

Agnieszka Łowczanin / Dorota Wiśniewska
(eds.)

All that Gothic

Dis/Continuities

Toruń Studies in Language,
Literature and Culture

Edited by Mirosława Buchholtz



PETER LANG
EDITION

Introduction

The aim of this monograph is to present an overview of the rich range of expression and form the Gothic has taken in Western culture since its emergence in late eighteenth century England. Though at first restricted to literature and to the Old Continent, the genre spread across the Atlantic, finding fertile ground for expression on the New Continent, on the one hand, drawing from the European gothic tradition and on the other, enriching it with new themes and strong local flavours.

In the nineteenth century Gothicism appropriated a new body from folklore, the vampire, thus manifesting the genre's confident indifference to the high vs. low culture dichotomy. Gothic fiction evolved into ghost and vampire stories, which became a territory for addressing the taboo, themes otherwise inappropriate for this era's standards of propriety and decorum. Gothicism has always been a highly visual genre and its insistence on the marriage of image with emotion has granted it a permanent presence in cinema from its very beginnings in the early decades of the twentieth century. Gothic imagery and themes have been indispensable elements for cinematography, not only through numerous adaptations of classic gothic and vampire stories but mainly because of the genre's aesthetic potential, its subversive ideologies and legacy of contestation.

The title and the structure of this volume illustrate that Gothicism is deeply rooted in our culture and creative consciousness, crossing continents, taking on various forms and shapes and becoming a tool of expression for the fears that consume us. Its transcontinental, transgeneric and temporal transformations demonstrate its hybridity, and its undying, almost monstrous potential. Escaping easy categorisation, shrugging off definitions, but longing for modifiers – like postcolonial, urban, male, female, queer – Gothicism is blatantly ubiquitous, oozing into our reality in provocative guises. This collection of essays has been guided by the conception of gothic themes and provinces sketched out below, and represents an attempt, perverse as it may be, to put together a contemporary overview of gothic studies.

The content of Chapter One – “American Gothic” – indicates that “gothic” has become firmly established as the name for one sinister corner of the American imagination and sensitivity; from the unresisted acts of perversity and insane violence in the tales of E. A. Poe, examined in this volume by Weronika Łaszkiewicz, to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories* and their themes of the body, heredity and guilt, analysed by Marek Wilczyński; from H. P. Lovecraft's crude, obsessive, sensationalist prose in the service of naming the unnameable addressed by Wit Pietrzak to the “Ekphrastic Horror” in Stephen King's morbid tale “The Road Virus Heads North,” articu-

lating his own apprehension concerning the cultural status of the genre discussed here by Zofia Kolbuszewska.

Chapter Two – “Post- (Colonial) Gothic” – deals with texts which belong to this new-fangled category of postcolonial Gothic. The first article by Dorota Filipczak explores the familiar connection between Gothicism and colonialism while applying Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection to the relation between mothers and daughters in a short story “The Peace of Utrecht” by Alice Munro, associated with the so-called “Ontario Gothic,” and Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Anna Branach-Kallas shows in her analysis of fiction by Tomson Highway, Joseph Boyden and Eden Robinson how postcolonial Gothicism, while allowing a move beyond the stereotypical interpretation of texts by Canadian Aboriginal writers, simplifies Indigenous aesthetics in response to the postcolonial awareness fashionable in academia today.

Chapter Three – “Gothic Topographies” – with its analysis of such diverse examples as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Monika Kocot and contemporary Scandinavian horror film by Yvonne Leffler demonstrates that for the gothic effects to be attained, a literary or cinematic work should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space. These two dimensions reinforce one another to produce an impression of a sickening descent into disintegration. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman's tale “The Yellow Wallpaper” reminds us in its combination of personal testimony and feminist fable, the imprisoning house of Gothic fiction has from the very beginning been that of patriarchy, in both its earlier and its expanded feminist senses. The novels and films that revolve around a morose and moody Scandinavian topography unearth an intricate liaison between setting and character, external environment and internal condition of human psyche. Finally, both physical and mental confinement is evident in Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* – a novel organized around the chief metaphor of movement from centre to periphery and back to centre again, as Krzysztof Kosecki evidences in his article using the framework of Cognitive Poetics.

