THE DARK THREAD: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID PUNTER

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David Punter is the author of fifteen academic books, many of which revolve around gothic fiction. *The Literature of Terror: The Gothic Tradition* (vol. 1-2, 1996) is one of the most relevant manuals about the Gothic published so far. He is also the editor of ten academic volumes and has taught at universities in different countries and even continents, the University of Bristol being the last one, where he was the research director for the Faculty of Arts. David Punter has also authored eight volumes of poetry and has published poems and short stories in various anthologies. His work can be found at david-punter.org.

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Mónica Fernández Jiménez: The titles of your two most famous volumes on the Gothic make reference to terror. In the introduction to the first one you clearly state that "Gothic fiction has, above all, to do with terror" (13). How do you associate the particular features with which you describe the Gothic genre to the fact that they always create terror? Can you think of some exception?

David Punter: When I published those books that was forty years ago and I suppose my views have changed or I hope developed a bit since then. I do think the Gothic and the notion of terror are critically interlinked but one has to bear in mind that Gothic was from the very beginning, if one takes the beginning to be the late eighteenth century, to an extent formulaic. If you take an early novel like Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777) I would not imagine that that produced in its audiences a sensation of terror, but it might have produced a kind of *frisson*, of excitement. I think that terror is a term that sometimes needs to be thought of in inverted commas. And, of course, from the beginning there was this distinction which is still with us I think between terror and horror, with terror being seen as more psychological and

horror more to do with what we now call body horror, a kind of gross intersection of physicality. And, of course, that does occur as a dialectic at the beginning of the Gothic with the frequently cited differences between Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, with Lewis as a far more explicit writer about various matters which might cause us to feel fear.

But I would want to now say one or two more things about that, because what I had assumed in the days when I first wrote about the Gothic as a strand of writing from the eighteenth century to the present day was that Gothic should be seen as a function of whole works, whole novels, whole poems. I always had trouble with that because, for example, in *The Literature of Terror* I talk about Dickens, and you might think of Dickens in terms of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840). *The Old Curiosity Shop* does contain moments which I would still think of as Gothic, but it is not a Gothic novel, and I think now we might want to be more sophisticated about how the Gothic interweaves with other genres and modes in particular works. Maybe not many works are actually wholly Gothic and maybe that is okay. Maybe Gothic needs to be thought of as a vein that runs through works rather than the whole deal as it were. I think of early Gothic drama back in the early to mid-nineteenth century, where a Gothic play or mini play might crop up in an evening's entertainment alongside satirical works, comical works, farces, and so forth. This is all part of an evening's entertainment and not many early Gothic writers would have thought of themselves specifically or entirely as Gothic writers. They were writers who wrote, among other ways, in a Gothic vein. If I move on to a different matter related to this, it occurred to me when thinking about your question to think a little bit about Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Now, that is often referred to as a Gothic work but I do not think that that story, that novella, invites one to experience terror quite. One certainly has fear about the unstable relationship between the governess and the children. But I think that what is more interesting in that work, as an example, is about doubt, suspicion, uncertainty. And I think that the Gothic could be seen as a kind of strand in writing that takes away your usual bearings and means that you are looking at things in a different way. And that is because Gothic always, I think, has to do with transgression of one kind or another, and there is no knowing how far that transgression will go. Once you have transgressed against the usual physical and so-called natural rules then you might go anywhere. Outstandingly, of course, that is the case when dealing with the supernatural, which the Gothic has always done, I think, in one way or another, either through belief in the supernatural or through challenging the supernatural or through criticising or indeed mocking the supernatural. Self-mockery then was in the Gothic from the beginning, because once we grant the possibility of ghosts, vampires, zombies… then anything might follow from that.

