THE GOTHIC WORLD

Edited by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

DEFINING A GOTHIC AESTHETIC IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART

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If you google "the Gothic" and hit "Images," on the screen before you will appear a wildly disparate – if oddly predictable – set of images. Desktop wallpaper featuring a misty forest dominated by a pointed-arch ruin in silhouette and sprinkled with ominous, hooded monks. Bela Lugosi, in a publicity still from Tod Browning's vintage *Dracula* (1931). Goth babes in ripped tights and figure-hugging corsets. A vaulted, shadowy, crypt-like space beneath a cathedral in Prague. Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* (1781–82). A haunted house, silhouetted against the night sky, perched on a hill. A scene from *The X-Files* (Carter 1993–2002) featuring a terrifying cyber-tunnel.

Taken together, these images certainly conjure up a "Gothic" vision, but how might we begin to define it? What might we mean today by a "Gothic aesthetic," and is this a valid term of aesthetic description where modern and contemporary visual art is concerned? What constitutes, in other words, the cluster of thematic and visual triggers that prompt the "Gothic" descriptor? Somewhat superficially, one might begin by noting that all the googled images are "dark," with a prevalence of the color black, but there are many "dark" things – outer space; a bowler hat; a kind of tea – that are black in color, without being distinctly "Gothic." So, dark, Gothic things are dark in a particularly "Gothic" way, and we are instantly caught in a tautological loop which seems inescapable.

In contemporary art discourse, the term "Gothic" carries little critical weight, and is usually reduced to describing motif-laden works typically featuring skulls, gore and other "spooky" iconography. Within the established contemporary art world, such "gothicky" artworks are received with a degree of suspicion, if not outright derision. Contemporary art critics often lament that "Gothic" contemporary art is merely that which features Halloweenish tableaux oozing with fake blood, bearing none of the revolutionary power of its claimed literary antecedents, from Sade to Edgar Allan Poe. Yet one notes the many respected contemporary artists producing works which intuitively earn the Gothic descriptor but do not feature the usual slew of "gothicky" motifs: Louise Bourgeois's shadowy, memory-laden *Cell* installations (Figure 35.1); Aïda Ruilova's dramatically *noir*-ish videos, with their sense of foreboding and picturing of "dead" time; Nathaniel Mellors's "black-box" installations

412

such as *Giantbum* (2009) (Figure 35.2), comprising Frankensteinian animatronics and film narratives that overlap past and present. How might we define the Gothic aesthetic that, as observed in these important contemporary artworks and in the culture at large, ventures beyond a tiresome catalogue of motifs, from vampires to angels in black shrouds, crosses to coffins?

Perhaps the conundrum of establishing meaningful parameters for a Gothic aesthetic stems from the routinely overlooked fact that the term was originally an art-historical rather than a literary one. The question today is not, as is often assumed in literary studies, solely one of translating a literary term into visually based media, but of returning "Gothic" to art after a very lengthy sojourn predominantly elaborated within another discipline. The term *gotico*, of course, was introduced into artistic and cultural discourse by art writers in Renaissance Italy in reference to post-antiquity art and architecture. Within Enlightenment culture of the eighteenth century, the term was applied to a pointed-arch revivalist architecture which mimicked the Middle Ages; subsequently, "Gothic" in English took an unprecedented turn to literature when Horace Walpole imaginatively (if confusingly) subtitled the second edition of his terror tale *The Castle of Otranto* "A Gothic Story" in 1765. In today's hybrid usage of the term, distinctions between the early literary and art-historical sources are often blurred; for example, in horror film the haunted house is located in a pointed-arch-style pile, a convenience exemplified in Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963). More recently, Peter Parker's monstrously

