Twenty-First-Century Gothic

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Edited by

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PREFACE

CATHERINE SPOONER

Is it too early to name a twenty-first-century Gothic? Gothic is conventionally a backward-looking genre. Whether set in a barbarous former age, or haunted by that age's remnants and vestiges, the past weighs heavy on Gothic narratives. The twenty-first century, on the other hand, has long been shorthand for visions of futuristic opportunity and excitement. "Here comes the twenty-first century/ It's gonna be much better for a girl like me" sang Deborah Harry in 1989[1]—encapsulating a mood of optimism regarding the next century that resonated through the 1980s. In pop-punk tracks by the likes of Sigue Sigue Sputnik and Transvision Vamp, the twenty-first century signified the heady day-glo rush of disposable pop culture, space travel, and futuristic sex. But barely a decade into the new century, these 1980s pop visions seem naively retro. Disposable pop culture is now held responsible for imminent environmental crisis; space programmes are too expensive for governments negotiating global recession; and cyber sex just looks tawdry. The more dystopian future visions of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) have dated better: narratives which look back to the labyrinthine cityscapes of nineteenth-century urban Gothic and the Frankensteinian implications of creating artificial life. As the twenty-first century begins, the dominance of cyberpunk has given way to steampunk, an even more self-consciously backward-looking form of retro-futurism. In texts like Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's serialised comic *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-ongoing), a faux-Victorian aesthetic is combined with the technologies of nineteenth-century science fiction to create uniquely atmospheric fantasy, picturing a future powered by brass and steam. If the world's media presented the turn of the millennium as an enormous temporal cusp, the orgy of looking backward that this afforded has fuelled new and unexpected obsessions with the past. Ghosts proliferate: on television, in cinema, in the obsession with past traumas that fills the shelves of high-street booksellers with misery memoirs and true crime confessionals. The dominant mode of the twenty-first century, it increasingly seems, is Gothic.

So is twenty-first century Gothic just the hangover of the twentieth century, the last throes of pre-millennial tension, or does it represent the emergence of a new zeitgeist, one that will continue to thrive in coming decades? Imposing epistemological breaks onto history is always a suspect enterprise, and arguably twenty-first century Gothic has its roots decades earlier, back in the 1970s when the novelist Angela Carter declared that we are living in "Gothic times" (1974: 122). Certainly both Goth subculture and Gothic Studies as an academic discipline emerged towards the end of that decade, and have become increasingly significant in the production of Gothic meanings and discourses over the ensuing thirty years. Other significant moments could be identified, however, as heralding a change in sensibility: April 20th, 1999, when two students at Columbine High School in Colorado massacred their classmates; or September 11th, 2001, the date of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, the initiating event of the so-called "War on Terror". The former event was explicitly (and erroneously) linked with Goth subculture by the American media; Gothic links with 9/11 and its aftermath are more oblique. The media reporting, however, of the atrocities of Abu Ghraib and elsewhere has subtly shifted the language of horror, so that films like Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) or George Romero's *Diary of the Dead* (2007) inaugurate a new nihilism in which torture and trauma are bound up with their modes of communication through new media and technologies. As a result, we could argue that there is more at stake in twenty-first century Gothic: earlier Gothic productions reworked the tensions and anxieties of their age but ultimately were the pure stuff of entertainment; now that the news has become a form of entertainment in its own right, frequently deploying what Edward Ingebretson (2001) has termed the "rhetoric of fear" in its sensationalist creation of monstrous others, Gothic has real and visceral effects on the way audiences understand world events.

It is overly simplistic to suggest that the resurgence of Gothic in the final decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first can be mapped directly back on to cultural crisis. Culture doesn't operate that conveniently; fiction—or film, or fashion, or music—is not a mirror that faithfully reflects back the concerns and crises of its age. It does, however, provide a means of mediating them for different audiences; it creates a space in which they can be explored and expressed. And as Gothic becomes an increasingly dominant mode of cultural production as the twenty-first century progresses it seems imperative to undertake its new formations seriously. As Brian Jarvis demonstrates in this volume, for example, the traditional haunted house of American Gothic fiction may be

uniquely well-suited to expressing the early twenty-first century economic crisis and collapse; while Xavier Aldana Reyes argues that the extreme representations of bodily pain found in some contemporary Gothic texts can offer a meaningful and even beneficial response to the soulless world of late capitalism. Dean Lockwood, invoking a particular brand of criticism inspired by Derrida's *Specters of Marx* that has been crucial to recent understanding of Gothic discourses, suggests that post-punk music has a "hauntological" function in relation to northern Britain in the 1970s and1980s, enacting both containment and critique of what novelist David Peace describes as "industrial decay, industrial murder, industrial hell". In all of these essays, Gothic criticism enables the elucidation of social and political change.