MFJ: You endorse a very inclusive definition of the Gothic in these volumes. Gothic has always been hard to categorise and there are some horror and science fiction, decadent or supernatural works that have been excluded by critics from the Gothic category even though they also include some transgression. I was thinking of a particular piece of work which you

indeed include in the second volume of *The Literature of Terror* that I personally love. It is Arthur Machen's novella *The Great God Pan* (1894). The critics Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton argue that this novella does not create fear because it is too detailed and it is more about embracing the occult (44-45), which is commonplace in decadent literature. What thoughts do you have on the literature of the occult sometimes written by authors who fearlessly embraced these unknown forces in relation to Gothic transgression and terror?

DP: My original attempts at defining the Gothic in *The Literature of Terror* were indeed very inclusive. Some might say they were too inclusive but I was trying to trace this strand of the Gothic from the late eighteenth century to what was then the present day—that is quite a long time ago now. In another sense they were not inclusive at all because in those early books I was entirely dealing with a tradition based in British and to an extent American literature and now things have changed. We have had a great deal of work done on what we might loosely call global Gothic or Gothics of different cultural backgrounds. And I think that one of the crucial features in these new critical approaches to Gothic is that there is a series of intersections between what we have thought of traditionally as Gothic and what some might say folk motifs within very different, very various cultures. Every culture I know of has some dealings with the supernatural. And every culture I know of is predicated at least to an extent on attempts to deal with fear. Different cultures deal with that in different ways and therefore different cultures produce different kinds of ghosts, but the ghosts are always there. From the fox fairies of Chinese and Japanese writing through to the Wendigo in North America, every culture that one can think of has these dealings which are partly, of course, dealings with the ancestors and dealings with death.

So we now have within our purview a very much wider range of materials that we might think of as Gothic and of course it is even more complex than that because what we might call Indigenous texts of fear have become inflected recently with European and American Gothic, so there is a kind of mutual feeding between what we think of in the West as Gothic and what has originated in other cultures to cope with issues of fear. And that of course has now fed back into, for example, an emerging Anglo-American folk horror tradition. Think of *The Wicker Man* (1973). I am currently reading a graphic novel by Hannah Eaton called *Blackwood* (2012) which is all about folk motifs in the English countryside. It is all to do with managing fear, lots of Gothic motifs, ghosts and so forth, but it is not really based in that. It is based in some historically different kind of past. Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* is a tremendous novel. Wonderful. I agree with you entirely, Mónica. One of my favourite books. It is certainly occult. Is it Gothic? Well, I think you could say it is Gothic if we accept this description, not a definition but a description of the Gothic as transgressive, specifically in relation to the supernatural, because it deals with the supernatural and, to an extent, it accepts the supernatural. But, of course, when we think of novels of the occult then it turns out that almost all of them, in my experience, are actually quite intensely more than that. They do not say that there are dark forces coming to claim us. They say that there is a battle in the world between

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dark magic and white magic and that this battle is something that needs to be described in order to restore order, or at least to point out, as Matthew Lewis did of course in *The Monk* (1796), the extreme dangers of challenging the boundaries around that order. Let me just mention a couple of other novels of the occult. Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild* (1923). Crowley of course was supposedly a believer in magic, in dark magic. But again, in the novel it is white magic that triumphs. A much more interesting and more ambiguous novel which is not so well known, I think, is by a wonderful writer called M. John Harrison who has written a long series of science fiction works but also a book called *The Course of the Heart* (1992), which has to do with ritual magic but also with psychological disorder. And the hinge of that book is that what you summon up through magical rituals or through memory cannot be banished. And that, of course, is also the root of recent and not so recent cultural anxieties about the literature and more specifically the film of terror, as in the example of the visual experience of *Child's Play* (1988). Once you have something lodged in your mind then you cannot dismiss it and you may have to, in some sense, act upon it. And that is the cause of lots of moral panics about Gothic and horror texts, not so usually literary now, more filmic. There is the threat of an incitement to violence, maybe a result of repeating images. Another example, my last one of literature of the occult, Peter Ackroyd. His wonderful book *The House of Dr Dee* (1993) is about John Dee, the famous Elizabethan astrologer and magician. What Ackroyd does is perform a historical engagement with ritual magic, which is brilliantly ambiguous about whether that magic is or ever could be actually effective. So all through the literature of the occult, I think, there is this set of doubts about whether or in what sense we are dealing here with magic. You can describe magic as a supernatural power over the natural. The physical is not its own master but supernaturally in some way you can control those forces, that is what magic has been about since the ancient Greeks at least, and in Chinese culture probably for even longer than that. Where there is magic, that goes way back into what we think of as some deep history. But whether that magic is actually effective or being used as a metaphor—and Crowley I suppose is good on this because he does talk about how, for him, even magic is a kind of metaphor for exerting power—is another issue. Maybe the occult is something like that, although the occult of course is also a way of forming relationships, small groups. Think of the Society for Psychical Research at the end of the nineteenth century in the UK and elsewhere. This is a way of banding together to form some kind of power, often among those who are otherwise powerless.

