

## Maeve Davey, "Gothic Fiction and the Postcolonial Writers of Ireland (2007)"

There is a distinction to be made between the Irish Gothic tradition/mode and the supernatural and fantastic in Irish writing, although there are of course strong connections and overlaps between the two. Bruce Stewart comments, 'The occurrence of the fantastic in any literature is probably due to the marginalisation of social and psychological forces which find no room for representation under prevailing intellectual conditions'.<sup>1</sup> This is arguably also true of the Gothic; in societies in which people have been denied access to or have become jaded by the political process, or in which the social climate is censorious and oppressive (whether obviously or subtly so) the Gothic novel has been an effective and often horrific critique of the effects of such regimes on the individual. [...]

The Gothic has always been preoccupied with the past, and contemporary society's relationship with the past: 'In Gothic texts, the past returns with sickening force: the dead rise from the grave or lay their cold hands upon the shoulders of the living ... In Gothic texts, therefore, the past is a site of terror, of an injustice that must be resolved, an evil that must be exorcised'<sup>2</sup>. Therefore it makes sense to interrogate contemporary Gothic's relationship with its own past to consider whether Gothic as it exists today is really so fundamentally different and thus divorced from Gothic as it existed two hundred years ago. Despite the initial obvious differences, the similarities are at once striking - the Gothic is still a highly popular form, is easily adaptable to a political critique, continues to explore colonial anxieties, fixate upon the body as mutilated or monstrous and always transgresses boundaries. It could even be argued that only the occasion and location of the Gothic has changed significantly over time, a progress described by Spooner as: 'the labyrinthine underground vaults and torture chambers of eighteenth-century Gothic texts; the secret passages and attics riddling the ancestral mansions of the nineteenth century; the chambers of the human heart and brain in twentieth-century writing'<sup>3</sup> However, it is not just within the mind that one may be pursued, tortured and held captive in today's Gothic. Botting explains: 'Terror and horror are diversely located in alienating bureaucratic and technological reality, in psychiatric hospitals and criminal subcultures ...'.<sup>4</sup> However, more and more frequently, the contemporary Gothic does not simply focus on exaggerated parodies of bureaucracy and monstrous technology, or the subcultures of mental patients and crime lords. One of the functions of the Gothic in recent times is to locate and expose horror in places familiar to the reader, from the workplace, to the home, to the archetypes of modern society. Thus, today's Gothic derives much of its strength from its ability to create a sense of uneasiness about the home, and the urban sprawls so many of us inhabit; in effect, to use Freudian terminology, transforming what should be *heimlich* into the *unheimlich*. [...]

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart, Bruce, 1998, 'Our Proper Dark: A Chapter of Conclusions' in Bruce Stewart, ed. *That Other World: The Supernatural and Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts* (Gerrards Cross : C.Smythe, 1998) vol 2. pp.365-386, p.380

<sup>2</sup> Spooner p.18

<sup>3</sup> Spooner p.18

<sup>4</sup> Botting p.13