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GOTHIC SPECTACLE AND SPECTATORSHIP (JUNE, 1, 2019)

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***Gothic Spectacle and Spectatorship*. Lancaster University, Lancaster, England, 1 June 2019.**

On a suitably overcast day in June, scholars and lovers of the Gothic congregated at Lancaster University for *Gothic Spectacle and Spectatorship*, a one-day symposium which aimed “to provoke questions as to the nature and evolution of viewership and performance within the Gothic.” Beginning with a keynote given by Xavier Aldana Reyes (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) on reception studies as the future of Gothic scholarship, the symposium then consisted of five panels, four of which ran in parallel pairs, throughout the day.

Panel 1A was on Gothic fashion, and consisted of papers by Catherine Spooner (Lancaster University, UK) on the intersection of race, fabric, and horror in imperialist narratives, Victoria Hurtado (Independent) on the aesthetic experience of Alexander McQueen, and Jennifer Cameron (University of Hertfordshire, UK) on attire and otherness in *Dracula* (1897). Meanwhile, Panel 1B, on the Victorian Gothic, featured work by Kate Cherrell (University of Lincoln, UK) on the influence of Victorian reality on Gothic fiction, Zoe Chadwick (Newman University, UK) on marketing freakshows, and Brian Jukes (University of Hertfordshire, UK) on vampirism and degeneration in *Dracula* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). After lunch, Panel 2A, on the Gothic on screen, comprised of my paper on implicated viewership and the production of horror in *Inside No. 9* (2014-current), Luke Turley (Lancaster University, UK) on liberal horror in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-current), and Teodora Nikolova (Durham University, UK) on contemporary American Gothic aesthetics in *Riverdale* (2017). At the same time was Panel 2B, on Gothic theatricalities, which saw Marita Arvaniti (University of Glasgow, UK) speak on staging *The Monk* (1796) in the twenty-first century, Shauna Caffrey (University College Cork, Ireland) discuss the supernatural in Restoration theatre, and Gheorge William (Durham University, England) explore the role that Gothic theatricalities play in the urgent need to express the unspeakable experience of sexual trauma. Finally, the day came to a close with a paper by Katie Noble (Independent Scholar, UK) on portraying infanticide in representations of Medea, and a presentation by Ruth-Anne Walbank and Lara Orriss (Lancaster University, UK) of their creative critical undergraduate project, “Death of the New Woman: A Photographic Novel,” a strikingly modern feminist reimagining of *Dracula*.

Given that the symposium sought not just to explore the Gothic, but also “viewer/performer relationships and the instability of these boundaries within the Gothic mode,” Aldana Reyes’ work could not have been more suitable to open the day. Reception studies, he argued, is about knowing ourselves and our actions and reactions. This is vital to a comprehensive study of horror, which,

as he illustrated through a brief examination of *Mama* (2013), which has been variously read as centrally concerned with the return of the repressed, critiquing patriarchy, castration anxieties, and a scary, vengeful revenant, produces potentially vastly different responses in different audiences, which may or may not be those which writers or directors intended. This thought-provoking address set the tone for the day: those in attendance were, like Aldana Reyes, clearly not merely interested in a mode of fiction which has terrified, repulsed, and delighted audiences for over two and a half centuries, but also in what it means to participate in such viewership, and, by association, what it means to be human.

Aldana Reyes' work also posed a question which again recurred throughout the day. In his monograph on the subject at hand, *Horror Film and Affect* (2016), he explains that, after watching *Hostel* (2005):

I pondered not just about the ethics of the characters' actions but also my own involvement and role as consumer of violent spectacles: had I enjoyed the film? If so, did that make me complicit in the torture-for-sale business at the heart of the film? Was I in some way responsible for the carnographic spectacles I had witnessed? (1)

This appeared to be a question with which many in attendance were preoccupied, and the symposium was boldly unique in that, while derision from numerous external sources prompts many academics within the field to defend the Gothic ferociously, many of the day's speakers acknowledged the potentially damaging effects of both producing and consuming the darkly spectacular. Cherrell, for instance, discussed the manner in which Victorian spiritualism, while providing a means of escape from the suffocating confines of feminine expectations, also prompted numerous violent and exploitative practices.