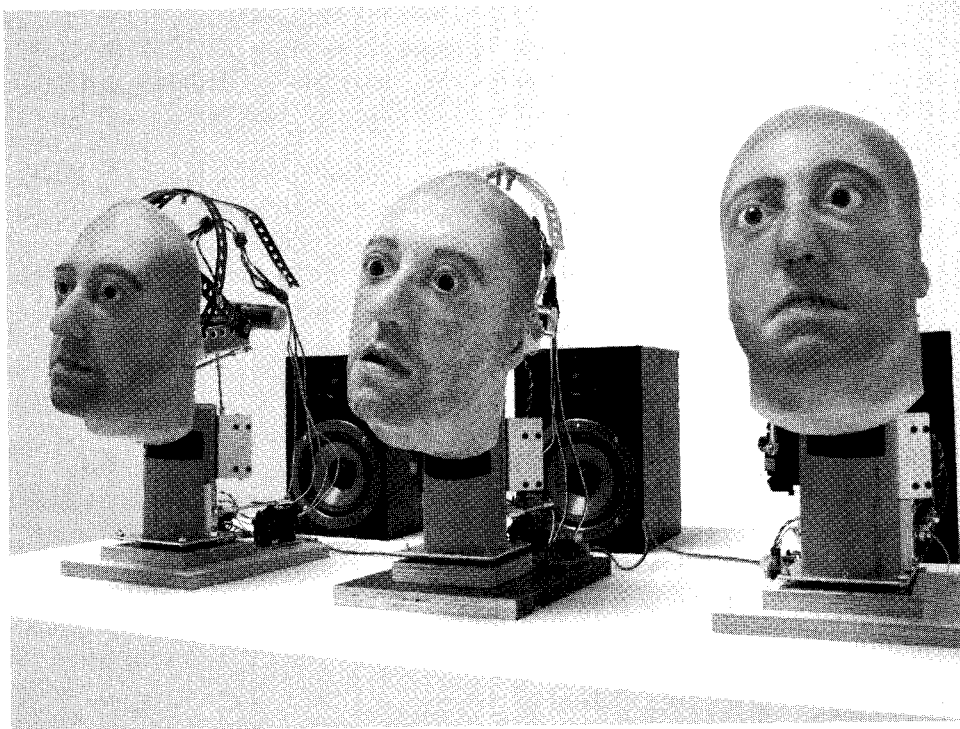Figure 35.1   Louise Bourgeois, *CELL VII*, 1998

Figure 35.2 Nathaniel Mellors, *Giantbum*, 2009

arachnidan transformation in *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007) occurs in a Gothic cathedral. "Gothic" is plagued with such slippages, rendering a fastidious untangling of disciplinary strands almost impossible; this chronic cross-disciplinary seepage should probably be recognized today as endemic within the Gothic vision. Independently of its post-Enlightenment history, art historians still apply the term "Gothic" to describe western medieval art and architecture of the period 1100–1500, although some architectural historians have questioned even this standard art-based usage. In the popular, literary-based meaning and imaging of "Gothic" today, however, the tradition of terror literature, horror cinema and the reinvention of the term within the goth subcultural socio-music scene has all but eclipsed its distant art-historical origins. In art, "Gothic" may have to share two meanings: one art-based and historical, the other literature-based and contemporary.

ORIGINS OF THE TERM "GOTHIC"

As critics have long acknowledged, the term cannot be grounded in any precise or conclusive origins; it would be nonsensical, for example, to assert that authentic Gothic architecture is that solely built by the Visigoths and Ostrogoths. As Paul Frankl pointed out in his authoritative *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations Through Eight Centuries* (1960), even Renaissance art

historians first experimenting with the term were aware that "Gothic" served as a shorthand for waves of various invading northern peoples (Frankl 1960: 254). The definitive invasion of Rome in 410 AD by Alaric, leader of the Visigoths, was mythologized as the final blow which irreversibly doomed the Eternal City, singling out this tribe – rather than the equally marauding Lombards, Vandals, Huns, and others – as deserving of special vilification by the Italians. The exact term "Gothic" – rather than, for example, "Germanic" or "modern," all synonyms in Renaissance Italy to describe the "inferior" art and architecture of the invading foreigners – appears first, and just twice, in the mid-fifteenth century. Establishing itself within critical vocabulary across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "Gothic" originally referred to almost a millennium of non-Classical art and architecture produced in the until-then unnamed post-antiquity "style" which the Italians had unhappily inherited. Across the Renaissance and beyond, the term "Gothic" ambiguously combined varying shades of meaning, from "low class" to "monstrous," "barbarous," "Northern," "foreign," "uncivilized," "awkward," and more. The term could also refer to any artistic artifact produced between the fall of Rome and the fifteenth century, without attaching itself to the biases of critical evaluation.

Shades of these many meanings persist and spread over the centuries, with some gaining momentum ("monstrosity") and others being shed (the term's once powerful nationalistic connotations). Although Gothic's semantic unwieldiness has been intensified in recent years, serving as a term applied equally to Wells Cathedral as to teenage vampire TV, its imprecision is not new: in many ways the term started life on uncertain etymological ground, and has remained stranded there ever since. I will argue, however, that of all the ancient, art-based resonances gathered within "Gothic," there is today a predominant, single, ongoing theme: the representation of an unresolved inherited condition, persisting unwanted into the present, aspects of the term that are most useful when applying it as critical descriptor to the field of modern and contemporary visual art.