At the same time, there is a new lightness about much twenty-first century Gothic. The burgeoning popularity of what is often labelled "urban fantasy" or "paranormal romance", in which werewolves, vampires, fairies, zombies and other marvellous creatures became characters—and frequently romantic leads—in their own right, demonstrates a different kind of engagement with Gothic, one that has more to do with sex, desire and lifestyle. The best of the genre, like Charlaine Harris's Sookie Stackhouse novels and their televisual adaptation *True Blood*, do engage with "serious" identity politics on the levels of sexuality, race and class, but also return with an apparent sigh of relief to the idea of Gothic as sensation, as entertainment. In the wake of series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Blood* and *Being Human*, Gothic has become witty, sexy, cool. It has transcended its cult interest niche to become what would have once been unthinkable: fashionable. And fun: dressing as a vampire, as Maria Mellins' respondents do in her essay for this volume, may have more to do with pleasure (in fantasy, in socialising, in the details of costume and make-up) than personal or cultural anxiety.

These twin Gothics—Gothic as the profoundly serious business of trauma and haunting, and Gothic as sensation, pleasure and romance—go hand in hand and are not always clearly distinguishable, even within individual texts. In the twenty-first century, Gothic is increasingly hybridised. Fear may not be the primary mood or concern of contemporary Gothic narratives—rather comedy, or romance, or macabre quirkiness, or melancholia, or desire, or mourning. In fact, Gothic has been so thoroughly hybridised with so many different kinds of other texts that it is difficult to securely pin down any longer. Gothic is no longer one thing, it no longer fits a convenient definition—if it ever did. This may give rise to anxiety in some critics who wish to impose limits on an increasingly unruly set of discourses, but can also be regarded as a source of critical

pleasure. The proliferating signs and traces of Gothic have by now spread far beyond the limits of fiction into numerous other forms, discourses and media. While we should retain precision in mapping their spread, it is self-defeating to exclude texts from a notional Gothic "canon" in the interest of a fictional generic purity. Rather than worrying about what twenty-first century Gothic "is", perhaps instead we should focus on what it does—how it is deployed, what kind of cultural work it performs, what meanings it produces. Seen in this light, twenty-first-century Gothic retains the capacity to surprise us—to horrify, and to delight.

Notes

1. Deborah Harry, 'I Want That Man' (Tom Bailey/Alannah Curry), Chrysalis Records, 1989.

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INTRODUCTION

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY GOTHIC

BRIGID CHERRY, PETER HOWELL
AND CAROLINE RUDDELL

The essays in this volume reinterpret and contest the Gothic cultural inheritance, each from a specifically twenty-first-century perspective. Most are based on papers delivered at a conference held, appropriately, in Horace Walpole's Gothic mansion at Strawberry Hill in West London, which is usually seen as the geographical origin of the first, but not the last, of the many Gothic revivals of the past 300 years. At the time of the conference this building was being completely renovated by English Heritage, and it is tempting to suggest that the public money bestowed on this project is an expression of a recent revival of interest in all things Gothic related. This is a revival that can be evidenced across a wide range of cultural productions, most obviously in the domination of the American Gothic, including the recent popular vampire tales *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* by Charlaine Harris (2001 onwards, adapted for television as *True Blood*) and *The Twilight Series* by Stephenie Mayer (2005 onwards, also adapted for the cinema), but also apparent in more 'global' examples such as Asian horror cinema or co-production films like *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 2001). The Gothic sensibility could in this way be seen as a mode particularly applicable to the frightening instability of the world in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The truth is probably less epochal: that Gothic never went away (when were we ever without fear?), or at least has persisted since its resurgence in the late nineteenth century. As Christoph Grunenburg asserts, the transition from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century incorporates, 'a full-blown resurgence of a Gothic sensibility in contemporary art and culture,' with 'a mordant outlook along with a chilly attachment and […] pitch black humour' (1997, 210). As such, Gothic is at least as modern as it is ancient, and each essay in this collection explores a particular aspect of Gothic's contemporaneity.

The influence of Gothic as a mode of discursivity is wide and varied across cultural spheres, and appropriately this volume contains work by researchers working in a number of disciplines. Despite such variety and multi-disciplinarity it is, however, possible to discern two main ways of understanding Gothic, which inform most of the readings given here. The two essays that begin the volume are exemplary of these approaches. Gary Farnell's essay 'Theorising the Gothic for the Twenty-First Century' advances the argument that Horace Walpole's founding Gothic text *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is a mechanism for expressing, or failing to express, an unnameable anxiety or thing (in Freud's terminology 'Das Ding') that haunts the psyche. With its roots in psychoanalysis, via a Lacanian route, this first tendency claims that Gothic culture can best be understood as a drama of the mind, a confrontation with, or a working through, of desires and anxieties located in the unconscious. Conversely, Brian Jarvis' essay 'The Fall of the Hou$e of Finance' interprets Gothic tropes as symbols of an economic system in crisis, the perennial figure of the Gothic house becoming a metonym for sub-prime lending, the collapse of the housing market, financial leverage and debt. In this way, the Gothic text is read as figuring political and social anxiety, the crumbling house symbolising the crumbling social fabric, and Gothic fantasies being analogous to the fictitious money created by the finance industry. The house and the haunted space also become the central tropes explored in Rebecca Janicker's chapter 'Behind the Barricades of Silence', on Richard Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes* (1958). Here the focus is shifted from the economic on to anxieties related to the family and mundane domesticity in 1950s America. Consumer culture and suburban living are not only alienating, but the ordinary space of the family house becomes liminal once subject to haunting.