The symposium also highlighted the role of new media in shaping and reshaping the Gothic mode. The symposium's call for papers was accompanied by Dale Townshend's assertion that "the Gothic imagination is one of ghostly and ghastly spectacle" (xl). This, Townshend argues, is because it is "[s]ynonymous in the mind of Coleridge and other detractors with the phantasmagoric displays of the magic lantern show" (xl). In *The Ghost: A Cultural History* (2017), Susan Owens delves into the influence of such theatricalities on the Gothic mode's genesis, explaining that, prior to the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), "[l]ight shows had long been associated with the projection of ghosts" (132). This proved of particular relevance to the panel on Gothic television since, as Karen Williams argues, alongside spirit photography, "the supernatural of reality TV participates in another genealogy as well: the ghost show or phantasmagoria," and tied the panel perhaps surprisingly neatly to that on the Victorian Gothic, during which Cherrell explored the influence of Victorian spiritualism, including spirit photography, on Gothic fictions past and present (149). As some worry that the term 'Gothic' has becoming troublingly loose, such connections served to demonstrate that the spirit of the Gothic is much as it always has been.

The Victorian Gothic panel also demonstrated that Aldana Reyes' concerns for the morality of the consumption of extreme Gothic spectacles is by no means new, through Chadwick's investigation into the exploitative marketisation of otherness in the nineteenth century freakshow. In this way, a further question emerged from the day's discussions: spectacle may be inherent to the Gothic, but might it not also be possible that the Gothic is inherent to spectacle, too? In its association with the dark side of culture, the return of that which society has repressed, and an obsession with transgression, which Turley argues is the core component of the Gothic mode, is perhaps spectacle itself as potentially Gothic as crumbling castles and suits of armour? Moreover, if this is the case, then could there be any better time to study the Gothic? As Guy Debord remarks at the very beginning of *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), "[i]n societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life itself is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (7). This could not more clearly connect with Jerrold Hogle's work on "the ghost of the counterfeit" – that is, "the Gothic re-faking of fakery" that has been intrinsic to the mode since the ghosts that walked Walpole's eponymous castle emerged not from graves, but from paintings (489). In the age of reality television and social media, could Angela Carter's forty-five-year-old claim that "we live in Gothic times" be any more apt (133)?

A slight difficulty presented itself in the fact that the event was held in the Ruskin Library, the open plan architecture of which meant that it was sometimes possible to hear applause or audio from one panel while sitting or presenting in another, but these occasional and minor distractions seemed to be unanimously forgiven in light of the beauty of the space. The primary triumph of the symposium, however, was its defiant assertion that the Gothic is, in spite of itself, still very much a part of contemporary culture. From Julian Wolfreys' claim that "[t]he Gothic was dead, to begin with," to Alexandra Warwick's that the Gothic is now "so large as to be meaningless," there is a sense that a growing number of academics are now shaking their heads at the insistent, perpetual probing of the Gothic for scholarly debate (xi; 8). As Aldana Reyes argued, however, as he took Fred Botting's sense of hopelessness towards the future of the field to task, it is perhaps not so much that the Gothic is now redundant, but rather that it is by nature adaptable and hence multifarious, and *Gothic Spectacle and Spectatorship* adeptly reflected this element of the mode. One would be hard-pressed to find many other symposiums with source materials including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula* alongside *Riverdale* and Alexander McQueen, or which showcase the creative critical works of second year undergraduates. As Chadwick argued in her paper, Gothic fiction, like the freakshow, provides a response to the mysteries of human nature that can be answered neither by science nor religion. In these uncertain times, such meditations are perhaps more vital than ever. The Gothic, the symposium resolutely proved, remains, in spite of itself, very much alive and kicking, and as spectacular as ever.

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BIONOTE

Brontë Schiltz recently graduated from the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, with an MA in English Studies: The Gothic. Her research interests include the televisual and digital Gothic, the neoliberal Gothic, and the queer Gothic. She recently had an article published in the SFRA Review.