

EVENTS REVIEW

The Dark Glamour of Neo-Victorian Gothic

Gothic: Dark Glamour Exhibit, curated by Valerie Steele

New York Fashion Institute of Technology, 5 September 2008 - 21 February 2009

“Your mind is in disturbia” sang the reigning princess of R&B music, Rihanna, as she opened the 2008 MTV Video Music Awards on September 7th. Clothed in high-fashion black leather and feather bondage gear, she and an entourage of back-up dancers miming zombies gyrated around the stage as she asked seductively, “Am I scaring you tonight?” If the performance, which resurrected Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* with a touch of S&M, frightened the audience it was with no more than a pleasantly titillating thrill as Rihanna’s macabre Gothic-inspired musical opening effectively upstaged the return of Britney Spears and kept more than 8.4 million viewers riveted to the screen.

MTV, perennial source of all things trendy, used its opening entertainment as a clever marketing tool, for Rihanna’s performance responded to the Gothic vampire craze present in contemporary youth culture, particularly the culture of adolescent girls. The popularity of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series of fantasy novels has positioned the author as the J.K. Rowling of “tweens” and teens. *Twilight*, first book in the series, sold over 1.5 million copies, and the final installment, *Breaking Dawn*, sold 1.3 million within 24 hours of its release. Not coincidentally, a movie adaptation of *Twilight* opens in November. Even HBO, a network with programming geared more toward adults, has staked (pun intended) its claim to vampire narratives, premiering this Fall its drama *True Blood*, based on a series of Southern vampire mysteries by Charlaine Harris. Alan Ball, writer of *American Beauty* and creator of the critically-acclaimed series *Six Feet Under* (also for HBO), has said in interviews that he sees *True Blood* as an opportunity to continue the popularity of vampire shows like *Dark Shadows*, while simultaneously providing viewers with smart, witty pop satire of American culture and politics.

A phenomenon like the *Twilight* series has its roots in the earlier success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the all-black Goth fashion popular amongst teenagers in the late 1990s, developments that both proved of interest to academic scholarship. Milly Williamson’s essays in *Reframing the Body* (2001) and *Dressed to Impress: Looking the Part* (2001) address women’s complex relationship to the image of the vampire and Gothic fashion as a means of self-expression. Williamson speculates that fascination with vampires and with Gothic clothing originates in a desire to produce “nonconformist identities through oppositional dress.” This gesture of rebellion is, however, contradictory, as vampire narratives and their corresponding fashions simultaneously reject and retain conventional ideals of femininity.

Although the rise of the Gothic has been a prominent topic in academic publishing for several years, it has, until recently, bypassed the museum world. Certainly, no show had looked at pop culture versions of Gothic through the lens of fashion history and theory. On September 5th, the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City mounted the first exhibition devoted to Gothic style: *Gothic: Dark Glamour*, curated by the museum’s director, Valerie F. Steele.

The intersection of the Gothic with clothing style has long been a staple of both the gothic as a literary genre and the Goth cultural movement. The wall text for FIT Museum’s exhibition includes a telling quotation from Catherine Spooner’s *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* (2004): “Within gothic discourse, the clothes are the life” — a play on Bela Lugosi’s famous pronouncement, as Dracula, that “The blood is the life.”

Spooner continues, “Surely, therefore, within the world of fashion, it is this enduring potency of gothic images for imaginative self-identification that leads to their perennial revival.” Like a vampire rising from its coffin, our fascination with the Gothic continues to come back to (after)life as we use Gothic trappings to imagine new selves and recycle alternative identities.

The new lifeblood of Gothic fashion also comes from another source. Throughout the exhibition, Valerie F. Steele emphasizes the morbid allure attached to the Victorian period as a significant factor in the Gothic’s ongoing afterlife. Scholarly studies, such as Cora Kaplan’s *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007) and John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff’s essay collection, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (2000), have already established the connection between the popularity of recent Victorian revivals and the Gothic. In fact, the cover of the paperback edition of *Victorian Afterlife* serves as an excellent example of the intersection between Gothic and fashion: the features of the female model are obscured by a funereal black coatdress with a cascade of hyperbolically feminine white ruffles exploding from the neckline. The image echoes almost precisely the Fall 1997 creation “Camaïeu de Roses” (Cameo of Roses) by *haute couture* designer Thierry Mugler on display in *Gothic: Dark Glamour*. Mugler’s black silk faille and silk taffeta dress re-envision a Victorian-style mourning gown, with dark fuchsia fabric blossoms bursting from both neck and wrists.

