

The Art of Terror: some artistic references in Gothic Literature

It is common to find in Gothic Literature many references to paintings and other objects of art. The traditional Gothic taste for portraits is recurrent in many novels and short stories that follow the conventions of this literary mode. These portraits are usually a source of terror, with the past presented as something alive, like a ghost that haunts the present with its terrible mystery. We all remember that famous portrait of the oldest of the Pyncheons in *The House of the Seven Gables* by Hawthorne or the image of Melmoth's ancestor in *Melmoth, the Wanderer* by Maturin. What also comes to mind is the tragedy of Roderick Usher, inherited from many generations of artists, who were the inhabitants of that house and art museum named the "House of Usher". "The Oval Portrait" by Edgar Allan Poe is another of these examples, where a portrait is represented of a young woman killed by art. In the chapter "The Spouter-Inn" from *Moby Dick*, we experience a certain unrest provoked by an oil painting that contains an infinite quantity of "masses of shades and shadows", which seem to represent chaos and gradually uncover the presence of the great Leviathan:

But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant.

(Melville 1983:805)

More recently, contemporary authors continue to use this Gothic device. In *Rose Madder*, Stephen King creates a feminine character that is able to escape the obsessive persecution of her violent husband by a process of transformation that develops through her identification with a mysterious painting. In one of her more recent works, entitled *Beasts*, Joyce Carol Oates tells us about the excesses committed by the aesthetic sensitivity and bohemian lifestyle of a university teacher and his wife, a sculptress who outrages the students of the university campus with the crude, primitive and larger than life wooden totems that she exhibited under the motto “we are beasts and this is our consolation”.

Many other similar examples could be given. And this happens because there has always been a close connection between Gothic Literature and art, especially modern art. Many authors consider this kind of literature itself an example of modern art because it can become an anti-realist protest and a rebellion of the imagination against the reduction of fiction to the analysis of contemporary habits. In his *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler says: “Despite its early adoption by Mrs Radcliffe, the Gothic is an avant-garde genre, perhaps the first avant-garde art in the modern sense of the term” (Fiedler 1997:134). One of the main intentions of this literary mode was to “épater la bourgeoisie”, an aim common to the main modernist movements, as was the case with Dada, Surrealism and Pop Art artists. In *The Gothic Flame*, Devendra Varma associates the Gothic to certain movements of modern art, such as Surrealism, because he noticed that these artists used colours according to the principle of contrast, deriving from the Gothic their essential ideas and symbolism. Varma concludes that the Gothic fragments from the beginning of the 19th century evoke precisely the same feelings through words as the paintings of Picasso, Marc Chagall, Chirico, Klee and Max Ernst were able to express through colours. Picasso, with his terrifying style and tormented inspiration, can be considered one of the best examples of these artists. Herbert Read said that this artist embodied in its totality “the Gothic or Germanic spirit” (Read 1998: 233). Another artist worth mentioning is Francis Bacon. When he was confronted in an interview with the question of whether he was conscious of the states of unease and terror that were expressed in his portraits of lonely men in their rooms, Bacon answered:

I'm not aware of it. But most of those pictures were done of somebody who is always in a state of unease, and whether that has been conveyed through these

pictures I don't know. But I suppose, in attempting to trap this image, that, as this man was very neurotic and almost hysterical, this may possibly have come across in the paintings. I've always hoped to put over things as directly and rawly as I possibly can, and perhaps, if a thing comes across directly, people feel that that is horrific. Because, if you say something very directly to somebody, they're sometimes offended, although it is a fact. Because people tend to be offended by facts, or what used to be called truth.

(Sylvester 1995: 48)

This intention of expressing with authenticity the dark but very real aspects of human existence has always led to a very close relation between certain works of art and Gothic literature. That's why Robert Bloch, the famous author of *Psycho*, once said that "horror is the removal of masks". This interest in representing what lies behind appearances had to develop a new aesthetic concept based not on what is beautiful, but on what is sublime. Horace Walpole, the author of *The Castle of Otranto*, deeply understood the spirit of this new aesthetics when, in *Anecdotes of Painting*, said that "One must have taste to be sensible of the beauties of Grecian architecture, one only wants passions to feel Gothic" (Varma 1987:16). This justifies Coleridge, when, in *General Character of the Gothic Literature and Art*, he also stated that while Greek art is beautiful Gothic art is sublime. The Gothic cathedral, whose spiritual power and creative energy projects the presence of man in the universe, is the best known example of this sublimity. We can say that while classical architecture expressed a kind of static beauty, Gothic expresses the power and energy of human emotions. That's why, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke said that whatever is terrible is sublime too. *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Baudelaire was another example of these new aesthetic principles according to which the idea of the Beautiful was in direct association with what was strange, bizarre, unexpected or even ugly. His definition of modern art can also be very useful to define Gothic fiction:

L'art moderne a une tendance essentiellement démoniaque. Et il semble que cette part infernale de l'homme, que l'homme prend plaisir à s'expliquer à lui-même, augmente journellement, comme si le diable s'amusa à la grossir par des procédés artificiels, à l'instar des engraisseurs, empâtant patiemment le genre humain dans ses basses-cours pour se préparer une nourriture plus succulente.

(Baudelaire 1980:339)

This diabolic tendency, which draws the Horrid towards the Beautiful, turning it into one of its most essential elements, was explained by a certain attraction to the ugly aspects of life and by the desire to penetrate into the unknown. This free and paradoxical game between opposing aesthetic categories permitted a transgression that opened up the possibility for acceptance into the domain of art of something that had previously been forbidden, turning it into its true essence. Beauty and Poetry began to be extracted from what was repulsive and abject. This led Baudelaire to conclude:

C'est un des privileges prodigieux de l'Art que l'horrible, artistement exprimé, devienne beauté, et que la *douleur* rythmée et cadencée remplisse l'esprit d'un *joie* calme.

(Baudelaire 1980:504)

Pain and suffering became integral parts of desire, giving rise to what Baudelaire called “painful pleasure”, an expression that constituted the basis of the “Esthétique du Mal”, in part created by the influences of Edgar Allan Poe, who inspired the French poet in his main intention of “extraire la *beauté* du Mal” (Baudelaire 1980:131).

This concept of “terrible beauty” was also explored by Wolfgang Kayser in *The Grottesque In Art and Literature*, where the author noticed that by the word *grottesco*, the Renaissance understood not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister that transcended the laws of symmetry and proportion, creating a world in which the realm of inanimate things was no longer separate from that of plants, animals, and human beings. This subversion of order and proportion that is present in the tendency to mix elements from different origins, leads to the creation of certain monstrous forms that became widely known through Picasso’s paintings and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. There are even a few titles of some of Picasso’s works where we can find the same peculiar subjects that appear in Gothic fiction. This was because, in 1899, the Spanish artist was deeply pessimistic about political and social decadence, which led to works with titles evoking the presence of death, such as *The Kiss of Death*, *Two Agonies*, *By Luisa’s Grave*, *Priest Visiting a Dying Man*, etc. Moreover there is a fantastic drawing entitled *Christ blessing the Devil*, which seems to present the question of whether, in Picasso’s mind, the devil would be associated with his own spirit of rebellion and his provocative genius.

This question is also very often raised in Gothic fiction, where the villain, through his independence, loneliness and rebellion, possesses many affinities with the artist; he not only seems to embody the images of Faust and Don Juan, but is also identified with Satan and Prometheus, two representatives of the lonely man that is the writer himself. We can say that the villain, the Gothic writer and the artist all suffer a common fate, condemned to follow an accursed destiny: they all have to defy the traditional values of a society where they live as outsiders, trying to show the dark side of its rules, even if this purpose forces them to show the dark side of their own creation processes. About this Fiedler concluded:

Dedicated to producing nausea, to transcending the limits of taste and endurance, the Gothic novelist is driven to seek more and more atrocious crimes to satisfy the hunger for 'too-much' on which he trades.

(Fiedler 1997:134)

That is why some famous Gothic characters such as Frankenstein, Ahab, Jekyll, Dracula or Moreau can be understood as being not only Faustian heroes, but also personifications of the artist. They are at the same time destroyers and creators, and it is this ambivalence and paradox that gives Gothic aesthetics its sublimity.