Indeed, the subjection of the present to the past, and to undesirable forces beyond our control, has emerged as the term's principal thematic inheritance, born from its earliest (art-historical) meanings, and which Gothic literature potently absorbed. In the long history of Gothic film and literature in the present, the "contaminating Northern tribe" that Renaissance Italian art writers first vilified has been replaced by any variety of unwelcome circumstances: it might be child abuse, drug addiction, slavery, psychosis or unrequited love. It might be sexual violence, religious excess, capitalist oppression, racism, colonial legacies, terrorist attack, vampirism, possessed software, an ancient Egyptian curse, talking killer toys, *ad infinitum*. In all cases, the key Gothic pattern sees a lost history or an uninvited force impose itself on the present as a kind of haunting, demanding our urgent attention and resolution. This theme is often expressed in a set of familiar visual and conceptual symbols of a persisting past: ruins, the undead, history-laden objects, talking pictures, long-lost diaries and letters, haunted places or foreboding machinery. All of these Gothic (literary) tropes can be similarly updated in myriad forms, from cybernetically undead replicants to immortal e-mails which refuse supernaturally to be deleted. Prior to tracing these impulses as they are manifested across a selection of modern and contemporary art-works, it is perhaps necessary to reflect on their

historical origins in some well-known works of the late eighteenth century. In a word, what is "Gothic" about so iconically "Gothic" an image as Fuseli's *The Nightmare*?

THE NIGHTMARE AND THE GOTHIC

In the popular imagination, the painting *The Nightmare* (see Figure 28.4 in this volume) by the Swiss-born, London-based painter Henry Fuseli provides the emblematic visual parallel to the literature of horror and terror emerging around the same time. In Fuseli's theater-like space behind a curtain, violent animals emerge mid-ground out of the darkness and remain still, as if frozen in time, while a powerful light, strong enough to throw the dark shadow of a demon's pointed ears on the back wall, is eerily emitted from the woman's phosphorescently pale, swooning body. Of course, much is shared across the disciplines of literature and visual art here, including a young, desirable female innocent under threat; mysterious, nocturnal interiors and visitors; implications of impermissible erotic temptations; monsters and the supernatural. Accordingly, it has long become a commonplace to associate early Gothic writing with contemporaneous visual art trafficking in terror and dark fantasy: another artwork habitually evoked in this context is Francisco Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, c.* 1797–99.

Art-historically speaking, however, to call *The Nightmare* "Gothic" is somewhat untenable. Without question, Fuseli and other cultured people of his day would have been perfectly baffled by such a term of description. As E.J. Clery has shown, literary texts of the period were more often referred to as "ghost stories," "modern romances" and "tales of terror" (Clery 2002: 37), while, for art historians, well into the late twentieth century, "Gothic" meant almost exclusively an association with the Middle Ages, with its implicit notions of anti-Classicism. The self-taught Fuseli considered himself a devoutly classical artist, and would have been confused if not repelled by a conception of his work as "Gothic" (although he admired elements of medieval culture). (See Chapter 28 in this volume.) Fuseli associated medieval illuminated manuscripts with the "savage and infant tastes" of such "primitive" art-forms as Egyptian hieroglyphs; both of these distant precedents the artist condemned for their flat and unvaried surfaces as belonging more to graphic art than fine art, an epistemological and hierarchical distinction well intact in Fuseli's day (Stafford 1985: 355). His literary sources were Shakespeare and Greek playwrights, among others, never current popular stories, which were inadmissible for Fuseli's high-artistic, classicist ambitions. Walpole, in turn, reportedly wrote in his copy of the 1782 Royal Academy catalogue, next to the entry for *The Nightmare*, a single word: "shocking"; although he admired the painter's technical bravura, one senses that the resistance between Fuseli and some literati of the genre was perhaps mutual (Frayling, in Myrone 2006: 10).

In 2006, the Tate Britain exhibition and catalogue *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* attempted to draw valid parallels between the Romantic era's literature of terror and a range of contemporaneous artworks. Curator Martin Myrone observes but dismisses the works' evident shared visual qualities of dark, psycho-sexual subject-matter and shifts the discussion toward the conjoined impetuses of political radicalism and mass-audience cultural strategies.