MFJ: I have always been intrigued by the occult because its emergence and its representation within decadent literature follows a different periodisation than the early Gothic fictions of the eighteenth century. In your answer you have mentioned psychic disorder and also the different cultural traditions where the Gothic has made an appearance. In the introduction to volume one of *The Literature of Terror* you seem to express the belief that the nature of fear in the American reappearance of the genre is completely different because of its psychic

dimension if we compare it to eighteenth-century British Gothics. In your words, “this new American Gothic seems to deal in landscapes of the mind” (2). This is also how Rosemary Jackson, who wrote a book about fantastic fiction, defines the gothic genre. She defines it as a recognition that fears are “created by the self or by unconscious forces” (14). But you seem to believe that in the early British Gothic works there was a sort of more external fear compared to the reappearance of the genre in the American context. Can you elaborate a little bit on that in relation to what is unique about the American Gothic?

DP: There are many critics far more expert than I am on the US dimension: Charles Crow, Maisha Wester, Marilyn Michaud and Bernice Murphy, for example, have written very powerful books on US Gothic. To slightly sidestep that for a moment—but I will come back to the United States—I think I would no longer say that there is a distinction between inner and outer fears, but there are different ways in which they might be represented. I was recently reviewing a book on Polish Gothic and the author, Agnieszka Lowczanin, discusses ruins. Of course, ruins are a theme in the Gothic from the eighteenth century through to Iain Banks' *A Song of Stone* (1997), Shirley Jackson … lots of material. Ruins run right through Anglo-American Gothic. But the point made in this book is that although ruins also run through Polish Gothic, they mean something quite different because in Britain ruins represent the legacy of internal strife, largely religious, monasteries being destroyed, abbeys being burned to the ground … all in the course of religious strife within the UK. Whereas in Poland, and in Polish Gothic, those ruins are almost always the effect of a destructive invasion from other nations and empires which have sought over several centuries to destroy Poland, and in fact they succeeded twice in banishing Poland from the map of Europe. So all I mean to point out by that is that any repertoire of Gothic motifs in different polities—the ruin, the castle - even the persecuted maiden depending on gender politics—will be different in different locations. And so, fears in the US will also be differently coded.

Here is a huge generalisation and I am not an expert on this so I expect I am quite wrong. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in a lot of US Gothic the anxieties are about insurrection from within, whereas in European Gothic a lot of those fears are about invasion from without. Now that is a vast generalisation, there are many exceptions, but that is something which I think may have some mileage in it and therefore in the US I think the return of the repressed, whether that be through anxiety about indigenous racism, national fate, or terrors about the after-effects of slavery … these I think are very much to the forefront in US Gothic. They are more on the back burner, I think, in Britain. But in the US these are sometimes very interestingly coded. And I want to make reference here to Stephen King who I believe is a great American novelist. A lot of American critics over the decades, even last century, have wailed and moaned about the question of where is the great American novelist and they have said “oh, he or she has not yet arrived.” I think he has. I think he did. I think it is Stephen King. But you cannot confront Stephen King or face Stephen King partly because King is boxed into a genre, Gothic or horror, whatever you call it, and partly because what he does with that is based not