Since "The Birthmark" by Hawthorne, many stories have been written about the excesses of characters that have a common tendency to develop a heightened sense of aesthetic perfection. That's why, in these works of fiction, the central character is sometimes a psychopath, who is an allegory of the artist himself. We could mention, for instance, *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995), a film by John Carpenter, where a specialist of fantastic literature, Sutter Cane, is able to disturb the mental state of his readers by the power of writing, the power that every author such as Lovecraft or Stephen King also possesses, which is why they were the source of inspiration to create this evil writer. The same happens with the films by Wes Craven entitled *Scream*, where a group of teenagers become psychopathic killers through being unconditional admirers of terror movies, which they used as real crime manuals by copying scenarios, characters and plots extracted from the Gothic tradition of horror movies. If these examples reveal the interesting possibility of abolishing the boundaries between fact and fiction, on the other hand they criticise the excesses provoked by the horror aesthetics and its negative effects on the audience. They express the dangers of transforming fictional

terrors into real ones and the fact that art can exceed all its limits when it becomes itself an art of crime.

In Gothic Literature, it is common to compare the villain to an artist, a *virtuoso* in the art of murdering, similar to the one portrayed by Thomas De Quincey in “On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts” (1827). Sometimes, like in *Clockwork Orange*, the worst atrocities are committed as if they were a work of art, because they obey the same aesthetic feeling through which a poem, a painting or a musical composition are produced. It is common to find, in this literary mode, stories of murders committed by psychopaths intent on imitating violent crimes from the past, famous for the artistry involved in them. Taking their obsession to an extreme and transforming it into a real art, their copies recreate the original crimes in every detail, adjusting each object and recreating scenarios with exactly the same precision with which an artist learns how to imitate a master. Thus conceived, the criminal act is similar to the artistic act in its need to establish a dialogue with a tradition, to perfect techniques that will eventually allow certain effects to be achieved. The reference to William Blake in *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris is a recent example of this very common practice in the literature of terror. As De Quincey remarks in his work,

People begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed - a knife - a purse - and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature.

(De Quincey 1924:263)

In Harris’ novel the so-called Tooth-Fairy is a serial killer that comes into the crime scene with the stylized movements of a dancer, so that he can watch himself later on as the central performer of the horrific home-videos he directs with an astonishing aesthetic distance, even in the most intimate moments. The pieces of glass he introduced in the eyes of his victims had the purpose of turning them into an audience that could watch his performance as if it was a work of art. His aesthetic pleasure reaches its climax whenever he watches William Blake’s *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*. As we can read in the novel,

the picture had stunned him at the first time he saw it. Never before had he seen anything that approached his graphic thought. He felt that Blake must have peeped in his ear and seen the Red Dragon.

(Harris 1993:87)

This happens because he wants to see his physical and psychological ugliness transformed by the Dragon's power. That's why he thinks that even after two hundred years, Blake's painting looks fresh and almost alive. He believes that, through this aesthetic experience, he is going to transform himself into a man-dragon. The belief in this process of metamorphosis and transcendence explains his highly planned crimes, because they would make him God. Creating a character that is at the same time an artist and a criminal, a sensitive man and a monster, very similar to the highly educated cannibal, the famous Dr. Lecter from *The Silence of the Lambs*, Harris created a divided personality that reminds us of many scenes from *Psycho* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It is not by chance that this serial killer is called Dollarhyde. Concentrated in this character are all the dualities and ambiguities essential to the Gothic sublime. The very gifted F.B.I agent, Will Graham, is also contaminated by this ambiguity, because he possesses that artistic imagination that makes him able to assume the points of view of other people, even those that might scare him. If this is considered, in the novel, as a powerful gift, it is also a proof of human duplicity. This explains how art could be used with a double purpose. Graham's sensitiveness uses it to defend life; Dollarhyde's sick mind practises it to cause death. Through both characters, we become conscious of its powers of creation and destruction. This ambivalence also allows us to penetrate into what should be the true purpose of Gothic fiction as an art form.