At the beginning of the exhibition, which is fittingly housed in the FIT Museum’s basement, Steele juxtaposes the Victorian cult of death with the figure of the vampire. Gowns from Kambriel’s 2007 collection stand next to authentic Victorian mourning clothes, circa 1880. Kambriel and other designers suggest that contemporary Goths respond to the “morbid allure and claustrophobic corsetry” of Victorian fancy. Thus, visitors to *Gothic: Dark Glamour* see the Victorian period constructed for modern (fashion) audiences as a distinctly Gothic setting. The Gothic, and simultaneously the Victorian age, becomes synonymous not only with fear and terror, but with anxieties over contested femininity. Both the clothes on display and the layout and structure of the exhibit pay homage to contemporary fashion’s Victorian antecedents and to Victorian debates over women’s social roles.

Instances of hyperbolic femininity recur throughout Steele’s show, especially in the voluminous gowns of Alexander McQueen and of Kate and Laura Mulleavy. But one of the most interesting intersections of Victoriana, Gothic, and hyper-feminine attire is represented in the “Elegant Lolita” fashion movement from Japan. Designers such as Hirooka Naota have combined fanciful babydoll dresses with parasols and petticoats. Naota’s models clutch angry dolls, with skull-like faces reminiscent of figures from Tim Burton’s film *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) or from the graphic novel *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* (Jhonen Vasquez 1995). With fashion-forward American pop singers like Gwen Stefani—who now has her own line of clothes—embracing the Elegant Lolita (also called “Gothic Lolita”) look, the trend has even begun to turn up on campuses in the U.S.

The corset, that most iconic of Victorian symbols of restrictive femininity, also appears numerous times throughout the exhibit, perhaps never more memorably than in the “Strange Beauty” collection, where Yohji Yamamoto’s 2006 black silk crepe ensemble with cage corset resurrects, according to Steele, the “twenty-first century equivalent of whale-boning” while “simultaneously evoking the human rib cage.” Not coincidentally, Steele made a name for herself in scholarly circles as a historian and apologist for the corset with her book *The Corset: A Cultural History* (2001).

In the display area called “Ruined Castle,” an outfit by Hussein Chalayan plays with past trends in fashion by deconstructing a garment made from blue silk, gauze, netting, cotton, and lace. Inspired by the idea of ruination, the dress is meant to imply that it was “ripped apart by a voodoo curse.” Interestingly, what is left behind in the deconstructed garment is a look reminiscent of a Dickensian street urchin, complete with artful tatters and uneven handkerchief hem. Apparently, stripping away layers of Gothic fashion leaves us with the aesthetic stylings of one of the Victorians’ most successful novelists—a creation that is half the fashion sister of *Oliver Twist* and half the stepchild of Miss Havisham.

Miss Havisham’s contradictory world of preservation and decay is also evoked in the section of the show called “Cabinet of Curiosities,” which Steele uses both for Victorian memorabilia and modern Goth fetish accessories. The examples of *memento mori* collected in this cabinet include the death mask of the nineteenth-century American poet Celia Thaxter and Victorian mourning jewelry and hair-wreaths encased in shadowboxes placed alongside contemporary bracelets, chokers, and rings featuring skulls and bats. Once again, Victorian and the twenty-first-century styles mirror each other, brought together in the same Gothic discourse.

Gothic: Dark Glamour ends by making the idea of reflection literal. In the “Bat Cave,” Goth and cyberpunk clothing of the kind favored by black-clad Goth teenagers shares space with a two-way mirror. As the lights are dimmed and raised, the viewer sees either the high-fashion equivalents of contemporary Goth street clothes or only herself in the Gothic mirror. Thus, the exhibition functions as its own cabinet of curiosities, blending a Victorian past and a postmodern present, defying categorical and historical boundaries, and revealing what the current cultural obsession with Gothic narratives and styles already suggests: that we now see ourselves through a glass very darkly.