For Myrone, what unites Fuseli's art with the literature of terror is the revolutionary climate of social unrest at the end of the eighteenth century and the contemporaneous emergence of bourgeois consumerism. Vividly popular artworks and novels trafficking in the sensational and the historically evocative suited the tastes of this new public, avid for spellbinding cultural products (Myrone 2006: 35). While this argument sheds important light on shared motivations and audiences, this socio-economic common ground feels somewhat inadequate: *The Nightmare* still *looks* quintessentially "Gothic." Art historian Maryanne C. Ward has demonstrated the direct influence that *The Nightmare* had on passages of Shelley's *Frankenstein* written a few decades later, aligning literary Gothicism directly with the painting. Is it possible to define an aesthetic category of "Gothic" within artistic discourse, a category that carries critical weight, and one which is capable of accommodating, describing and accurately accounting for a painting such as Fuseli's *The Nightmare*?

The answer lies, perhaps, in charting the ways in which the original implications to the term "Gothic" eventually began to accrete into the sense in which it is most commonly used today, namely as a synonym for the aesthetic of the dark, the grotesque, the macabre and the supernatural. Numerous theorists have advanced explanations for the perplexing shift from art to literature. Frankl, for instance, asserts that fragments of Gothic architecture were evoked in eighteenth-century literary works for the sake of establishing the desired mood and location of eeriness (olde England), while instilling a flavor of religiosity, superstition and poetry belonging to an earlier age – a "magic" which Enlightenment purists had driven off in favor of pure reason (Frankl 1960: 380). Commonly, literary theorists reduce the connection to the fact that, like *The Castle of Otranto*, many, but by no means all, early tales of terror are set in medieval locations, particularly castles, monasteries and charterhouses.

Jack Morgan's *The Biology of Terror* (2002) suggests an association based on the medieval period's alleged obsession in art with death and bodily putrefaction. Citing art historian T.S.R. Boase (1966), Morgan finds a "Gothic" link between the Romantic-era ghost story and the much earlier period's graphically morbid literature, such as the thirteenth-century poem "The Three Living and the Three Dead," in which living men encountered their decaying future corpses. Morgan's nightmarish depiction of pre-Renaissance culture ignores the fact that much art from the medieval period, particularly that prior to the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, takes as its subject-matter such life-affirming themes as beauty, redemption, courtly love and the establishment of heaven on earth, all themes in stark contrast to a notion of the Middle Ages as an epoch fixated upon violent imagery. Late in the medieval period, macabre subject matter, including the dance of death motif, certainly did increase, a phenomenon seen as a response to the heavy mortality rates from repeated outbreaks of plague, war and famine. However, medieval art on the whole does not dwell on death and violence, and early English Gothic revival architects, including Horace Walpole, hardly held *danses macabres* in mind in their fanciful evocations of the Middle Ages.

Nonetheless, in some ways Morgan has a point. "Gothic" at the time conjured up two contradictory scenarios: firstly, a dark age embroiled in a gruesome and superstitious culture, felicitously stamped out by progressive Enlightenment thinking, and

secondly, an age which, for some, was conceived as possessing a lost emotional richness and chivalrous tradition that they longed to rekindle. Walpole primarily summoned in his architectural experiments this noble medieval past, just as he reconfigured it in his fiction as an age of harrowing darkness. Paradoxically, then, it is in his literary work, not in his visually based architecture, that he began to establish the Gothic aesthetic as we recognize it today.

Linda Bayer-Berenbaum's art-historical study, *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (1982), asserts that the two principal "Gothics" – namely, pre-Renaissance art and the literature of horror and terror – share a coherent aesthetic and philosophic perspective centering on such qualities as restless energy, inquiry into the unknown and intertwining motifs. Bayer-Berenbaum's study is an admirable early attempt at establishing the terms for an ongoing, cross-historical Gothic aesthetic; however, her method illustrates a common methodological error, in which adjectives which can be applied to both visual and narrative-based manifestations of the mode – the "demonic," the "wild," the "imaginative" and the "excessive" – crystallize, despite their different implications and forms, into a forced set of easy equivalences. For example, elaborate, intertwining Teutonic motifs decorating medieval church capitals become equated with psychological complexity and the "sleepless, puzzled, tortured souls who populate the Gothic novel" (Bayer-Berenbaum 1982: 48). One senses that what is at work here is a kind of terminological sleight of hand, in which visual and formal qualities are manipulated through shared language to become thematic or emotional content, and vice versa, a problem that recurs in many interdisciplinary studies of the Gothic aesthetic.

Some critics have questioned whether the two principal significations of the term "Gothic" – medieval art and the eighteenth-century literature of terror – might, in fact, be entirely unrelated, a "convenience of designation" based on a sequence of misunderstandings and misuses perpetuated for centuries (Clery 2002: 21). We might turn our attention here to the perplexing overlap between these two meanings effected in the work of Horace Walpole, conventionally recognized as both the first author of the genre and the propertied architect/decorator of the prominent Gothic revival founding work, Strawberry Hill (1748–76).