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in these returns of the repressed. He very rarely writes about the fate of indigenous peoples. He does write about small-town USA and he writes about it in terrifying ways and the novel of his I think is the best is called *Needful Things* (1991). Now in *Needful Things* the devil arrives in small-town USA, does not matter where it is, and sets up a shop, and in that shop he can give you anything you want. The people in the town, who appear fairly peaceful but actually have these huge antagonisms one to another, come asking for various things they think will help in these disputes. And the devil helps, of course, the devil is a helpful kind of chap. But, in the end, it turns out that all that people actually want, all they need, their needful thing, is a gun. So the devil provides guns and there you go, there you have one powerful version of the history of contemporary USA, I suppose. Black lives may matter, but do they matter as much as the right to bear arms? I know I am always puzzled by the assertions of the National Rifle Association in the USA who say repeatedly, "guns aren't the problem." Well, I do not think they are right but if they are right, what is the alternative? If guns are not the problem, then something deep in the US psyche must be the problem. There is no third way, it has got to be one thing or the other, the motive or the means. So you are talking about a deep traumatic root of disturbance in the US which is what US Gothic keeps on trying to gnaw at. Although maybe recently the threat of invasion is back. I think about Max Brooks' wonderful book *World War Z* (2006) and how the US remains no longer immune to a kind of invasion. And, of course, now with this current pandemic we see again that the US is not immune to invasion. Another kind of return I think is represented in Kameron Hurley's wonderful set of books *The Bel Dame Apocrypha* (2010-2012), which are about the violence on women and about the return of the ravaged deserts so that what the US has done in Afghanistan and in Iraq and so forth comes back home. And to go back to Stephen King again, in his book *Cell* (2006) he refers memorably to the possibility of Americans being refugees in their own land, doing an endless "Refugee Walk" (183), which of course echoes Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

MFJ: The Stephen King novel is a great example. I am going to move on to something a bit different and it also has to do with something that you have been mentioning which is changing your mind about things that you wrote in the past. Unlike many scholars with a background in the literature of the previous centuries, although your background is extensive and you never historicise the Gothic in absolute terms, you also have an interest in the critical framework of deconstruction. This is particularly visible in your 2007 book *Metaphor*, especially in the seventh chapter "Metaphor, Difference, Untranslatability," although I can see a deconstructive form of writing throughout all of your texts. I have enjoyed reading this text very much. This book was published after the ones on the Gothic that I have been mentioning so far. Has your latest interest in deconstruction added something new to your perception of the Gothic?

DP: Yes, thank you again for that question. I am interested in deconstruction. On the positive side I find that Derrida's writings and Kristeva's writings provide a kind of *jouissance*, a kind

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of enjoyment in the twists and turns of language. I think deconstruction can almost be defined as an alertness to the ways in which words never say exactly what they mean, or they never mean exactly what they say. I think that it is extremely important not to get boxed in by the notion that words have a conventional acceptable history and that they can be defined entirely in the ways in which they are defined by dictionaries, because words are always small explosions. Almost any word that you can use has other meanings hidden or partly visible within it. And that is only thinking about them in terms of one language and its etymology. Of course, when you spread that out across a range of languages, matters become even more complex. I also think that deconstruction is in a sense a development of a political position and specifically a Marxist position, though very few deconstructive thinkers would agree with me. What Marx said about ideology before the term ideology got debased was that ideology is a way of purveying the world upside down so that you are taught to ignore the real causes of things—in this case the real economic causes—and to focus on the superstructure as though that is what causes things, which it does not. This is a complicated situation. I do not want to go into any more detail about that but I think that deconstruction follows on from that, even while not wanting to, in trying to expose this kind of upside-down view of the world that we are continually exposed to. That is on the positive side. On the negative side I think the real problem is with the ways in which deconstruction has been interpreted as the possibility of a slide into relativism. And I worry increasingly about whether that connects with or has been made to connect with the current discourse of fake news because when deconstruction says "there is nothing outside text" (158), then it is in danger of saying "therefore, there is no such thing as pain," and pain for me is the touchstone. You could say there is no such thing as death because different cultures view death differently. I can understand that, some cultures do not acknowledge death. That is grand, good for them. I wish we did not but there we are. And some religions do not acknowledge death, and that is good too, that is absolutely fine. But pain for me is the touchstone, you cannot not acknowledge pain. It is real, it is physical, and I do not think deconstruction has a rhetoric for coping with that, or with the many painful experiences that most people in the world go through.