As evidenced by these chapters, there is a debate in literary studies between psychoanalytical critical approaches on the one hand, and historicist on the other; does the cultural text bespeak the world within or without? Yet it is also true that Gothic has a habit of confounding such a dichotomy. If the body is the interface between the mind and the world, then Gothic's interest in physical sensation figures the personal as political, and the political personal. Xavier Aldana Reyes' essay 'Obsessed with Pain' focuses on pain in the novels and films of *American Psycho* (dir. Mary Harron, 2000) and *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999), and in *Saw* (dir. James Wan, 2004) and the franchise it spawned; he explores the depiction of the body in pain and finds a Gothic sensibility in the morbid fascination with death and decay in these examples. Importantly, Aldana Reyes acknowledges that the experience of reading or viewing these case

studies involves a difficult identification on the part of the reader/viewer, where they might be aligned with the tormentor and/or victim. The experience of reading these texts means an engagement with a contemporary Gothic perspective of the body in 'bits and pieces', of being 'comfortably numb' and potentially desensitised to images of pain. This also becomes a central feature in Margaret Bethray's essay 'A World of Bald White Days in a Shadeless Socket', a re-reading of Sylvia Plath's 'The Hanging Man' (1960), where the poem is explored from the perspective of social and cultural attitudes towards gender and madness. Here, through an exploration of ECT in American society—what Bethray refers to as Gothic medicine, the female body is subject to torture and pain as femininity is medicalised.

The Gothic, according to Wayne Drew, has also been revived in postmodern horror cinema by filmmakers such as David Cronenberg, where issues of the body are prominent. Drew identifies patterns of obsession and fascination present in the stylistic texture, complex genesis and highly subversive subject matter of the Gothic novel that filmmakers have attempted to replicate. Rooted in cultural neuroses, the moral ambiguity and metaphysical complexity of the Gothic experience did not translate easily to the cinema though. Rather, Drew identifies a Gothic shadow at the centre of the obsessions and neuroses of late twentieth-century western culture and sees it at work in the 'clear call to the unconscious' (1984, 17) of Cronenberg's body horror cinema. Although Drew's discussion centres on the very specific cinematic horror of Cronenberg's films, his arguments can be related to anime, particularly in terms of the obsessions and neuroses attached to contemporary living. With regard to the twenty-first-century Gothic, anime embraces the fluidity of identity and bodily integrity. Many diverse anime films, television series and manga create ambiguities and close the gap between living beings and inanimate technological objects. In her essay on cyborg identity in anime, 'Representations of Augmented Humans and Synthetically-Created Beings in Japanese Cyberpunk Anime', Melanie Chan uses Donna Haraway's discussion (1991) of the cyborg and gender as a springboard to address such fluidity in the technological body. Such obsessions could be related to contemporary concerns with technology, although Haraway's argument that we are all cyborgs potentially liberates us from a negative reading of contemporary technology's impact on the body.

Furthermore, like the historical and fictional Gothics that precede it, popular culture is a monstrous entity with its own mixed heritage. As Catherine Spooner suggests the 'Gothic is mutable and can fulfil the

cultural and critical needs of the time' (2006, 156). She goes on to note that the Gothic anachronistically harks back to earlier forms of the Gothic in appealing to the 'contemporary lust for spectacle and sensation' (156). Cultural texts therefore become uncanny again, both familiar and unfamiliar. Two of the essays in this volume explore the ways in which popular culture has an uncanny ability not just to reflect the time in which it was created but to mediate the histories that precede it. Dean Lockwood's essay 'Dead Souls' addresses the Gothic as a disruptive force in contemporary culture, as a haunting. With a focus on post-punk, Lockwood discusses crises related to urban decay in Britain of the 1970s, with a particular focus on the North. A recurring theme of this collection, and the Gothic more widely, is a tension between past and present, which Lockwood terms as 'spectrality' and 'untimeliness'. Similarly, Brigid Cherry's essay 'The Black Parade' focuses on the music video and addresses the idea of recycling the past to make sense of the present, which she argues is the case in certain music video genres that mediate a Gothic sensibility. The chapter explores the music video as creatures made as if by a Frankenstein, created from the disparate parts of other texts. The aesthetic experiences of such videos depend upon their hybrid status. They are uncanny and abject and exhibit the morbid humour of the grotesque.

