

Banks Violette as yet unilluc' (TriStar horse) 2008 video projection in water vapour

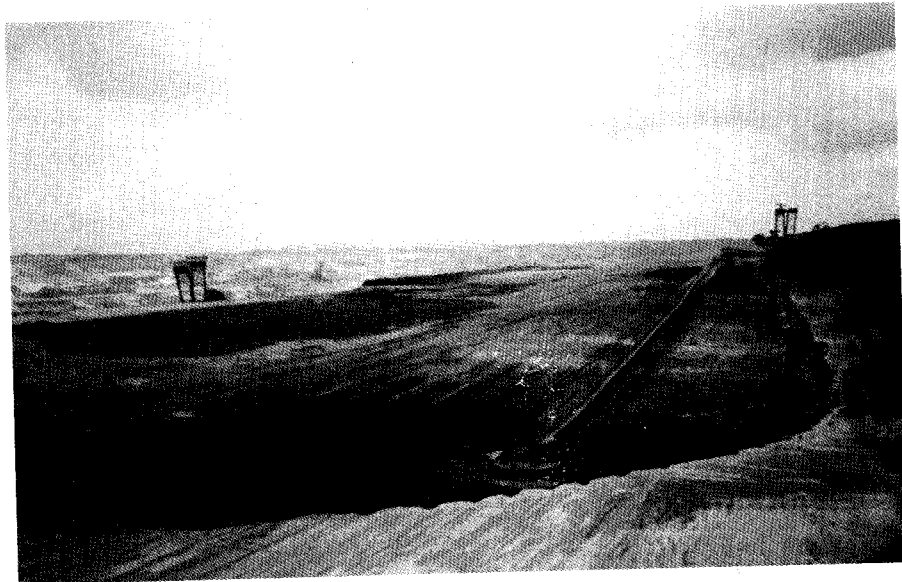


**Gilda Williams** on the embarrassing, campy cousin of the uncanny

# Gothic v Gothick

I COUNTED FIVE GOTHIC-THEMED GROUP EXHIBITIONS HAUNTING LONDON OVER THE PAST YEAR, 'THE GOTHIC' EVIDENTLY VYING FOR A PLACE WITHIN ART DISCOURSE AS THE DARK SIBLING OF ASSOCIATED TERMS SUCH AS 'THE UNCANNY' AND 'THE ABJECT'. These exhibitions gather artworks whose 'Gothic' content is signalled in familiar motifs (skulls, tombstones, shrouds); loose connections with the genre's 19th-century novelists, particularly Edgar Allan Poe; and evocations of death, magic and nostalgia in imagery heavy with shadow, Goth subcultural references and, well, the colour black.

Never having benefited from the illuminating theories of a Sigmund Freud or Julia Kristeva, Gothic is mired in such vaguery, its persistent theatricality and trashy, spooky literalness seem to doom the Gothic as the uncanny's embarrassing, campy cousin. This embarrassment has accompanied Gothic since its modern origins, at least since



Gregor Schneider  
Garzweiler, Germany  
1990-91

1818, when Mary Shelley went to great lengths in her preface to *Frankenstein* to distance her work from the vogue for rapid ghosts stories and 'mere spectres and enchantment'. No, she asserted; her *Modern Prometheus* was worthy of the attention of Dr Darwin himself. Likewise, in his architectural treatise *The Gothic Revival*, 1928, Kenneth Clark spends most of his introduction woefully apologising for drawing our attention to a style of such candid distaste. Yet despite its hokiness, Gothic is strangely seductive. My love for Gothic has to do with this perpetual contradiction: its ability to straddle antithetical levels and moments of culture. It is credited as the first modern literary genre to speak of such weighty issues as child abuse, domestic violence, the imprisoning effects on women of patriarchy and the demonisation of the Other. Yet the Gothic also harbours such low-brow phenomena as the slasher film, heavy metal, a style of décor I associate with Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen and 'feminine fantasy fiction'. No wonder no one seems to know what Gothic actually is.