In *Violence in the Arts*, John Fraser says that feelings of attraction and repulsion are involved whenever we deal with violence in arts, because some of the expressions of that violence help to develop consciousness and lead to intellectual clarity while others only create confusion. As an example of this ambivalence, Fraser comments on *A Clockwork Orange* by Kubrick, saying that this director touched upon ambiguities and ambivalences of feelings. Comparing himself to Nietzsche, Sade, Genet and Camus, this author concludes that the art produced by some intellectuals sometimes confirms the psychopathological vision of the criminals, especially in the cinema. About the identification of the American citizen with the figure of the psychopath, Fraser says:

In some ways this kind of tolerance towards criminals may be thought to be merely a continuation of the tradition that the *Time* reviewer referred to when he spoke of Americans' tendency to see gangsters as "individualistic resistance fighters against society"— the Robin Hood tradition, the Jesse James tradition, the Ned Kelly tradition. But what is new is a much greater self-projection than before into the figure of the psychopath or at least a certain kind of psychopath.

(Fraser 1974: 22)

According to this author, the artist who deals with violence in an honest and valid way is the one that confronts the public with real human nature and with his essential will of destruction. He should make them face what is unpleasant and sordid, the villainy and human brutality. That is the price of authenticity in art. This role of the artist will be very important in a society that is worried about hiding its focus on violence through an aesthetic surgery of its negative aspects, trying to eliminate the germs from the social tissue, so that it is completely unthinkable to talk about Evil. But this is something that Gothic fiction was never afraid of doing.

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde is an example of that authenticity because it shows us the destructive consequences of extreme aestheticism. This novel can be said to represent the paradox of Wilde's aesthetics, which desired to be a model of life while at the same time remaining totally disconnected from it. The corrupting influence of art, so explored in the Gothic novels, is expressed by an excessive desire to have power over life, which transforms the creative force into something destructive, as happens in *Frankenstein*. More examples of this connection between art and crime can be given. There was in 1994 a rap artist living in New York who appealed to the separation between art and life to justify as "art" the criminal intentions of his performances. This art of terror was also executed by Albert Fish, an American serial-killer, who liked reading the *Extraordinary Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, especially "The Pit and the Pendulum", perhaps to learn from this long horror narrative how to terrify his victims. This seems to explain how in *Seven*, the famous movie by David Fincher, a highly educated serial killer has sophisticated habits of reading, being inspired by *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Merchant of Venice*, etc. The sentence "Long is the way that from hell leads to light" is quoted because the murderer extracted it from *Paradise Lost* by Milton to justify his terrible crimes. These evil actions are committed as if they were works that obey a very high sense

of composition, from which is extracted an enormous aesthetic pleasure. Quoting De Quincey again, we may say that this is perhaps the ideal of every important crime, because, like Aeschylus's and Milton's art, it should ascend to the level of the sublime, developing a sense of taste according to which it should be appreciated. And there is nothing better than the contact with Literature, or with Art in general, to develop it. These similarities between criminals and artists led once Stephen King to conclude in an interview that he might very well have ended up working out his demons with a high-powered telescopic rifle instead of a word processor. This happens not only because human nature has an essential duality, but also because Gothic fiction is deeply paradoxical, being able to conciliate terrible horrors with great art. One of the most famous examples of all this is Hannibal Lecter, the famous serial killer created by Thomas Harris, who was not only a cannibal but also possessed sophisticated artistic tastes, as shown by his interest in the art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, his knowledge of Dante's poetry and his musical taste for the *Goldberg Variations*. He was an artist, who decorated his cell with drawings of the Palazzo Vecchio and the Duomo in Florence, painted from memory. Like many other characters in Gothic fiction, he had to be profoundly gifted to create a true art of terror.

Universidade de Évora

References

BAUDELAIRE, Charles (1980). *Oeuvres Complètes* [1857]. Paris: Robert Lafont.

BURKE, Edmund (1990). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1757]. New York: Oxford University Press.

De QUINCEY, Thomas (1924). *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and other Essays* [1821]. London: Macmillan.

FIEDLER, Leslie (1997). *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press.

FRASER, John (1974). *Violence in the Arts*. London: Cambridge University Press.

HARRIS, Thomas (1993). *The Red Dragon*. London: Random House.

MELVILLE, Herman (1983). *Moby-Dick* [1851]. New York: The Library of America.

READ, Herbert (1998). *A Concise History of Modern Painting* [1959]. New York: Thames and Hudson.

SYLVESTER, David (1995). *Interviews with Francis Bacon*. London: Thames and Hudson.

VARMA, Devendra (1987). *The Gothic Flame*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.

WALPOLE, Horace (1994). *Four Gothic Novels - The Castle of Otranto*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.