Hybridity and mediations of the past are topics which are also explored in Maria Mellins' essay 'Fashioning a Morbid Identity'. Focusing on dressing the body and constructing performative identities amongst female vampire fans, Mellins' account is based on empirical research into the nature of dress and identity in this particular community, or communities. The association between vampirism and sexuality and gender is related to the violation of taboos, allowing for identification with the other. Vampirism, or the sexuality associated with vampirism, is a forbidden act for the woman who is constrained by patriarchy to suppress her sexuality. Mellins' findings from studying female vampire fans shows how appropriating Victorian Gothic imagery potentially allows her participants to 'stand out' from traditional understandings of femininity; they communicate identity through an appropriation of the Gothic. This is based on the transgressive vampire heroine as able to cross or breach the boundaries of identity. Nina Auerbach notes that the Gothic incorporates symptoms of social and cultural change (1997, 5). Mellins' arguments underscore that change through a physical appropriation of the Gothic, and more specifically of the vampire. This allows the vampire fan to signify both a looking back and a glance forward to social and cultural changes in gender identity.

The Gothic text is no longer primarily concerned with the destruction or casting out of that which is better left in the grave; the monstrous other has 'surfaced from the subconscious' and been transformed and subverted (Wood 2007). Just as Mellins' research into female vampire fans demonstrates that the Gothic monster is no longer wholly abject, Rachel Mitsei Ward's essay 'Copyright, Association and Gothic Sensibility' also looks at a fan community, the members of which have embraced monstrosity. Ward discusses 'ownership' over the Gothic text or genre in another empirically-based study. She examines the politics of cultural ownership of the Gothic text (Jenkins 1992). Her study focuses on fan reactions to White Wolf's lawsuit against the producers of *Underworld* (2003) for copyright theft. This chapter deals with (fan) attitudes towards who owns the imaginative text. Rather than looking at specific practices within role-playing, Ward's objective is to explore the ways in which role players develop a sense of ownership, or appropriation, of the status of the text.

As the findings of Ward's research make clear, ownership of Gothic discourse is in the hands of the reader or viewer, rather than the creator. In its varied iterations and diversions, Gothic in the twenty-first century is a market in which consumption implies (re-)production, and where every consumer is also a producer. No doubt it was always thus; as the newly re-instated details of Horace Walpole's mansion at Strawberry Hill abundantly show, the Gothic revival was from the start no reputable, strictly antiquarian recreation of the past, but an eccentric *bricolage* and appropriation of history in response to late eighteenth-century social and psychical concerns. That female vampire fans in twenty-first-century London appropriate Gothic tropes in order to express desire and reject patriarchal constructions of that desire should not, then, surprise us; Gothic is a discursive form that was from the start particularly suited to such appropriational free-play.

However, there is a danger in praising such democratic diversity that we construct a consumerist and oxymoronic 'happy Gothic' sensibility. When delighting in the liberated space created by Gothic *bricolage*, we should also remember the nature of the dark social and psychical threats from which the Gothic subject attempts to be liberated. The essays in this volume reference economic crisis, medical control of individuals, technocratic domination, the grotesque and tortured body, and dread of the unnameable thing that haunts the unconscious, and show that Gothic culture consists of unremittingly sombre musings on contemporary concerns. This is perhaps the sting in the Gothic tales told here.

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CHAPTER I

THEORISING THE GOTHIC FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

GARY FARNELL

> We are too close to *das Ding*, that is the theological lesson of postmodernism.
> —Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*

A new theory of the Gothic for the twenty-first century is as follows. Gothic is the name for the speaking subject's experience of approaching the Thing. This Thing (with an upper-case T) is as it has been described in Lacanian theory (fashioned from the writings of Kant, Hegel, Freud, and Heidegger): a phantasmatic construction of an unnameable void at the centre of the real, which as such both resists and provokes symbolisation. This Thing, then, is not of the order of signifiers within the symbolic order, hence its actual unnameability except as *the Thing*. As Serge André, himself a Lacanian analyst, says, "because language includes words such as 'unutterable' and 'unnameable', a place is hollowed out where something unutterable or something unnameable can really exist" (1994, 92). The Thing is rather "that which in the real suffers from the signifier", to quote the formula which Jacques Lacan employs in his seventh seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1992, 115; see also 118, 125, 134). It is in the process of its becoming-word—its suffering from the signifier—that this actually unnameable Thing is resolved into a series of effects in the symbolic order. A thing (with a lower-case t) is, by contrast, a phenomenon of the order of signs as any object that might be named by language: in Freud's German, for example, *die Sache* is a nameable thing, while *das Ding* is its unnameable counterpart. The significance of this distinction is what is elaborated on in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The thrust of this labour has it that the symbol (and, by extension, the symbolic order of language, culture, art) is understood as being defined against the impossible reality of the Thing. Further, to define the symbol by

something other than itself means that what is other is *by definition* already part of what it is simultaneously exterior to. Lacan speaks in this connection of the "intimate exteriority or 'extimacy'" which constitutes the Thing; Jacques-Alain Miller explains this "extimacy" (*extimité*) as "a term used by Lacan to designate in a problematic manner the real in the symbolic" (Lacan 1992, 139; Miller 1997, 75).