Some 15 years ago – before 'the Gothic' was everywhere, from special issues of *Vogue* to basement exhibition spaces in Shoreditch – while working for an art publisher, I found myself late for a deadline calling for proposals. In a panic I hastily came up with a half-baked idea for a cross-historical art history book titled *Gothic Art*, and tossed together contemporary artworks by Damien Hirst, Jake & Dinos Chapman and Douglas Gordon with paintings by Francis Bacon, Francisco Goya and Edvard Munch, garnished with a Cindy Sherman dismembered doll, Jeff Wall's *Vampire's Picnic*, 1991, and Zoe Leonard's *Wax Anatomical Model*, 1990. This mess was greeted enthusiastically. The publisher loved it, and my hastily contrived *Gothic Art* seemed miraculously to hold water as a coherent strain of art history – until someone abruptly asked, 'so, what exactly is Gothic?' Nobody (including me) knew. Was it something to do with darkness, the supernatural, death, perhaps the otherworldly? Does it refer solely to the literary form invented in the mid-18th century – and, if so, when does it end? In 1818 with *Frankenstein*, or 1847 with *Jane Eyre*, or 1936 with *Rebecca*? Is Stephen King Gothic? And what about Goth subculture, Gothic glamour, horror

films? And what is Gothic visual art – medieval cathedral sculptures and illuminated manuscripts? Or is it Henri Fuseli's Gothic posterchild, *The Nightmare*, 1782? Is Gothic Romantic? Are New Romantics Goths? Are Goths Gothic? Is romance dead? The editorial meeting sputtered on directionlessly, ending with instructions for me to go away and find out exactly what Gothic is.

This task, it turns out, is borderline impossible, and history is of no help. Once taken as signifying all things anti-classical, the term was a misnomer from the start. The 'Goths' (actually Visigoths and Ostrogoths) became, for fearful citizens of the dark ages, a shorthand in naming the many marauding northern tribes credited with the decline and end of the Roman Empire, including the Huns, the Slavs, the Anglo-Saxons and more. Had the 'Huns' caught the imagination of Renaissance lexicographers, members of 'Hun' subculture today might be listening to 'Hun' metal and balancing on 12-inch 'Hun' platforms. Definitions of the Gothic start on slippery ground, then grow in imprecision and turn contradictory too. Gothic can signal 19th-century ladies' trash fiction at the same time as it can, for AWN Pugin, evoke some morally pure English past symbolised by medieval churches. Purveyors of the Gothic have been accused of misogyny, their novels serving as handbooks for a woman's training in masochism (Michelle A Massé, 1992) and simultaneously hailed as proto-feminist, their intrepid heroines revealing the cruel realities of patriarchy (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). And what does Walpole's hedonistic Gothic folly, *Strawberry Hill*, 1764, have to do with the Christian spirit of piousness and unity admired at Chartres?

In desperation, one Gothic literary theorist has characterised Gothic as always having to do with fakes (Jerrold E Hogle, 2000). The Gothic is embedded in the counterfeit – the revival of something that never happened. Walpole's papier maché gargoyles and fan vaults are, in their fakery, the essence of modern Gothic; there is no 'authentic' Gothic.

Nevertheless, plausible stabs at defining Gothic abound. Most recently Catherine Spooner in *Contemporary Gothic*, 2006, defined it cross-disciplinarily as a language and a set of discourses with which we can talk about fear and anxiety. According to this definition Gothic becomes a

kind of system: a flexible set of themes, places and characters which are brought together through story-telling. This curiously coherent yet expandable system emerged at the dawn of Modernism in order to narrativise fears and anxieties centring on unprecedented questions regarding identity, mortality and the legitimacy of the past.

Following this definition, I would contend that contemporary art, on a par with film and literature, has throughout the late 20th century provided a site where the Gothic language or system has been consistently spoken and updated; that is, artists regularly use Gothic tropes in order to address the genre's subject matter – fear, anxiety and death. Consider how many artists have worked such Gothic standbys as haunted locations (Gregor Schneider, Jane & Louise Wilson), labyrinths and prisons (Mike Nelson, Janet Cardiff), ruins (Robert Smithson, Tacita Dean), shadows and spectres (Andy Warhol, Gregory Crewdson), ominous fragments of text and disembodied voices (Douglas Gordon, Raymond Pettibon), monsters (Paul McCarthy, Ann-Sofi Siden), family secrets and the crisis of patriarchy (Charles Ray, Louise Bourgeois) in order to produce their anxiety-provoking art.