Another thought I have had recently about deconstruction is that it is a kind of experimental criticism and I like that. It is good, we all need to experiment, but it does seem to me that it coincides rather oddly with a decline in what we used to think of as experimental fiction, except of course for flash fiction, which I think of as fiction for those with a short attention span. I am not very fond of flash fiction. To go back to deconstruction, I think we are at a kind of cusp, or maybe beyond it, in relation to high theory. I am not sure anybody cares much about high theory anymore, I think there are more pressing concerns, mainly about the realignment of the canon so that we no longer have a kind of male supremacist view of writing, a white supremacist view of writing. These things have moved on amazingly in the last twenty years and that is obviously all to the good. I have got a brief footnote to that which I suppose is partly about the current pandemic. I am interested in the way in which deconstruction

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speaks about different kinds of speed of writing and reception. Thinking about that took me back recently to Paul Virilio, a major cultural critic who about forty years ago wrote a book called *Speed and Politics* (1977). What he was saying was that the real privilege in political life has to be geared to speed so that if you can travel faster, you can conference faster, you can influence faster, you can be part of the world as it moves. If you are stuck in one location you cannot influence how things go on. It is a fairly obvious point but he goes into great detail about different speeds. In a different book of his he says that "the invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck" (89). I think that is the most wonderful, crisp statement about how every advance produces or can produce its own disaster and I take it that is the situation with the pandemic. I presume it has been spread by global air travel, I presume also in the way of inversion people now, or governments now, choose to try to blame poorer communities, communities who do not have access to power. They choose to say that they spread the pandemic. Actually, it is spread by the super-rich and their air travel. If you look at the figures for how many people travel by air, 3% of the people in the world do 90% of the world's air travel. My point about the pandemic, if I just continue that for a moment, is that what we have at the moment is a speeding up. International conferences are a speeding up of the interchange of ideas, and the current problem with physical presence and interaction might speed things up even more. But there is also a slowing down. Will air travel ever really function again? Interestingly, a great deal of Gothic has traditionally been about claustrophobia. We think of Poe above all. We think about all those castles of Radcliffe and Lewis and so forth. And we think about imprisoned heroines, and cells, and prisons, and dungeons, and all the associated paraphernalia of incarceration. A rare exception actually is the remarkable writer Algernon Blackwood who writes almost entirely about agoraphobia, but he is different. But I am interested in looking forward into whether that is going to change because I do not now know whether our greatest fear is of isolation, that is, claustrophobia, or fear of public spaces and what might be transmitted through them as in a pandemic situation. And I am interested to know how Gothic will emerge and cope with it. I am sure it is doing so already but there is a long way to go, I think.

MFJ: I am really fond of deconstruction but I do fear as well the tendency to relativise everything and that it might lead to something dangerous. I think it has a lot of possibilities. I do have just a small last question about your own creative writing. You have written eight volumes of poetry, the last but one is titled *Those Other Fields* (2020). This is about events that happened in 2020 so I would like to ask you about the process of writing during such a difficult time. I think, personally, that the gothic mode survives because it allows us to deal with the unspeakable, so I am therefore curious about how it feels on the other side, where you have to deal with writing about these unspeakably difficult times.