It may be that the most disturbing, as well as intriguing, aspect to this extimate Thing is that it is located at once inside and outside language, culture, art. By the same token, it may be at once inside and outside one's home, one's family, one's self. Already, perhaps, we can glimpse the interest of this notion of the Thing (*das Ding*) to a new theory of Gothic as a way of formalising our grasp of such things as space, property and subjectivity—typically, threats to subjective identity as located within interior spaces arising from disputes over property inheritance—as the familiar *topoi* of numberless Gothic fictions.

The Gothic in Theory

As with all "new theories", this new theory of the Gothic is not entirely new of course. We must acknowledge the work in this direction of Catherine Belsey. Belsey too probes the extimacy of the Lacanian Thing that renders to us the absent centre of the real; that is, something which is unsymbolisable but which, ironically, must be symbolised if we are to come to terms with its radical strangeness. This radically strange Thing is thus the reason why we have culture: as Belsey says in her *Culture and the Real*, "culture offers a detour that keeps the Thing itself at bay, defers with its own signifying presence the impossible *jouissance* of the encounter with pure absence, and gives pleasure in the process" (2005, 71). This remark is to explain what in Lacan is described as the "magic circle" that separates us as speaking subjects from the asymbolic Thing (Lacan 1992, 134). In her work, Belsey takes us on an extended tour of culture's magic circle, expounding the complex nature of pleasure itself as it arises from a wide range of cultural forms that mediate the real to us.

For all the extensiveness of Belsey's tour, however, there is no engagement with the Gothic, as inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis. For that, with an emphasis on Thing theory in particular, we can turn to the recent research of Dale Townshend, published in his book *The Orders of Gothic*. Townshend identifies what he calls "Gothic's incestuous Thing" (2007). In so doing he notes how so many Gothic fictions, starting with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* as founding text in a whole tradition of Gothic fiction, dramatise the prohibition against incest as the

basis of family and social life as lived across a central nature/culture divide, in the process positioning the mother of the incest prohibition as radically Other. This absent mother is thus *the* figure who occupies the place of the Thing *vis-à-vis* the symbolic order: she is *par excellence* Gothic's incestuous Thing. In *Otranto* what is at issue is the *potential* incest of Prince Manfred with the Princess Isabella, who, as is mentioned repeatedly, lives as a daughter within Manfred's family prior to her marriage to Manfred's son Conrad. Manfred is desperate to produce an heir, especially after the death of Conrad, on the day that should have marked *his* wedding to Isabella: "by me", as Friar Jerome remarks to Manfred after hearing the latter's plans to take Isabella as his wife, "thou art warned not to pursue the incestuous design on thy contracted daughter" (Walpole 1968, 84). It is Victoria, the wife of Alfonso, the last rightful Prince of Otranto, who is the structural *absent mother* in all this. She is the grandmother of Theodore, the true heir of Otranto, a figure whose lineage has been obscured through Victoria remaining in Sicily after Alfonso joins the Crusades in the Holy Land, being poisoned there by his chamberlain Ricardo. It all works out in such a way in Walpole's novella that the subject of incest is at once an explicit subject of the plot and an excluded subject of the narrative. It is thus an "*extimate* phantasmatic Thing", as Townshend says, apropos of the representation of sexuality in Walpole; of this very subject, Townshend notes, "For all modernity's repugnance towards it, it assumes a position of hideous centrality" (2007, 189).[1]

Townshend makes a valuable contribution to a new theory of the Gothic from his understanding of extimacy, as figured with reference to the Thing, located within the field of sexuality. But there is no need to confine ourselves to this level alone in Gothic analysis as undertaken from this perspective. In his most extensive, Lacanian engagement with the Gothic, the essay "Grimaces of the Real", Slavoj Žižek describes how "the void of the inaccessible Thing is filled out with phantasmagorias through which the transphenomenal Thing enters the stage of phenomenal presence" (1991a, 66). (This void that generates phantasmagorias is itself a variant of Hegel's "Night of the World" in the Jena Lectures 1805-6). Žižek's emphasis here on *transphenomenality* is important for it captures the way that the unsymbolisable Thing always comes to be symbolised in the world of cultural objects. Addressing the problem of sublimation in his *Ethics*, Lacan introduces us to what for him is the primordial cultural object, the potter's vase. This vase is made by the potter out of nothing, "starting with a hole", as Lacan says (1992, 121). It is an emblem in Lacan of the process of creation *ex nihilo* that encompasses the production of artworks in general, such that works of art are seen as forms of creation *ex*

nihilo that start with a hole in signification and thus encircle (in culture's magic circle) the emptiness at the heart of the real that materialises as the Thing. In short, the potter's vase is the object of objects in Lacan; as such, it has the value of representing the transphenomenal Thing. In terms of its representative function, the vase—notably maternal in shape—is thus the object of a process of sublimation which, as Lacan says in another of his formulas, "raises an object […] to the dignity of the Thing" (112). As we shall see, it is primarily within the object world of Gothic fiction that sublimation itself becomes one of two main processes triggered during the speaking subject's experience of approaching the inaccessible Thing.