Antiquarian-turned-architect-turned-novelist, Walpole was an amateur in all fields. His inventive "Gothic" architecture emphasized the late flamboyant English style which he characterized as spaces of "light, gaudiness & grandeur" contrasting with areas of "gloom" (Snodin 2009: 16). Walpole praised "the irregular lightness" of the style, along the lines of Nathan Bayley's noted 1736 description of the ancient style as "light, delicate, and rich to an extreme, full of whimsical and impertinent ornaments" (Snodin 2009: 55n7). "Light," "whimsical," and "delicate" are hardly terms with which we today associate the dark and foreboding "Gothic" architectural stereotype, the haunted house or labyrinthine castle, yet such cheerful adjectives abound in early eighteenth-century descriptions of the revived style. Liberally departing from authentic medieval sources, Walpole's suburban pleasure palace – although claimed as the partial backdrop for his terrifying story – was not meant to appear a dreary or frightening place to his pleasure-seeking guests, a sentiment that becomes immediately apparent as once is ushered into Strawberry Hill's recently restored, luminous, mirror-clad Gallery, richly adorned in gold and crimson. Indeed, the "Gothic vision" we have come to expect today is more closely realized in his

literary conjuring in *The Castle of Otranto* – with its "long labyrinth of darkness" and rays of "moonshine, streaming through a cranny of the ruin" – than in his bright three-dimensional architectural pastiche. The misty churchyards, ruins, wild landscapes and full moons of early Romantic poetry and prose provided some of the raw material for Walpole's literary Gothic imagination, and were all but left out of his architectural experiments in Twickenham.

John Fletcher (1999) has usefully distinguished between two kinds of Gothic architecture at work in the eighteenth-century imagination. As Fletcher observes, the mostly ecclesiastical, medieval architecture of the Middle Ages was freely re-invented in the fiction of the period, and the pre-eminent typology of Gothic shifted from the light-filled cathedral to the darkened castle or ancestral home. During the eighteenth century, fantasy Gothic architecture was secularized in literature to produce suffocating, private spaces divorced from any actual architectural referent. As Gothic literary space grew more tortuous and mysterious, architecture purists such as A.W.N. Pugin began carefully measuring the medieval churches in a series of archaeologically driven studies. Where the past held for architects of the revived style a model for a future, better England, the literary genre was filled with problematic histories requiring resolution by its tortured protagonists, symbolically navigating inhospitable, ancient spaces. The bright neo-Gothic architectures that triumphed in civic and ecclesiastical building in England throughout the nineteenth century starkly contrast with the claustrophobic, private architectural visions fabricated in the literature, the latter chiefly contributing to what establishes today's Gothic image.

Unlike the earlier generation of novelists that includes Walpole and William Beckford, author of *Vathek* and architect of the medievalist extravaganza Fonthill, a second generation of "Gothicists," including Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, did not cross disciplinary boundaries by working in both fiction and revivalist architecture. The direct linkage in England between a literary-based and an architectural-based Gothic personified in the figures of Walpole and Beckford had begun to erode. In the writings of Radcliffe and Lewis, one notices the falling into place of the prevailing themes and recurring aesthetic characteristics of a new Gothic mode: darkness; shadowy outlines; labyrinthine and claustrophobic architectures; ancient furnishings exhibiting richly varied materials and textures; uneasy vantage points; mysterious lights and the like.

GOTHIC IN CONTEMPORARY ART: DEFINING A GOTHIC AESTHETIC

Art critics prior to the 1990s tended to be circumspect in setting forth direct aesthetic connections across disciplinary strands, maintaining primarily the term's original art-historical meanings. In contrast, literary critics more liberally explored the "Gothicness" of artworks that seemed to be trafficking in analogous themes. In 1977, for instance, Ellen Moers extended her pioneering observations on "female gothic" texts into art, drawing, as she did so, a number of parallels between the fiction of Carson McCullers and the marginalized figures photographed in Diane Arbus's work (Moers 1977: 109). Moers's innovative analysis singled out those aspects of an artwork which offered the appearance of a consonant "Gothicness" in the subject matter, extracting the art from its wider context (for example, with Arbus,

removed from the history of documentary photography). Such literary-based infiltrations of "Gothic" made little headway into contemporary art discourse; such a usage of the term, fully divorced from the still-prevailing art-historical and medievalist connotations, remains surprisingly rare in art criticism until as late as the mid 1990s.