I would claim that Louise Bourgeois represents an emblematic modern Gothic artist, particularly in her late work. As is well known, in 1982 she published an illustrated text titled 'Child Abuse' in *Artforum*, a fragmented account of her distant and unhappy childhood centring on an overbearing father, the treacherously seductive English tutor Sadie and the disturbingly tolerant mother. Bourgeois' story was accompanied by shadowy images: *Fillette*, which hangs like a discovered suicide on a dark and mysterious staircase; the large, ominous family home at Choisy, which is pictured at a distance behind massive iron gates, like Norman Bates' house on the hill or a B-movie haunted mansion. Her autobiography is told, in effect, as a Gothic tale, complete with an evil patriarch and a young female innocent (Bourgeois) forced to endure the family secrets around her. The *Cells*, 1986-2000, that followed these revelations are claustrophobic installations exhibited in semi-darkness and filled with loaded objects from the artist's past – like empty horror film sets occupied by the ghost of a young Bourgeois, effectively recast as Gothic victim/heroine.

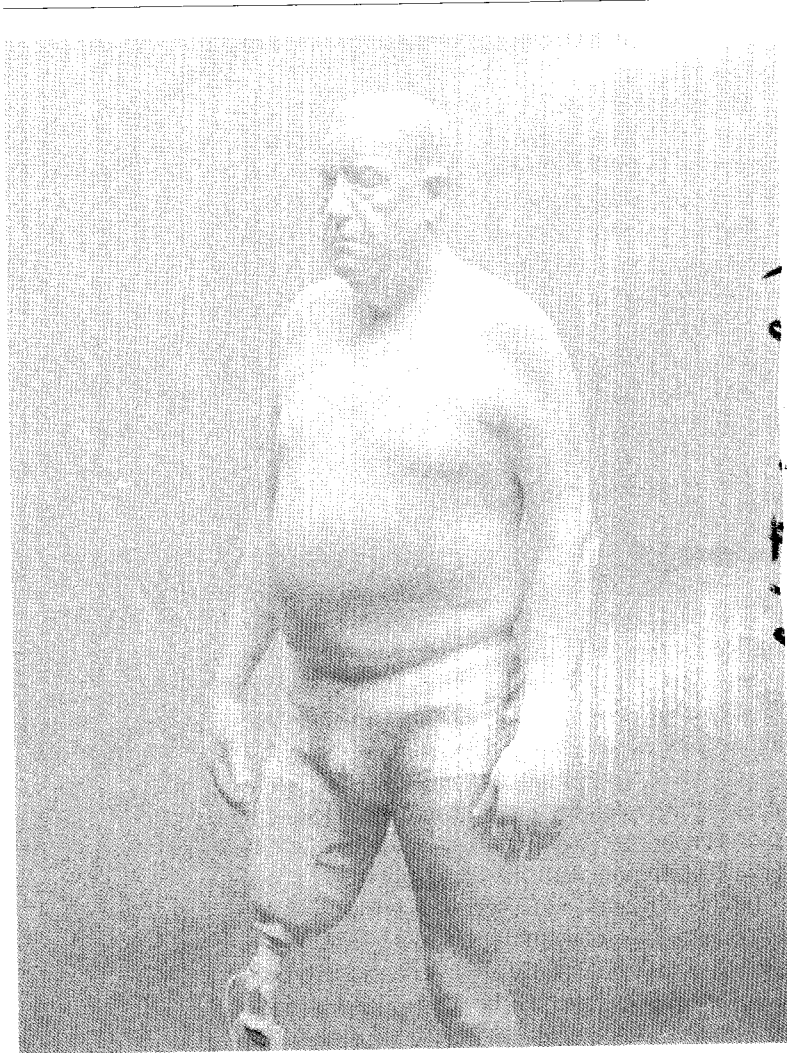
One particularly respected definition of literary Gothic – which goes beyond stock Gothic features to get at the core sensations and effects of Gothic – was put forward in 1992 by theorist Chris Baldick: '[The Gothic] should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce a sickening descent into disintegration.' Consider in this light Bourgeois' *Passage Dangereux*, 1997 – all levitating chairs and prosthetic fornications – or *Precious Liquids*, 1992, a kind of Frankenstein laboratory of bubbling body fluids presided over by a domineering, gigantic male ghost. These both correspond to the Gothic's claimed reliance on history, claustrophobia and a disturbing disintegration for their effect. With our knowledge of the artist's biography now relentlessly rehearsed in museum wall texts and the nostalgic family pictures inevitably accompanying any presentation of her work, there is the suggestion of a living history and the