DP: *Those Other Fields* is my last book but one, I published one since then called *Stranger* (2020). *Those Other Fields* was straightforwardly political but it was mainly focused on refugees, which

of course has now become not the major issue of our times, which I think is a problem because the whole issue of refugees is how we code our fear of the Other. *Stranger* has more ghosts. But the poems I am writing now seem to be more about the local, the immediate small incidents that happen outside my study window. So maybe that reflects the way in which we have all been driven back on ourselves during the pandemic and the questions are, I think, about how we will behave when we are freed from lockdown, how we are beginning to behave as lockdown loosens up. Will we rampage or will we emerge blinking into the sunlight? Just one very small point. I do not know about other parts of the world, but in the UK we have had the continuous repetition of this terrible mantra "it is what it is." That is supposed to make you feel at ease with things and not mind too much about lockdown and so forth. Well, Hegel often implied, in his dismissal of common sense, that actually things are not exactly what they are, and the Urban Dictionary online that you may know is especially good on "it is what it is." It says that "it is what it is" is a code for saying it will always be what it is. So it is a way of telling us not to even think about change, not to imagine a future. And the Gothic is all about imagination, about possibilities, maybe especially when they are transgressive, so I think we need to resist that terrifying thought "it is what it is."

Open Q&A session

Anna Marta Marini: I see that you have recently worked on Mexican Gothic. I found some remarks that you made on the border very interesting, about how the border can be a place where Gothic happens in a way. Could you briefly say a few words on why the Mexican Gothic interests you and how you find the border connected with terror and horrific realities and narratives.

DP: I have written a couple of things on Mexican Gothic but I know I am no expert. I think the Mexican Gothic is a kind of classic, maybe the classic site of intersection between what I was mentioning earlier about folk traditions and cultural appropriation, because Mexico can obviously be seen in very large-scale terms as a continuous struggle between the indigenous and the imperialised. That has been so for a very long time and it was accentuated again during the Trump years - one hopes it might be a little more relaxed now. So, on the one hand, you have the Mexican traditions of the Day of the Dead, the death cults and so forth. On the other, you have the continuous threat of invasion or takeover from the bully in the North. That I think produces a very interesting form of Gothic which is of course full of fear and anxiety but also is curiously jaunty. I am thinking here of Laura Esquivel. *Water like Chocolate* (1995) is an interesting book of course in itself because of something I was saying earlier about Gothic being a kind of hybrid form, never quite as pure as we would like to think. And that, of course, is a hybrid book. It is a cookbook and it is a book about a family, and it is a book about real terror, isn't it? Or at least fear. But it has a jaunty kind of tone to it, it seems to me, as though in Mexican Gothic, to quote Heidegger, the terrible has already happened (164). Something terrible has happened in the past and whatever happens now cannot be worse than

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that and we will manage somehow to survive it. That is the kind of tone I get from Mexican writing which I get from very few other countries. I do think that Gothic can sometimes be not just a site of transgression, also a site of resistance. And I think there is some resistance evident in Mexican Gothic, some resistance of being entirely taken over, even when most of the films being watched in Mexico are US films. Although that is the case, I still think that their reception is not the same as it would be in the US, so there is still some Mexican *différance*. On the other hand, I think one must be careful not to romanticise that Mexican resistance because Mexico has numerous indigenous difficulties and problems which will not be solved by simply reading its literature. But I do find that site of cultural resistance and reaffirmation of the Mexican past very intriguing, and especially because it is done through a lot of motifs which in themselves are quite terrible. Octavio Paz, as we all know, saw Mexico as imbued with a kind of a culture of death.

AMM: I think I do agree with you because I find Mexican fiction of this kind to have a connection with the past, but it is like a ghostly past. It is like they are haunted and if, in a way, as you say, that can be a place of resistance, it can also be a place of not moving on. It has these two different sides and I think you can feel that in the fiction. The border, in a metaphorical and material sense, is an absolute place for that. I would like to find, though, a lot more Mexican fiction on the border, but I think it is still too present. They write about haunting from the past if it is the colonial past or the pre-colonial past, or even the revolutionary times as is the case of Laura Esquivel's book, but I think it is still too early for a real Gothic of the border.

DP: Gothic of that border takes you back to Cormac McCarthy, doesn't it? And the trilogy.

AMM: I find, for example, the movie *The Sleep Dealer* (2008)—which is science fiction but not quite—to have a kind of a Gothic edge, because there are migrants that are attached to machines and they work from Mexico in the US attached to virtual reality machines. So I think maybe this border fiction is still trying to find somehow a way.