More recent art critics, such as Christoph Grunenberg in his *Gothic* exhibition and catalogue (1997), have refined the fluid methodologies of Moers and other critics, primarily through identifying a set of salient themes marking the literature (such as fear, family secrets, the abject and monstrosity) and finding their expression across a range of contemporary artworks. Such art is said to participate in a pan-disciplinary, late postmodernist trend of "gotica" observed in music, fashion and film, all allegedly in response to a millennial mood of doom and apprehension – later updated in a post-9/11, post-Columbine, post-Abu Ghraib, post-economic- apocalypse world. Although Grunenberg's work remains the most thoughtful research on the subject thus far, his figuring of Gothic contemporary art via the assumption that the term, as a category of aesthetic description, is borrowed primarily from literature and, at its furthest extreme, eighteenth-century revivalism, somewhat overlooks the essential theme of the lingering effects of the past and our subjection to forces outside our control, one which vitally determines the Gothic aesthetic's particular identity and purpose. This has emerged as the key cross-disciplinary thematic of Gothic, powerfully at work even in the high-modernist writings of art critic Clement Greenberg, who despised all things Gothic as representative of a despicable throwback to the past.

Equally overlooked, and of even greater importance, is that for a number of influential literary theorists of the genre since the 1980s, terror literature is not only signaled by a set of ominous themes but is also greatly reliant on a concatenation of visual signals. Aesthetic qualities are briefly addressed in Grunenberg's work (fragmentation, subverted notions of beauty, dramatic lighting), yet without much reference to the vast body of literary criticism which has catalogued the genre's recurring visual triggers. Visual and material terms signaling "Gothic" within literary analysis include the emphasis on surface and texture (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* [1980]); the literalization of idea into form (Margaret Homans in *Bearing the Word* [1989]); claustrophobic space and disintegration, signaling a history of unhappy relations with the past (Chris Baldick's influential "Introduction" [1992]); the voyeuristic and theatrical framing of a scene often belonging to a specifically female position as an outsider (Susan Wolstenholme's *Gothic (Re)Visions* [1993]); the deliberate insistence on viewing the physical "body-in-pain" (Steven Bruhm's *Gothic Bodies* [1994]); the subtle but consistent uses of skin to signal monstrosity (Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows* [1995]); and the blurring of forms to suggest undecided material and ontological states (Fred Botting's *Gothic* [1996]). Such a set of formal qualities might well form the basis of a coherent aesthetic rehearsed in Enlightenment-era literature, and one which we can now recognize in the visual art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as "Gothic."

These key visually-based characteristics conjured up in the literature do not merely accompany the genre's abiding themes, but are central to signaling its presence. Of course, no work includes every marker, and the best examples are often able to invent new ones; certainly, the production of a Gothic vision should not be reduced to a box-ticking exercise. Yet this flexible cluster of visual traits, combined with a

420

narrative-based and often dramatic context recounting a set of oppressive conditions usually inherited from the past, uniquely distinguish the Gothic from its broadly affiliated visual categories, among them the sublime, the picturesque and the Romantic. Other related terms, such as the fantastic, the uncanny and the abject, do not carry the same distinctive material vision – one that is, in some ways, reworked within the thriving subcultural and *haute couture* goth style of dress. For, despite the many stylistic variations and changing fashions of goth dressing, this style almost always places strong emphasis not only on darkness (the color black) but on surface, variety and texture (satin, rubber, lace, metal, latex, ribbon, veils) while drawing attention to skin (naked flesh, pallor, tattoos, piercings, ripped clothing). Many of goth's iconic signs are also the formal characteristics of the literary Gothic.

Elements marking the genre's aesthetic – extreme attention to varying surfaces and skin; claustrophobic space; darkness; blurring and disintegration; literalization of symbolic states into material realities; voyeuristic viewing conditions – evoked in the literary settings and scenarios are pressed into service to convey the effects of unwanted conditions oppressing the present; this combination provides the defining thematic and formal qualities of a Gothic aesthetic. And it is such a definition that allows finally for the recuperation of Fuseli's painting as a Gothic vision. *The Nightmare* is presented voyeuristically, as if taking place in a kind of forbidden stage-set. Here, a semi-conscious young woman is plainly exposed to uncontrolled and dangerous, animalistic forces; our sense of her vulnerability is heightened by her luminous pale skin, barely concealed behind a veil-like nightdress. In this depthless space, partially blurred figures disappear into dark shadow, such as the real/unreal horse which charges toward us in terror, as if propelled by some unseen force. An unprecedented kind of imaginary space – claustrophobic, shadowy, both unreal and real – harbors creatures that seem to inhabit a state between dream and wakefulness, life and death. In *The Nightmare*, the sleeping girl seems to share our "real" time, surrounded by fantasy demons swirling about her and occupying instead a dream time. We might recall here that Walpole alleged that (like Shelley's "vision" of her Creature) the source behind *Otranto* was a dream: a non-rational mental picture which follows its own spatial and narrative logic.

