

THE GOTHIC: DOCUMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

GILDA WILLIAMS (ED.)

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Contemporary art is forever looking for something new, disengaging with the cultural norm and the art historical canon. Therefore the ways in which we discuss and describe art must also seek new – or import external – critical concepts. It is with this in mind that art and film critic, lecturer and editor Gilda Williams considers 'the Gothic' in contemporary art. The Gothic is, historically, more associated with literature and architecture, but Williams argues that it is only since Clement Greenberg described Pollock as 'Gothic' in 1947 that it has fallen out of use as a term for new art. This publication reacquaints us with, rather than introduces us to, how we can use Gothic in regard to contemporary culture.

In the introduction, rather than trying to produce a watertight definition of the Gothic, Williams tries to give it a loose form that can be played with and reshaped. She looks at how concepts of the Gothic have been defined over time, from the flying butress to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As there has never been a defined Gothic, she sketches the form by indicating what Gothic is not. It is not the grotesque, as it is aesthetic and seductive. Unlike the abject, it is cultured and refined, if a little dusty. The Gothic does not equal horror as not all horror is Gothic. Williams gives equal weight to the themes of traditional literary Gothic: death, monsters, fragmented bodies, sexual subtext and intrepid young women, as to modern outlets of (sub)cultural Gothic: fashionable skull motifs, musicians such as Marilyn Manson and *Cradle of Filth* and macabre TV programmes such as the *British League of Gentleman* and the American *Desperate Housewives*.

Having developed this idea of Gothicism, Williams can consider which contemporary artists are Gothic. Damien Hirst is overtly Gothic, continually referencing death and sculpting fragmented bodies; he even resides in the Gothic revival Toddington Manor. Williams cites Louise Bourgeois as another example; her cells are 'dimly lit inaccessible spaces, phantom bodies, loaded objects and body fragments'. These fear-filled spaces are as

much plucked from Transylvania as her Red Rooms are from *The Shining* (1980). As this anthology's editor is a critic of film as well as art, one finds this conscious or unconscious interplay between contemporary art and cinema in each of the seven themed chapters. In fact, the 'fragmented bodies' of the texts that make up the book come from a wide range of sources, from literature, to cultural theory, to art criticism and more besides; they also range from one page of a novel to full essays.

The first two chapters of texts support the introduction's attempt to fuse historic literary Gothic and contemporary artistic Gothic. 'A Thematic Framework' features extracts from Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), with Edmund Burke, Anne Williams and Mark Edmondson introducing us to Gothic Theory. The second chapter is made up of art criticism, catalogue entries and artists' writings from 1992 onwards, providing us with 'A short history of Gothic in contemporary art', a context for how curators, artists and critics have been using the term in recent years.

From this point on, the sections draw on the historic Gothic themes Williams initially identified: 'Modern Gothic: Death, excess and terror', 'The creature: Alien beings and alien bodies', 'Transgressing females and the name of the father', 'The uncanny: Doubles and other ghosts' and 'Castles, ruins and labyrinths'. Each chapter is similarly constructed, commencing with a major theorist or philosopher whose subject is not overtly Gothic: Baudrillard's *The Transparency of Evil* (1990), Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Lacan's analysis of Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (1972), Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919) and Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982). These are accompanied by cultural theorists who have looked specifically at the Gothic in terms of film theory, such as Judith Halberstam's analysis of the importance of skin and Carol J Clover's consideration of gender roles in horror films; and other fields, ranging from Kobena Mercer on Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and Slavoj Žižek on Kant and Vampirism. As one would expect, there are numerous essays on modern and contemporary artists such as Matthew Barney, Sue De Beer, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman and Andy Warhol, to name but a few. Dotted throughout are extracts from modern

fiction by Stephen King, Bret Easton Ellis and Patrick McGrath amongst others, keeping a strand of literary gothic weaving through the anthology.

Gilda Williams' desire to make Gothic a tenable critical term is ambitious but through this anthology she has certainly laid the groundwork. By combining big-name theorists and artists with contemporary art and film criticism and a continuing reverence for historic and contemporary literary Gothic, Williams creates a compelling argument for the use of Gothic in contemporary art (and film) criticism. Where a wide-spectrum anthology could be criticised for a lack of focus, here the scope of sources demonstrates how the Gothic can be found across culture. The themes addressed by each section radiate from the concept like a spider's web, intersecting with certain creative individuals and critical theories through history to create moments of Gothic, necessarily different to mainstream artistic culture.

The use of quotes as text decoration emphasises the exclusion of images from this publication. Although some visual aids would be useful to those unfamiliar with the artists discussed, they would distract from the theoretical and conceptual nature of the Gothic, which is quite distinct from the idea of a Gothic aesthetic. It is clear that a lot of thought has gone into the selection and arrangement of these disembodied texts, and with the electric spark of the Documents of Contemporary Art series' crisp typography, Williams' monster comes to life, and points us in some informative directions, albeit down some dimly lit, intimidating corridors.

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MASTERS & PUPILS: THE ARTISTIC SUCCESSION FROM PERUGINO TO MANET 1480-1880

GERT-RUDOLF FLICK

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This is an interesting book which attempts to trace the artistic 'succession' from Perugino to Manet, although there are clearly some problems in the 'succession' concept. Much of the detail is well presented and one suspects will be unknown to the non-specialists.