DP: I think that is partly what separates some Gothic fiction in the British tradition from lots of other Gothics, because I think it is fair to say that in the British tradition we do not have those anxieties about borders because we persuade ourselves that we do not have any. So we are ignorant of borders as we are ignorant of invasion. Or pretend we are. Or have been for a long time. Of course, everywhere is invaded. There is a wonderful poem in the eighteenth century by Defoe called "The True Born Englishman" (1701) which just lists all the various peoples that the so-called true-born Englishman in the early eighteenth century is actually made up of. We are a hybrid race and so on and so forth. But we do not care to acknowledge that, I think.

Laura Álvarez Trigo: Paul Virilio's idea of technology and speed in relation to power is often discussed in relation to Marshall McLuhan. I come from the field of communication and media studies and I am very fond of McLuhan as a theoretical framework. I was thinking of this

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very commonly quoted idea in his work that "the medium is the message," which is the title of one of his books, and I wanted to ask you if you had any comments that you could share with us in terms of the gothic modes and the gothic strands that you were mentioning at the beginning, especially how they are expressed through different mediums, if there is a specific way in which the gothic modes and strands vary according to medium and which one, if any, is a better medium for that to be expressed.

DP: I do not know that one could say that one is better than another. I suppose you might say that some media are more culturally effective than others and I suppose that mixed media, visual and verbal, are always bound to be more effective in some way. It seems to me now that if effectivity is the main criterion, rather than quality or subtlety or density of thought, then, obviously, a meme is going to have more power than any other kind of form. I am thinking just as one example of a meme called Slenderman. Slenderman got everywhere but what was the purpose? What was the point? Or is the point that there is no point? Is the point in simply showing that you can get anywhere with a meme, regardless of what that meme might mean? Or was the point to instill and foster a kind of fear parallel to but not effective in the way of a serial killer or stalker. Was that the point?

LAT: I think it might be a bit both in the sense that it worked because it came from a creepypasta, if I am not mistaken, and in the sense that these ideas are spread on the internet and just the capacity to get to a wider and wider audience. That is what is dependent on the medium, that it is more effective by virtue of the numbers.

DP: That virtually is a kind of pure example of the medium is the message. The message is nothing more than the medium in which it is conveyed. The message is the speed at which you can convey. But the image does not mean anything beyond that. Slenderman is a slender image. Maybe that was the point. An image without depth. An image that is purely of the surface. Virilio might like that idea, I think.

Natalia Kopytko: I would like to ask you whether modern Gothic authors are interested in using mythological patterns in their works.

DP: Some are some are not but also, again, it depends on what you think of as modern Gothic authors. The authors that come to my mind most immediately as using mythological patterns or making up new mythological patterns are, firstly, Russell Hoban, who I do not think one would call a Gothic author in every way, but his novel *Riddley Walker* (1980) is certainly involved with issues of fear and terror and uses a huge mix of myths to sustain that. Also Neil Gaiman who, again, I am not sure one would think of as a Gothic author, is clearly involved all the time with remaking myths and making them into more fearsome versions. If you go back a little way then I suppose a more acceptedly gothic writer would be Angela Carter who is often, I think, taken within the gothic canon, at least again partly but not wholly, and is obviously interested in myth, in fairy tale, in folklore, and gains some of her most terrifying

