Limits of horror: Technology, bodies, Gothic by Fred Botting

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In *Limits of horror: Technology, bodies, Gothic,* Fred Botting moves beyond his study of history and literature into an exploration of the concepts of the modern Gothic, as altered and defined by modern media and technology. The text explores how modern media forms are a reflection of Western society's Gothic past, and how the stimulation and shock cycles of television, film, art and video-games mimic the much-critiqued machinery of the Gothic novel.

Botting's text, with chapters entitled 'Daddy's dead', 'Tech noir', 'Dark bodies' and 'Beyond the Gothic principle', progresses with a logical flow in its discussion of exemplary texts and films, using the nouveau Gothic to explore the dissemination, and thus the dissolving, of the meaning and original elements of the Gothic. Botting's central arguments, namely the increasing banality and absorption of the monstrous and the loss of meaning of horror through the technologizing of its production, are woven into chapters which discuss the paternal figuration of the Gothic tale, the shock-value and repetition of modern media, the objectification and abjectification of the human body, and the ties between the principles of the Gothic and Freudian psychology. His work ties together multiple strains of argument and is sometimes difficult to follow. The chapter headings and section titles are little more than teasers, not providing the reader with a sense of the contents, and are only clearly understood in the context of the chapter.

The idea of the monster, a figure of otherness and difference, present to define ourselves against, has lost its impact in modern society, according to Botting. Throughout his text, his presentation and understanding of the monster continues to arise. From the very introduction, he asserts that as society is more pervaded by the monstrous, the more boundaries and systems of difference collapse as the metanarratives of social differentiation fragment. In losing the sense of the monster, Botting sees modern society losing a sense of the self:

> Monstrosity slips into the fabric of everyday existence indifferent to horror. Posthumanity erases all human distinctions and differences, difference sustained precisely in the relation to monstrosity. Monsters are neither more nor less than the norm. They are banal, unsurprising, ubiquitous, visible and overlooked at the same time. […] The only threat 'they' pose to 'us', that is if any difference can be detected at all, is precisely in the indifference which they circulate: if such a world is 'de-monstered', it is also dehumanized and 'their' tasks and existences are identical with those of their human counterparts. (2008, p.158-9)

The acceptance of the vampire, the embrace of deformity and surgical alteration, and the understanding of the body as artifice leads to a loss of distinction; as such, the monster is no longer a figure of difference, and thus no longer monstrous.

While the book examines the horrific and terrifying elements of modern media, the drive of mechanisation and digitization as a part of modernity and the shift of the Gothic, Botting is, in fact, arguing that the Gothic has been lost in this process. In his chapter 'Dark bodies', he describes the drive to the real, the urge to overcome the fantasy of the media; however, this results in a turn to hyperreality. Horror has become a social criticism, as it is no longer a subjective and personal experience, but rather shows the hollowness of humankind, through technological creation:

What distinguishes contemporary horror is its relationship to technology, the capacity to realise visually what had, before, to remain as fantasy, thereby evincing the capacity to reformat reality itself. The former depends on the imagination of readers, on their credulous investment in the restoration of a paternal symbolic order, while the latter requires only the passive consumption of the spectator, intoxicated by the realism of images generated by special effects. This is the crucial difference between modern and hyper- or post-modern forms: the technological ability to realise fantasy by way of machines rather than human imagination. It is a technical power that, emptying Gothic of affect, discloses a wider process that produces horror on a cultural scale with no reference at all to the conventional (Gothic) forms and images. Horror's production bypasses the human figure and, simultaneously, becomes the last source of human horror: it discloses the human figure as nothing but surface, a fabrication evaporating in the destiny of images. (2008, p. 171)

The power of technology to emulate, replicate and obliterate the subject comes up repeatedly in Botting's argument, as the uncanny nature of doubling and the mechanization of the natural leads to a reduction of individuality, a reliance on surface and a loss of the core sense of humanity.

Botting's work is quite dark in its assessments of modern society and its development of fully Gothicized, yet emptied, media. An undercurrent of the text remains the innate value and need for the Gothic in society and, as the true Gothic drive is lost through its 'Disneyfication' and pop-culture absorption, so is humanity's sense of self and future:

The fantastic apocalypticism, with its enthusiasm for destruction, barely veils the proximity of the gaping maw of an alien future assembled from the ruins and wreckage of the present. Negativity, machinic and inhuman, pulses beneath the fantasy. (2008, p.217)

Botting sees the machinic desire tearing apart political, cultural and traditional values, and ends his text with the dark sentiment: 'Game over and over again' (2008, p.217).

Botting's text, while fascinating, would benefit from a clearer sense of organization and focus. The discussion ranges from early Gothic texts to media recreations of horror scenes to anti-industrialist writings without apparent consistency or direction. While Botting's project is a fascinating consideration of the Disney-gothic and candy-coated conceptions of horror, his analysis the development and dissolution of the Gothic is as tangential as many of the modern works he references. The writing is interesting, but tends towards melodrama, as the text carries the implication that horror, terror and the sublime are cornerstones of human culture, and the expansion of the mechanical and digital forms of the Gothic undercuts Western values and principles, leading to a widespread loss of self.

As an introduction to Gothic media or fictions, this text would be horribly ineffective. It is necessary to understand the underlying principles of the Gothic to access Botting's argument; however, in examining the forms of terror and sublimity, Botting has drawn together diverse examples to discuss the power of modern technology in art, media and medicine as a re-conception of the Gothic. For its breadth of analysis, *Limits of horror* is a fascinating read, though one can become lost in the dark, twisting maze of Botting's discussion.