Žižek explains the status of sublimity as "ultimately that of a 'grimace of reality'", here evoking a key phrase from Lacan's *Television* whereby a *grimace* signifies an expression of pleasure and disgust at the same time. Žižek's point is that such a grimace constitutes one among many possible analogues of how the real expresses itself at the level of phenomenality (Žižek 1991a, 68; Lacan 1990, 6 & 42). Žižek argues: "The boundary that separates beauty from disgust is […] far more unstable than it may seem, since it is always contingent on a specific cultural space" (1991a, 68). It is precisely from this specific cultural space, organised by cultural objects, that the doublings of beauty and disgust become articulated together in the Gothic's enactment of a symbolic approach to the Thing; that is, in the encounter with the proverbial things that go bump in the night. Or to put this in a more strictly psychoanalytic way, it is the key processes of *sublimation* and *abjection* that are activated within the psychic economy of the subject in encounters with the unknown as staged in Gothic fictions. It is through sublimation in Lacan that we move towards "the beyond-of-the-signified", whilst what is termed "the outside-of-meaning" is approached by us through abjection, as described by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (Lacan 1992, 54; Kristeva 1982, 22). Either way, it is to the place of *das Ding* that we are led by these paths. Kristeva suggests that, "The abject is edged with the sublime" (11), and thus she produces a nice formula with which to capture the tension which animates numerous Gothic tales. From this viewpoint, the world of Gothic is one of pulsating *jouissance* – that is, an alternating rhythm of sublimation and abjection – arising from narrative encounters with the "beyond" or the "outside" of signified meaning.[2] Or, to use the language of Walpole's Preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, "the mind is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions" (1968, 40).

Vase/Helmet

We can readily identify phenomenal traces of the transphenomenal Thing within the cultural spaces and their objects represented in Gothic fictions. In *The Castle of Otranto*, for instance, though incest is the "*extimate* phantasmatic Thing" that haunts the tale's sexuality, there is also the way in which the at once maternal and absent Thing manages successfully to enter the play of the world in this novella. Thus: where in Walpole's text might we find a figuration of the potter's vase as the Lacanian object of objects upon which a certain rhythm of sublimation and abjection appears contingent? The servant who brings to Manfred and the wedding company the news of Conrad's death, crying "Oh, the helmet! the helmet!" gives us our answer to this question (52). For in this, as it happens the first phantasmagorical occurrence in the first Gothic novel, we discover within the lifeworld of Castle Otranto an instance of the beyond of the symbolic order making its presence, its otherness, its *enjoyment* felt – a huge, black anamorphotic stain in the very reality of Manfred and the others. For this, of course, is the giant helmet from the statue of Prince Alfonso that has fallen on Conrad, crushing him to death on what should have been both his birthday and his wedding day. The key thing that is affirmed by this is the source *and* efficacy of the power of Alfonso, located in a time-space outside the "common sense" or, indeed, the general ideological field of Manfred and the rest, to correct Alfonso's usurpation by Manfred's grandfather, Ricardo. Here, the appropriateness of the helmet as the object which serves as the instrument—or object-cause—of Alfonso's power is clear. For the expository idea of Gothic's incestuous Thing is what is presented in the spectacle of Conrad "dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, a hundred times more large than any casque ever made by human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers" (52-3). Suffice to say, the Gothic is everywhere marked by dark, anamorphotic stains like this—think also of that picture veiled in black silk as a covering for a *memento mori* in a recess of the wall in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—always disrupting the normality of established ways of thinking and seeing.

Here, as in the Lacanian vase, signification starts with, precisely, a hole (or hollow or void). In the scene of Conrad's death what we have is an instance of signification—in this case, the new Alfonsoian order—starting from the hole represented in the shape of the helmet. This new order of legitimacy is realised as a creation *ex nihilo* out of the inner blackness of this black marble helmet. And, as with the potter's vase, the maternally-

inflected nature of the helmet's shape is significant. Notwithstanding the fact that this is Alfonso's helmet, it is its material form that serves to evoke the existence of the maternal-absent Thing which, as Conrad lies dashed to pieces as the son of a sinful father, is making its entry into phenomenal reality. As is well known, Walpole's novella dramatises the traditional moral, albeit presented defensively by Walpole himself, that a father's sins are visited upon his children.