disintegration of the family, perhaps even of Bourgeois' traumatised young psyche.

In the same vein we might reconsider Warhol's *Electric Chair*, 1963, observing here the inheritance of the US's barbarous and racially skewed dedication to the death penalty, and the disintegration of society in both the crime committed and the punishment applied. The viewer is perpetually slammed up against that blank back wall in this windowless space; it is a very rare example of a Warhol interior and he has unusually chosen this claustrophobic space to speak of Gothic's own subject, 'fear, death, anxiety'. The same kind of analysis, adopting Baldick's definition, can usefully be applied to Gothic re-readings of, say, the work of Rachel Whiteread, Doris Salcedo, or Schneider.

In the history of contemporary art writing, 'Gothic' disappears for some time after Clement Greenberg's maligning description in 1947 of Jackson Pollock as 'Gothic, morbid and extreme'. Robert Smithson was among the few who dared take the Gothic seriously during the decidedly un-Gothic 1960s, particularly in his 1967 essay 'The Monuments of Passaic: Has Passaic replaced Rome as the Eternal City?' This begins with the artist observing a newspaper picture of a traditional Gothic building and ends with him musing on New Jersey's invention of modern ruins which 'don't fall into ruin after they are built but rise into ruin before they are built'. Smithson seems to take as central to the Gothic imagination not its themes and spooky tropes but its time-based processes. The ruin is a fascinating example of a process-based object that confuses relations of figure and ground: it is both the object in the landscape and the landscape itself. Much Gothic imaging concerns such inversions of figure/ground – for example the ghost, which is both figure and ground, a contradictory position literally staged in the spectral photography of the mid-19th century. This may go some way to explain the unusual choice of imagery in Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' series, particularly the 'Car Crashes' and so-called 'Race Riots'. When imaging death Warhol untypically selected semi-indecipherable and indistinct images, rendered more illegible through multiple overlapping silkscreens. These markedly contrast with the solid, unambiguous outlines of the 'Campbell's Soup Cans', the portraits and almost all the rest of his art. Did the subject of death for Warhol instinctively call for the Gothic undermining of the figure/ground distinction?

In this light, it is significant that, unlike 'the uncanny' or 'the abject', Gothic has spawned its own subculture. What is it about Gothic that renders its admirers so keen to escape fully into its world – to dress Gothic, fuck Gothic, decorate Gothic, live Gothic? This bizarre, all-engrossing quality of Gothic is by no means new; Pugin reputedly sported a monk's hair shirt at home to experience the self-flagellating medieval spirit, and Bela Lugosi whole-heartedly embraced his Dracula character by wearing his distinctive black cape round Hollywood and allegedly sleeping in a coffin. Perhaps Gothic's life-consuming allure, this immersion, also has to do with this overlap between foreground and background, object and landscape, narrative and reality. In this sense Banks Violette's *as yet untitled (TriStar horse)*, 2008, is good Gothic, wherein the haze and the oneric horse projected upon it combine into a single transparent spectacle. Or consider Hans Op de Beeck's figure *Eric*, 2007, a



Hans Op de Beeck  
Eric 2007

Frankenstein creature-like figure with prosthetic limbs, sculpted in pure white Plexiglas and disappearing in the whiteness of the white cube.