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effects from that. Angela Carter is a very good example, I think, of how difficult it is to speak these days of a wholly Gothic author and it is interesting this has gone in two different ways. If you look in the bookshops, then you do not find shelves all devoted to the Gothic, you do find shelves devoted to horror and in the bigger bookshops you find shells devoted to what is now called "dark romance." But what is mostly on those shelves are books written specifically to figure in the charts and the sales pertaining to those labels, whereas a writer like Carter would figure, I think, in the general fiction shelves. If you try to classify her you would use such a number of labels, and the first, of course, will be "feminist," or "women's fiction" depending on what kind of labelling one is using. Then you might think of Gothic. You would never think of horror, not in relation to Carter. You might think of satire. You might think of cultural criticism. There are all manner of ways in which you could seek to classify Carter's works, her fiction as well as her essays, but none would be wholly satisfactory. It comes back to the whole way in which literary criticism tries to deal with questions of genre, which now has become more complicated because of course there are many, many writers, maybe the majority of writers, who write to fulfil a specific genre demand. There is nothing wrong with that, but it does mean that we now have this odd divide between genre fiction, so-called, and general fiction, which is not in a genre. Is it superior? Is it literarily superior to genre fiction? Is it simply unclassifiable? Is it better or worse for that? It is a very strange situation, I think. And, of course, it affects Gothic because Gothic has never, I think, really emerged as a genre in quite that sense. It is an academically reputable genre. Some would say it is the academically reputable version of horror. That is possible, but it does not sell in the bookshops in itself as Gothic. It might sell through horror, it might sell through certain kinds of graphic novel, it might sell through dark romance, always mediated through some other more popular, in inverted commas, form, because Gothic has this curious position of being and having been immensely popular without ever being popular. It has had a kind of ring of something slightly above popular genres.

Paul Mitchell: One of your quotes that I always use when I teach the Gothic and cinema is where you call the uncanny "a savage negation of history" ("Shape and Shadow", 260), which I think is a wonderful phrase to think about the uncanny and the way in which it makes us think about how we look at the world so that we re-see this world in which we think we live and that we think we know. I just wanted to pick up on something you talked a few moments ago, about borders. And I do not know if you are familiar with the British TV series *Humans* (2015). It is a really interesting piece because it is actually about kind of sentient robots, it is about AI and this kind of thing. But, in reality, it is kind of allegorical because it is about the migrant crisis and it is about Britain becoming swamped by these kinds of beings that come from without. Do you think that in the twenty-first century one of the hallmarks of the Gothic is that it has become more political, that it has become a force of subversion and resistance to big government? *Humans,* for example, is very much about the government that we have had

in the UK for many years, about living under austerity and these kinds of politics. That very much in the US has become a way to reflect on what has happened in the past few years with the Obama administration and then the administration of Trump. So whether it is becoming a lot more kind of politically focused than perhaps it was historically.

DP: Well, that is a really interesting question. I think my short answer is I would hope so. I think that one way of going at that would be to think about the history of the zombie and how that has always been infused to an extent with the political. Think back to the early film *White Zombie* (1932), by Victor Halperin, which obviously was making some extremely important points about slavery and exploitation, at the same time doing it in a way which was itself almost a kind of exploitation film. This is a brilliant kind of melding of popular form and political content. Then, if you think through with the zombie, I suppose the zombie becomes a kind of multivalent code for all manner of oppression. And I think that those relations between the notion of the zombie, slavery, and mindlessness have become more focused in recent years. Again, I could allude to works I have already mentioned. Stephen King's *Cell* which is about zombification through cell phones. A very potent thought that is. And again, *World War Z,* where the zombies prove capable of invading even the US. One of the wonderful things about *World War Z* is how different nations react in different ways, which gives good scope for Max Brooks to talk about different national priorities and to give his own views on how those national priorities might themselves be exploitative and open to critique. I will not mention examples right now but there are plenty of them in that book. I have said I hope you are right and I also think you are right. I have read quite a bit of lockdown poetry recently, some of it published poetry, some of it just written by colleagues I am in poetry groups with, and that motif of the coming of the mindless is very much there. But I think we have to be very careful because when you are speaking of zombies, then you can be speaking of that which is done to people, zombification by governments, or by capitalism, or by slave control. But by speaking of zombies, you may also be depriving sources of possible resistance, or, indeed, dare one say, revolution, of true agency. So I think the political force of that can go in two directions.

PM: I think it is interesting you mentioning the zombie as well given the context that we are in with the pandemic, and to see how that now plays out in terms of whether there is a space of zombie movies and zombie graphic novels which reflect that notion of people being contaminated in some way.

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