Kathleen A. Miller

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Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*

Adapted and directed by David Farr and Gisli Orn Gardarsson

A Versturport Theatre and Lyric Hammersmith production for the Dublin Theatre Festival, Olympia Theatre, Dublin, 29 September-4 October 2008

In Mel Brooks's *The Producers*, Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom, in search of the worst play of all time, a flop guaranteed to close on the first night and thus make their fortunes, find themselves reading through a mountain of treatments and proposals. 'Here's one!' says Max: "'Gregor Samsa awoke one morning to find he'd been transformed into a giant cockroach.'" Nah, it's too good!' As everyone will know, they light on *Springtime for Hitler*, 'a gay romp with Adolf and Eva at the Berchesgarten', and the rest is history....

In September 2008, the Los Angeles Opera staged a stellar production of *The Fly*, a newly-commissioned opera with music by Howard Shore (of *Lord of the Rings* fame), directed by David Cronenberg, and conducted by Placido Domingo. The production received, it is fair to say, mixed reviews.

Knowing all this, it did not exactly come as a surprise to me that this year's Dublin Theatre Festival would feature a staging of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* with music by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis of the Bad Seeds. And while this one doesn't quite go as far as Brooks's Busby Berkeley Nazis, formation high-kicking their way through a series of musical extravaganzas, there were times when I began to wonder whether Brooks's film was not consciously in the minds of Farr, Gardarsson and their cast as they staged Kafka's masterpiece. This is not to say that the production is bad or even misguided, and nor is it anything like as camp as I may have made it sound. After all, Nick Cave was involved, and I probably wouldn't have gone otherwise. It's often powerful, occasionally moving, and always strikingly ingenious.

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Current Issue

The Vault

Lost Souls

Links

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If I say that the best thing about the production is the set, this is not to damn the whole endeavour with faint praise. It's just that the set is brilliant. It divides into the two storeys of the Samsas' house, one above the other, connected by a staircase. Downstairs is the living room, where the family attempt to go about their normal, respectable, bourgeois life, while upstairs, Gregor's bedroom has been turned through ninety degrees, so that his bed and furniture are now on the wall. Yes, OK, what this means is that their lives have been turned upside down by his transformation into a giant insect, but this makes for more than just the literalizing of a metaphor. It also allows Gisli Orn Gardarsson himself, who plays Gregor, to give a breathtakingly acrobatic performance, climbing the walls, hanging from the ceiling. In 1980, David Bowie famously performed without makeup in a stage production of *The Elephant Man*, thus accentuating his character's fundamental humanity and the monstrosity of those who respond to him with cruelty and revulsion. Gardarsson's Gregor works along similar lines, further highlighted by the fact that, where Kafka's original found his attempts at speech thwarted by his new form, coming out as guttural noises, here we understand him perfectly, while his family greet his pleas for understanding and communication with incomprehension.

Franz Kafka, whose work was very influential for Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School of Marxist cultural theory, wrote *Metamorphosis* in 1915 as a generalized Modernist fable of the dehumanization of alienated labour: Gregor is a salesman for an unspecified company, a classic Modernist functionary, a 'little man'. Farr and Gardarsson's interpretation is far more specific, and their play is shot through with Nazi rhetoric and imagery. This makes perfect sense as an interpretation of the text, and is hardly new. Benjamin's collaborator in the Frankfurt School, Theodor W Adorno, who fled Germany for Los Angeles in the 1930s, famously read Kafka's work as a prefiguring allegory of Nazism. Another *Mitteleuropean* Jewish Marxist exile from the Nazis, the controversial Hungarian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, spent decades excoriating and hectoring just such respectable bourgeois as the Samsas for their repressed complicity, in books such as *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) and *Listen, Little Man* (1948). We

grow around us, Reich argued in the former work, an armour, a shell, a carapace, in our attempt to protect us from the iniquities of the world, and in doing so become less than human.

Here, Gregor's father, whose business has collapsed, finds a job as a security guard in a bank, and takes great pride in his new uniform, which he insists on wearing at all times: 'Work will set you free!' he says. *Arbeit macht frei*, and the Samsas' new lodger also spouts final-solution rhetoric about cleaning the vermin off the streets, while upstairs, locked in his room, Gregor is starved to death. As Gregor's life fades, his sister Grete, who begins the play as a sympathetic, violin-playing schoolgirl, grows her own shell, transforming into a business-suited harpy.