Chapter Four – “Gothic Bodies” – encompasses essays that account for gothic genre in psychosexual terms. In today's culture one's self-concept has been increasingly constituted in images of the body. In the ongoing crisis of identity the gendered binary subject of patriarchy has itself become subject to deconstruction. As the essays collected in this chapter demonstrate, the gothic genre emerged with discourses of the body to provide a language for imagining the self in monstrous transformation, re-gendered, ungendered, and regenerated, as early as in the late eighteenth century. The analysis of M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* by Agnieszka Łowczanin focuses on the representation and perception of the classical ideal of feminine beauty and examines the way in which its imag-

ing by the male subject actually helps to unearth that era's uncertainty about gender positioning. The figure of the vampire probably carries greater importance in today's mythology than it ever did for Transylvanian villagers in centuries past, and this is because it encapsulates for a postmodern age a fantasy model of decadent aristocratic cruelty, as well as sexual transcendence. A good example of the distortion of the typical arrangement in which the man is exclusive oppressor of a female victim is Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla." Tomasz Fisiak shows how the author skilfully deconstructs the gothic scheme by making a powerful, despotic female protagonist of a story which introduces to the gothic arena blatant eroticism and sexually transgressive female-female relations. Monstrosity, as Sara Tavassoli argues in her essay, has taken various shapes and forms since the development of the gothic genre. The discussion focuses on the body of Sophie Fevvers – the protagonist of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* – as a contemporary monster, whose feminine body, despite its beauty and attractiveness, shares a number of features with its old-fashioned ancestors. The last essay of this chapter, written by Agnieszka Kotwasińska, addresses the way in which contemporary horror fiction explores lesbian relationships and the way in which dramatic physical transformations enable protagonists to alter their bodies in unthinkable ways. Thus, via Paulina Palmer, Kotwasińska demonstrates how the characters in L. Timmel Duchamp's, Carrie Richerson's and Kathe Koja's texts tackle the excessiveness they are supposed to signify in a hetero-patriarchal economy.

Chapter Five – "The Supernatural" – deals with one of the most distinctive gothic tropes, the existence of which most unmistakably shakes the foundations of reality harnessed by reason. It commences with an article by Jadwiga Węgródzka who shows that after the eighteenth and early nineteenth century stories of children confronting the supernatural which aim to assert the rationality of reality, it is only in E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* that the gothic mode is used to undermine the ontological security of the rational world model. A completely different take on the supernatural is found in the fiction of contemporary British writer, Sarah Waters, whose two novels are examined in this chapter. Barbara Braid looks at Waters's neo-Victorian *Affinity*, where a gothic plot and gothic motifs, such as doubles and ghostly visitations, are employed as subversive schemes aiming at a disruption of the gender norm prescribed by what Butler termed the heterosexual matrix. Marta Goszczyńska examines *Fingersmith*, exploring the way in which gothic tropes and conventions seep into its narrative resulting in an all-pervasive sense of ontological and epistemological vertigo, as narratives become splintered, identities unstable, and the fictional world rendered increasingly unpredictable.

Gothic, like the other popular genres, has been absorbed into postmodernism. It infected the media with its themes and iconographies, as Chapter Six – “Non-Literary Gothic” – aims to demonstrate. Elisabeth Bronfen discusses George Romero's zombie film *Diary of the Dead* as a gothic war correspondent's narrative, in a tradition initiated by Ambrose Bierce's gothic stories about the Civil War. The article explores the continuity of this gothic sensibility in WWI poetry, as well as in Abel Gance's film *J'Accuse*, to evidence the resilient correspondence between war and zombie culture, and mediated re-enactments of war in literary and cinematic representations. The chapter again scrutinizes the world of the undead in an essay by Ewa Partyka entirely devoted to the vampire films created by Hammer Studios, which immortalized the nightly creatures for decades. In addition to all these now rather traditional features that Hammer vampires represent, E. Elias Merhige's film *Shadow of the Vampire*, discussed in the essay by Elena Baeva, provides another perspective on the nightly creatures and their contemporary cinematic embodiments. It is concerned with the recent discourses of the Neo-Gothic which are conveyed in the film's intertextuality and self-consciousness. A taste for the dead, on the other hand, informs Lynne Stopkewich's 1996 film *Kissed*, as shown in an extensive and vibrant discussion of a female necrophile by Katarzyna Małecka. Here sexual preferences are seen as lingering between a gothic sensitivity and the “sensibility of American transcendentalism” rather than between pure horror and gore. While Merhige's meta-film deconstructs the gothic and the medium film by showing how the fictional Murnau and his crew create and construct it for their production, the essay by Agnieszka Rasmus analyses Peter Bogdanovich's self-reflexive *Targets* not only as a homage to the gothic film but also as a farewell to the classic gothic horror film as well as a response to the alterations that the genre underwent in the 1960s. The chapter closes with an essay by Agnieszka Izdebska who analyses the way in which the conventions of the mockumentary and of the aesthetics of failure overlap in contemporary horror films to create an illusion of authenticity, a stratagem which takes us all the way back to the fakery inscribed at the very beginnings of literary Gothicism.

The authors and editors hope that this volume, if it proves anything, proves that the gothic genre is serious, important and necessary, not only to those human beings who read and watch in order to think, but to those vast numbers of readers and viewers who do so to feel. The gothic fulfils one more valuable human function. Besides showing us where the taboo lines of our society lie, it emphasises the light, by marking out that place where the darkness takes over.