothic sublime and its concern with the unrepresentable, as the core of the genre, it seeks to put forward a definition of Gothic postmodernism as a hybrid mode that emerges from the dialogic

interaction of Gothic and postmodernist characteristics in a given text. Consequently, it will establish that the Gothic still exists in postmodernist literature, and that 'terror' (with all that it involves) remains a connecting and potent link between the Gothic and the postmodern.

The idea of defining Gothic-postmodernism is intrinsically bound up in defining the Gothic. In identifying characters such as Billy Pilgrim and Bret Easton Ellis as Gothic anti-heroes, while denying Buffy the Vampire Slayer the same identification, I will intimate that the Gothic elements evident in the latter are at base superficial and that such texts are not really Gothic. The popularity of the 'candygothic' of such novels and films is evidence of our predisposition to concentrate on Gothic stylistic conventions. While its shadows and sombre tones, its stormy landscapes and characters are of course paramount to its artistic presentation and to its terrifying effects, they are and should be seen, not as ornamental literary devices, but as derivative of the Gothic's concern with terror and with encountering the unrepresentable in sublime experience. By considering the Gothic as the literature of terror, echoing David Punter, I define Gothic-postmodernism as the same and further this idea by advocating a view of Gothic-postmodernism as an amplification of the Gothic language of terror to encompass the more recent terrors of our postmodern age and also the theories of terror that have been put forward as part of the enterprise of postmodern cultural theory.

In approaching Gothic-postmodernist works, close textual analysis and a broad theoretical approach will be the main methodological approach. Consequently, twofold readings of the selected works will be offered. These works will be identified, firstly, as a fusion of various Gothic and postmodern features of literary exploration and secondly, as an articulation of Gothic-postmodernism due to the interaction of these different features. Acknowledging the overriding concept of terror will unify this approach and analysis will progress toward a performative and contextually driven definition, in which the particular qualities of the texts that have been identified are allowed to 'speak for' the genre.

A range of theoretical approaches to the process of genre definition in this work will furthermore seek to place Gothic-postmodernism as a pioneering contemporary literary effort, a self

conscious genre that operates both to broach our desires for terror and to expunge the fears of our postmodern 'culture of death' (Baudrillard 1993, 127). While many critics propose that the Gothic has been exhausted, and that its significance is depleted by consumer society's obsession with instantaneous horror, analyses of a number of terror-based postmodernist texts in this book will suggest that the Gothic is still very much animated in Gothic-postmodernism. Moving from a particularist approach to a generalist one allows for a broad definition of this literary mode, which surveys distinctly Gothic traits at work on a fundamental level in postmodernist works such as Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Paul Auster's *City of Glass* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*. Spectral characters, *doppelgängers*, hellish waste lands, and the demonised or possessed, emerge as the most obvious Gothic inscriptions in the chosen postmodernist narratives. However, as the main point of cross fertilization of the two genres, the deeper issue of the lingering emotion of terror as it relates to loss of reality and self, and to death will be the primary focus.

Re-evaluating current critical thought on both the Gothic and postmodernism, the premise of this book is based on the perception that our postmodern situation is comparable to the Reign of Terror in the years following the French Revolution (Punter); that period at which the Gothic reached its peak. The perspective of this work thus develops with a notion of 'terror' formulated from the theories of both continental philosophers and contemporary cultural theorists. In this sense, the Gothic anxieties of postmodern literary and cultural theories will also be considered. Quite interestingly, these theories are also evidence of the Gothic in postmodernism. Jean Baudrillard's 'spirit of terror' and 'cities of death', will be seen as closely linked to Jacques Derrida's 'hauntology', Jean Francois Lyotard's theories on the postmodern sublime and Slavoj Žižek's consideration of 'the Thing'. On a further level, these theories will be used to approach selected texts and will be applied to various readings of the works as Gothic, postmodernism or 'both and'.

Significantly, Gothic-postmodernism is not the same, although it is related to, classifications such as postmodern Gothic or Contemporary Gothic. Decisively, Gothic is used here as the adjective of the term denoting that what is under investigation is the postmodern text that is characteristically Gothic. The Gothic will be analysed as a reflexive genre akin to postmodernism in that it offers readers the

potential to interrogate our own unconscious fears, terrors and anxieties and new ways to represent them. And in its obsession with death it expunges those fears through the return of the repressed in a ghostly play on haunting and spectrality. Postmodernism can be assessed as being similarly dedicated to excess, anxiety, fear and death. According to Baudrillard, ours is a 'culture of death'. This would suggest interesting implications for the functions of terror in literature, significantly, that terror functions to highlight the spectrality of postmodern existence. In most Gothic-postmodernist works this is emphasised in the pervasive themes of haunting and fluid identity. Through these themes, a definition of Gothic-postmodernism will be suggested, introducing it as a mode of literature which, via metafictional strategies, offers the reader a new kind of reading experience appropriate to the postmodern condition; a genre in which Gothic elements fuel postmodernist explorations of reality and hauntology, and in which the liminality of the characters grasps at something close to that unrepresentability that underpins the processes of subjectivity, inducing silent screams as readers' illusions are shattered.