Some artists of the age, Goya and Fuseli among them, can be seen as attempting to represent in visual terms this unstable, haunted space which today might rightly assume the name Gothic. This is not the conventional view of Enlightenment-era space, as Andreas Huyssen writes, said to be energized by utopian ideals, multi-perspectivalism, montage, and fragment, later formalized in the high modernist style and vision, but by some other more confusing arrangement, indefinable both in time and space (Huyssen 2010: 22). This fictional, hard-to-define location, where modern man (or woman) is subjected to fears and forces over which he or she has no control – represented in both Fuseli's nightmare and Goya's *sueño* – can today be termed as Gothic space: elaborated in the literature of terror and taking shape in visual media at the dawn of the modern age.

WARHOL'S *ELECTRIC CHAIR*: A GOTHIC READING

Among the many attempts to define Gothic literature in some definitive and broadly usable manner, Chris Baldick's contribution in his 1992 "Introduction" to *The*

Oxford Book of Gothic Tales is considered by many to be uniquely valid and resilient. The Gothic, he writes, "should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce a sickening descent into disintegration" (Baldick 1992: xiii). Baldick is at pains to distance himself from the checklists of standard tropes and characters said to mark the Gothic mode. Instead, he directs his attention to its sensual effects – a suffocating depiction of interior space ("a claustrophobic sense of enclosure") and a resulting aesthetic and emotional effect ("sickening descent into disintegration") – to signal the Gothic's principal theme: an acute awareness of history ("inheritance in time"). Can these defining qualities of the literature – history, claustrophobia, and disintegration – be applied to modern and contemporary visual art in identifying a Gothic vision? With Baldick's definition in mind, I will offer a Gothic reading of Andy Warhol's *Electric Chair*, a silkscreened painting usually, and perhaps inadequately, framed solely within the antithetically bright and shiny vision of Pop art.

Warhol's *Electric Chair* (1964) is a rare example of an interior within the American artist's vast oeuvre, an oeuvre characterized, for the most part, by reworkings of the genres of portraiture and still life; thus, we immediately note that to "speak" of death – here and in other artworks comprising his *Death and Disaster* series
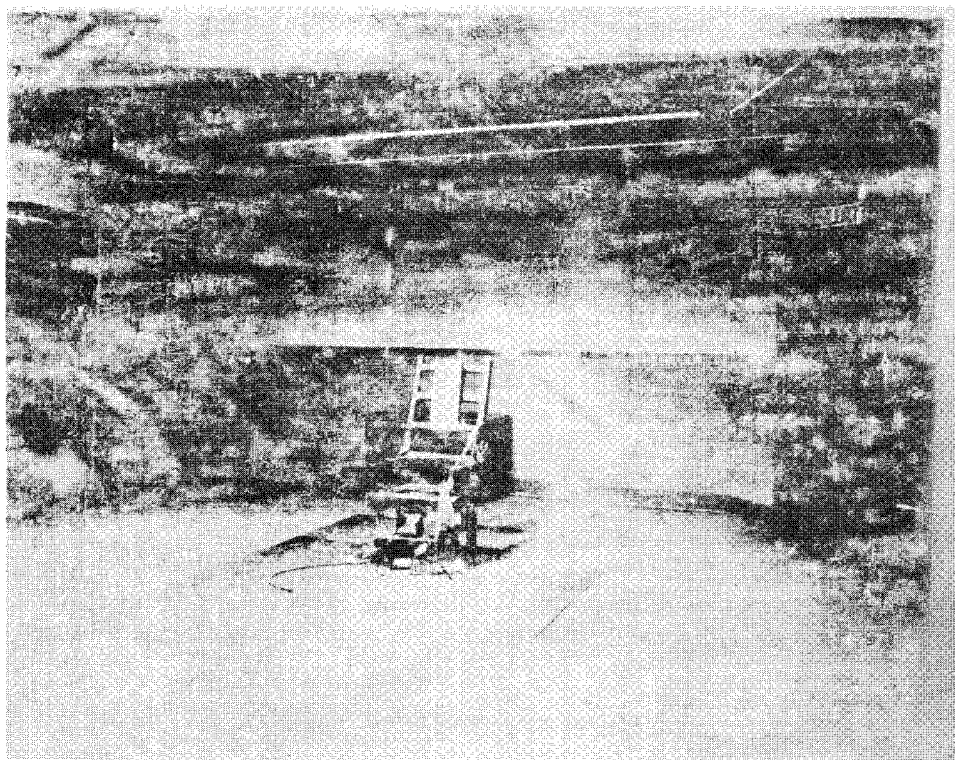