The play's closing tableau is really devastating. As Gregor dies, hanging from a length of silk, his room is destroyed to show, behind it, the Emperor's Gardens in full bloom, impossibly lovely. As the Samsas go for their gay romp in the garden, Nick Cave sings a heartbreaking ballad, and the flowers seem to be growing directly out of the discarded abjection of Gregor's corpse. It's springtime for Hitler.

Darryl Jones

Horrorthon Film Festival 2008
23rd - 27th October 2008 at the IFI cinema, Dublin

The IFI's eleventh annual *Horrorthon* took place from 23-27 October. This year marked another expansion on the programme to include 27 features and, for the first time, a script to screen workshop, with *2001 Maniacs* director, Tim Sullivan. Despite a varied schedule of material from schlock to extreme horror, criticism had been made that the festival was lacking in the kind of audience involvement that had characterised previous events. EA Games may have donated two kiosks to provide an alternative form of entertainment, but a lack of spot prizes and freebies goes a long way towards dampening what is usually a carnival atmosphere.

Call it cynicism but a predominance of 'classics' such as Tobe Hooper's *The Funhouse*, *Evil Dead II*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and, inexplicably, *Jaws 2* indicated a sad lack of originality either on the part of filmmakers the world over, or the organisers themselves. A selection of *Grindhouse* trailers provided some cheap laughs and the Irish contingent was represented by the unremarkable *Ghostwood* and *Seer* – the latter playing to a full house.

Thankfully, amidst the dross lurked a few new films of interest by turns efficient, quirky and downright shocking. The following covers some unexpected highlights:

Quarantine

A remake of the claustrophobic Spanish shocker *[REC]*, director John Erick Dowdle transfers the action from Barcelona to Los Angeles, where an outbreak of a mysterious contagion puts a residential building in lockdown. Told from the perspective of a TV news crew recording a colour piece about the local fire service the action goes from playful boredom to mania. As with its originator, the found footage model of storytelling works well as a conceit to enliven what is little more than an indoors version of *28 Days Later*. The main departure is the depiction of the central character who goes from being a cynical reporter looking for 'real news' to a peppy roving reporter. When the inevitable collapse into hysteria comes it feels less like a reversal and more like an inevitability. Popcorn by numbers.

Time Crimes

One of those films that left everyone with a smile on their face. Intentionally silly, Spanish director Nacho Vigalondo's debut is a low-budget mystery combining elements of whodunnit thrillers and old school house on the hill gothic. Hopefully it will get a release on DVD soon.

The Disappeared

Guillermo Del Toro's *Devil's Backbone* comes to Staines in Johnny Kevorkian's urban gothic. Just released from a mental hospital, Matthew (Harry Treadaway) is an emotionally crippled adolescent trying to deal with the fallout from his younger brother's abduction. With a fractured home life and a hostile, impoverished neighbourhood to deal with, Matthew has his problems compounded when he starts hallucinating his lost sibling. Compelled to find some kind of closure he enlists the help of a fragile young girl with issues of her own. Carefully constructed and with some excellent dialogue *The Disappeared* is a subtle ghost story given greater impact by an honest depiction of council estate life. Drugs, drink and violence are prevalent but are never overplayed for effect. The characters all come across as real people without lapsing into 'rude boy' posturing. The only let-down is the denouement where the villain is revealed to be considerably more malevolent than the plot actually required.

Martyrs

The shocking centrepiece to the weekend, Pascal Laugier's exercise in extreme terror also represents its biggest missed opportunity. Coming across as the bastard child of Michael Heneke's *Funny Games* and Eli Roth's *Hostel*, this abrasive revenge drama works as an assault not just on the senses but on the intellect as well. Having tracked down her captors of 15 years previous, a young lady and her closest friend wreak bloody havok, only to stumble across a form of deprivation more terrifying than they had ever imagined. Relentlessly linear, *Martyrs* keeps the attention by shifting the point of empathy from one character to the next using either smashcut editing or smashing blows to the face. The initial protagonist becomes an irredeemable savage, a happy family are in fact monsters