Another process of the Gothic which finds correspondence in contemporary art thinking is the undead: the perpetual Gothic theme, literally and symbolically, from *Frankenstein* to *Dracula*, *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca*, *Psycho* and more. The great undead in post-1960s art has got to be painting, that indestructible phantom. We have all witnessed painting die time and time again – we've watched it be stabbed (Fontana), burned (Polke), shot at (De Saint Phalle), hammered (Uecker, Ono), buried, drowned, crushed – and still it resurfaces, unstoppable and renewed. It behaves like serial killer Mike Myers in *Halloween*, 1978, whom we see stabbed three times (with a knitting needle, a coat-hanger and a kitchen knife), lethally shot six times and falling from a second-storey window – yet rising again and again, refusing to die. Painting, in this scenario, becomes a kind of monster, like Jonathan Meese's painterly concoctions, pieced together Frankenstein-like from any variety of materials, styles and palettes.

The Gothic undead, by the way, differs from Derrida's hauntological ghost. The Gothic ghost is not, like Marxism, a good ghost whom we hope will stick around. Ghosts in Gothic tales are disturbing, unwanted presences who return for a specific, often vindictive purpose provoked by a debt left unpaid. The plot usually

centres on determining who has to pay the debt – and in what currency. (Jodey Castriciano, 2000) Contemporary painters seem to sense in the first person this indebtedness to painting's history, and pay the debt by spilling more paint, like more blood, on more canvas.

For theorist Judith Halberstam all Gothic monstrosity is ultimately read on the skin – from the Frankenstein creature's loose-fitting yellow complexion, to the pallor of Dracula, to the darkening visage of Mr Hyde, to Leatherface in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974, to the suit of women's flesh that Buffalo Bill is stitching together in *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1990. Consider how many artists use skin to speak of such typically Gothic themes as the thin barrier between life and death (Hirst's dissections), class difference (Santiago Sierra's *250cm Line Tattooed on Six Paid People*, 1999), the pains of female experience (Gina Pane's *Self-Portraits*, 1973). In *Crawl Space*, 1995, Jane & Louise Wilson re-enact the words of desperation which emerge like a scar on Linda Blair's stomach in *The Exorcist*, 1973, while in the 'Morgue' series, 1992-, Andres Serrano photographically enhances the waxy quality of the skin to underline its deathliness. And recall Richard Avedon's 1969 portrait of Warhol a year after the shooting, revealing his scarred torso beneath another kind of urban skin, a black leather jacket. Warhol, like Bram Stoker's vampire, was unnaturally pale, hailed from some mysterious corner of eastern Europe, and was surrounded by strange and beautiful women with whom he had some intimate yet non-sexual bond. And the 612 coffin-like Time Capsules that Warhol left behind – and which exhibition viewers will endure for a long time to come – ensure his status as a chronically undead artist.

The most notorious visual signal of Gothic is the skull, the head without skin, a Goth and heavy metal favourite. The skull is a curious anomaly in this history as it does not derive from literature but from art history itself: the vanitas and the medieval Dance of Death. The skull has become an all-purpose signifier meaning death and taboo, often in anaemic images that do not actually elaborate on modern fears and anxieties. The skull image regularly lapses into what theorist Fred Botting has described as 'Candygothic': unstable if recognisable 'Gothic' triggers which play to a niche audience and a corresponding market for 'Gothic consumables, what I call 'Gothick' – the preferred spelling during Walpole's time for its medieval flavour, but which I take to mean 'dumb Gothic'. As the term 'Gothic' enters – with some suspicion – into contemporary art parlance, distinguish between Gothick and Gothic, an art which – like the best of Gothic film and literature – is genuinely destabilising in its dark depiction of the modern human condition. A work such as David Hammons' *In the Hood*, 1993, the empty, slashed top of a 'hoodie' which, casually using the Gothic language of shadows and ghostly presences, dramatises untold stories of lynchings, racial biases and the prospect of youthful death, is a great example of late 20th-century Gothic. Whether it would fit into the many recent 'Gothic' exhibitions we have seen – or into my hastily cobbled book proposal – is another question. ■

GILDA WILLIAMS is a lecturer at Goldsmiths, London and author of *The Gothic*, MIT/Whitechapel, 2007.