Figure 35.3   Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair* (1964)

(1963–64) – Warhol somewhat uncharacteristically chose and made use of claustrophobic imagery. The viewer's gaze is perpetually slammed against the blank back and side walls of this windowless, institutional architecture of this death chamber. In the *Electric Chair*, the state's control over the body is imprinted everywhere, from the shackles on the armrests of the chair to the sign demanding SILENCE hanging over the door. In *Electric Chair*, everyone – whether the absent, doomed body expected in the chair, or the implied bodies called to witness its gruesome destruction – is subjected to the commands of a death-delivering institution.

In Baldick's terms, we might find suggested the inheritance of America's barbarous and racially skewed dedication to the death penalty, as well as the disintegration of society in both the presumed extreme severity of the crime committed (history) and the irrevocable finality of the punishment applied (disintegration). In other words, the unusual choice of a closed space comprising the ominously empty chair might be said to convey what Baldick describes as "a fearful sense of inheritance in time" and "a sickening descent into disintegration." We might also consider here Mary Shelley's use of electricity to mark the passage between life and death in *Frankenstein* (1818), analogous in some senses to *Electric Chair*'s connotations of technologically assisted death. In representing the subjection to forces beyond one's control, in this case an institutionally sanctioned murder, Warhol seems to rework to great effect the Gothic visual language that I am defining here.

As an aesthetic, the Gothic might be understood as the extreme, almost caricaturish Other to the modernism of a Clement Greenberg or Theodor Adorno. The Gothic's insistent obscurity contrasts to an extreme and literal degree with the intellectual illumination of the Enlightenment and, later, the transparency of modernism, both said to point toward a new and better future, one that is completely untethered to the past. The Gothic tends to be dark and suffocating while the modernist style cuts wall-sized openings for light and air to pour inside, illuminating any lingering shadows – a point vividly made in Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992). The Gothic refuses any of modernism's historic or existential autonomy: hidden somewhere in its chronic darkness is the uncontrollable force that prevents us from moving forward. This Gothic vision presents a dark picture of haunted, insalubrious and unresolved circumstances, situations that remain thoroughly at odds with optimistic or forward-looking cultural frameworks. The Gothic is inclined toward broad communicability through highly engrossing stories, not abstract idealizations aimed at an initiated few implied in Greenberg and Adorno's anti-mass-cultural writings.

The Gothic blurs its characters and events to literalize "instability," while the hard edges of painterly and architectural works by such modernist stalwarts as Mondrian or Mies van der Rohe are stark and distinct. The Gothic surface is textured, seething with its unhealthy history, while the modernist surface is sleek and polished, non-absorbent and wipe-clean, bearing no trace of the past. The Gothic relies on narrative to communicate the particular haunting underway, loading materials with traces of that meaning; the ideal Greenbergian artwork exists in a state of objecthood, unfettered by any reference beyond its own medium-specificity and experimentation. In sum, the hallmarks of the Gothic aesthetic within modern and contemporary art tend perpetually to run counter to a modernist ideal. Some

mid-to-late twentieth-century artists, Warhol and Bourgeois among them, can be seen as adopting a Gothic aesthetic partially in a bid to shift away from high modernist art-making dogma. However, in observing this Gothic/modernist polarity, we should bear in mind that both visions are products of the Enlightenment era, and Gothic and modernist visual art should be seen as operating dialectically as cultural companions, not as mutually exclusive forces.

In his 1963 essay "Language to Infinity," Michel Foucault discussed the sensationalist qualities of terror literature as attempting to create a sensuous-material experience which transcended the limited experience of reading. For Foucault, the terror genre invented a form that denied its own textuality to generate unmediated sensations, producing "thrills, stupefaction, ecstasy, dumbness" presumed capable of stretching beyond language itself (Foucault 1977: 60–61). Whether in Foucault's analysis, or in the work of Gothic literary criticism briefly addressed above, the genre's defining stylistic traits always verge toward an extra-linguistic dimension. In the literature's elaborate, innovative, haunted visions we recognize the precise collection of visual signs invented to picture the flickering mental space of ongoing modern malaise: the Gothic aesthetic experience.

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FURTHER READING

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