Throughout, one essential point is repeated: a society founded on the prohibition of incest will always be traversed by a split between the symbol and the Thing. The very tenor of life in this society is determined by the dialectic of this split, a dialectic which we might see as a matter of conventional law and order versus lawless *jouissance* (or due authority versus obscene enjoyment). Breaking the incest taboo is precisely the epitome of asymbolic lawlessness. At the same time, this act of transgression points to the proximity of the law that will be reinvoked when order is threatened in this way. Thus, this is the story in Walpole's novella of the father's sins—and, in a sense, the grandfather's sins—being visited upon his children, to the extent of the children being the objects of the reassertion of order, itself serving as a form of punishment in relation to the father. Here, the father's sins include the "incestuous design" where Isabella is concerned, bound up with the earlier usurpation of Alfonso. The latter is a phenomenon that comes about as a result of the making-absent of the primal mother in the story, Alfonso's wife Victoria, who is left behind when her husband leaves for the Holy Land. This making-absent of the primal mother is the very image of the prohibition against incest in Walpole's text. Walpole's *Otranto* as a tale about the truly extimate subject of incest, explicit at the level of plot whilst excluded at that of narrative, *may be said to start here*. From this standpoint, we can see Conrad's death in the novella as the fateful outcome to a certain rebound of the force released through the symbol-Thing split that structures the society he inhabits. The fate of Conrad as a dead symbolic subject thus links up in an essentially ethical way with that of Victoria, the at once primal and prohibited mother who buttresses the symbolic order. What this shows is that a society's moral codes flow from the structural Othering of the primal-prohibited mother. Alfonso's huge helmet, at once unreal and maternal-shaped, serves as the bearer of this logic both to Conrad and to us in Walpole. In a wider perspective, what we can see here is how a certain rhythm of sublimation and abjection, evident in the Gothic more generally, stems from this primordial vase-like helmet which, as a prolific emptiness that materialises form, occupies the place of the Thing. In terms of Lacanian sublimation, this helmet is raised "to the dignity of the Thing".

At the same time, it is Conrad, in this particular tale, who is abjected in Kristeva's sense; "what is *abject*", Kristeva says, "is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (1982, 2). The abject, then, is "edged" with the sublime in the Gothicism of this approach to the Thing in Walpole's famous story.

Vase/Shape

This model of the Gothic Thing helps us to understand the Gothic as we move into the early twenty-first century. Consider, briefly, a reading of a more recent example of Gothic fiction: Angela Carter's short story "The Lady of the House of Love" (from the *Bloody Chamber* collection of 1979). This is the same Angela Carter who proclaimed in the 1970s that "We live in Gothic times" as well as being the same Carter who was presented in the 1990s by the critic, Beate Neumeier, as a proponent of "postmodern Gothic" (Carter 1974, 122; Neumeier 1996, 141-51). In Carter, too, Gothic is the name for the speaking subject's encounter with intimations of the Thing.

"The Lady of the House of Love" is Carter's story about the Countess Nosferatu who is visited in her château by a young British army officer; the story is a reworking of several texts, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (Count Dracula becomes Countess Nosferatu, while Jonathan Harker reappears as the young army officer). What makes Carter's Gothic story indeed Gothic is, one might argue, crucially two things. First, the vampiric Countess as a member of that extimate race of creatures known as the living dead has the value of representing the Thing; she occupies what is described in Lacan as "the place that is both living and dead of the Thing" (1992, 300). Second, Carter's story is structured in terms of two narrative approaches to the Countess-as-Thing, first from the viewpoint of the story's anonymous narrator, and second from that of the army officer, and the essential tension of the story is what arises from this dynamic. So, for example, the narrator's approach to the Countess in this way comes with a remark like the following: "She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no-man's land between life and death, sleeping and waking" (Carter 2006, 119). In her ambiguity as an undead creature the Countess is both like and unlike us: she manifests precisely the sort of "intimate exteriority" which Lacan speaks of in his account of the Thing, and, in this way, we might grasp the source of the anxious fascination which the Countess holds for us. Similarly, the army officer's encounter with the Countess inside her château occurs in terms of his seeing her first as "only a shape, a shape imbued with a faint luminosity" (116). This

"shape" gradually resolves itself into the officer's sight of the Countess as a girl—the undead grow younger as well as older—wearing a "hoop-skirted" wedding dress (116). In other words, like a Thing, the Countess as a shape resolves herself into other shapes and, in this instance, the resulting image of the girl in the hooped dress seems freighted with significance. (If the Countess is a sexual inversion of Count Dracula, as previously mentioned, at other points like this she also appears as a strange ghost of Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham.) Recalling as it does the hollowness traced round in Alfonso's helmet in *Otranto*, the shape of the wedding dress suggests the idea that the wearer of the dress, the at once eroticised and forbidden girl-woman, might herself be as Other as the mother of the incest taboo; in short, she is *structural* to our social life, as well as the Gothic's dramatisation of the incest taboo.[3] Essentially, it is from the rich indefinability of the Lacanian Thing that the narrative energy of this scene—itself a virtual erotics of narrative—may be said to proceed as Carter writes out her own version of the Count Dracula story.[4]

We should take note as well of the significance of Carter's interest in courtly love which is evident in "The Lady of the House of Love", courtly love being identified as a paradigm case of sublimation by Lacan in his *Ethics*. In terms of the construction of courtly love, it is always the Lady as feminine object who is "elevated to the dignity of the Thing" (1992, 112). Lacan notes that, within the contours of the ideology of courtly love, this Lady "is as arbitrary as possible in the tests she imposes on her servant" (150). This carries the suggestion that sublimation and abjection are interrelated; the *arbitrariness* of the Lady herself is what determines her servant in becoming either a sublime hero or an abject failure. Varying the terms of the argument slightly, Žižek, in his essay "Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing", argues that there is "a link between courtly love and a phenomenon which, at first, seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with it: namely, masochism" (1994, 91). Whether it is spiritualisation and masochism, as in Žižek, or sublimation and abjection, as in the present essay, the same point is reinforced. What is emphasised is the appropriateness of a doubled perspective such as this in any approach to the simultaneously forbidden and impossible Thing. Carter's Countess-as-Thing in "The Lady of the House of Love" is partly modelled on the courtly Lady. In courtly love, this Lady, within the convention of her Thing-like arbitrariness, can be quite terrifying *vis-à-vis* her servant; viewing her in the perspective of artistic as opposed to psychological sublimation, Lacan speaks of "an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner" (Lacan 1992, 150; see also Žižek 1994, 89-90). This theatre of the inhuman emerges in Carter as well: it is known as the

"House of Love"! All this enhances what appears at once seductive and deadly about the Countess Nosferatu within the narrative gaze of Carter's story, so that we are able to feel more strongly the pulse-beat of Gothic fiction itself the further we venture into this whole space of phantasmagorias. This Countess, in the narrator's words, "is a haunted house" (119). And, in an instant, what becomes condensed into an image is the haunting power of the Thing, precisely in the aspect of its extimacy, figuring something as familiar as a house, but rendered strange by the presence of ghosts.

All this then follows through into the last scenes of Carter's story. The Countess and the army officer spend the night together and, implicitly, the question arises: will the army officer become another victim of the vampire Countess? What happens is that, *à la* Sleeping Beauty (and, to an extent, *à la* Siegfried and Brünnhilde in Wagner's *Ring* cycle), the army officer's kiss awakens Carter's Countess from the condition of being one of the living dead and, through becoming human in this way, she then dies. In all this there is a process of abjection (the Countess dies) as well as one of sublimation (in dying, the Countess is reborn into human mortality). Carter, it might be said, thus dramatises the ambiguity of the Gothic as a genre in the way she handles the ending to her story, turning around an axis of abjection and sublimation. Carter herself reflects on how it is in the Gothic that "Characters and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions" (1974, 122). It is in terms of this process of *exaggeration*—a *jouissant* alternation of sublimation and abjection—as enacted in "The Lady of the House of Love" that we can discern an objective theory of the Gothic taking shape.

Real-as-Absence

This is to summarise what makes the Gothic Gothic, on our model of the Gothic Thing, in Angela Carter. Prior to this Beate Neumeier has emphasised a specifically postmodern contribution to the Gothic from Carter. She writes (alluding to Countess Nosferatu, among other of Carter's characters): "Angela Carter's fantastic creatures never become real in the way Frankenstein's monster or Dracula do [...] because the real only exists as absence, as vanishing zero point in a world constructed by images, symbols, and myths" (Neumeier 1996, 150). This point about the real in Carter becoming a form of absence into a postmodern age constructed from models of simulation ("a thing of myths and signs", as Baudrillard (1998, 174) would have said) is well made.

But at the same time, as we can now see, this emphasis on the real-as-absence appears at the heart of a Gothic ontology—a *hauntology* in strictly Derridean terms—that runs the full length of the Gothic tradition, from Prince Alfonso's giant "helmet" to Countess Nosferatu's mere "shape", for example (see Derrida 1994, 51). Notably, there is a tendency in Christopher Frayling, a critic whose work is partly inspired by Angela Carter, to see postmodernism and the Gothic as uncannily synonymous: postmodernism's "twilight of the real", he says, "has proved spookily appropriate to the Gothic" (2006, 18).[5] The point, finally, is that the most sophisticated theory of the real-as-absence to date remains that associated with Lacanian theory, with a focus on the protean Thing in the real which suffers from the signifier. Lacan himself has established crucially in his *Ethics* that "in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative" (1992, 130). With this breakthrough in thought, made available to the English-language world in the 1990s, he has paved the way for a re-theorisation of the Gothic for the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. See also Michel Foucault's account of incest as "an object of obsession and attraction, a dreadful secret and an indispensable pivot" on which Townshend draws in his work (Foucault 1998, 109).
2. See Slavoj Žižek (1991b, 220-1) for a brief, suggestive passage on how the "catastrophic consequences of the encroachment upon the forbidden/impossible domain of the Thing are spelled out in the Gothic novel" (220). The passage itself includes Žižek's account of the staking – in other words, the sublime abjection – of Lucy Westenra in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* ("The Thing in the coffin writhed", etc.—see Stoker (1979, 258)).
3. For a psychoanalytic study of the treatment of the incest taboo on the stage of dramatic tragedy, see Green 1979.
4. For a genealogical perspective on the erotics of narrative associated with the Lacanian Thing, see, in particular, the presentation of the myth of Actaeon and Diana (Lacan 2006, 340-4 & 362-3).
5. In his essay, Frayling explains that he himself, as a personal friend of Angela Carter, was in fact a model for the young British army officer in "The Lady of the House of Love".

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