Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance, and the Rise of Happy Gothic*
(London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017)

On a sunny day in August 2011, at the foot of one of Germany's most iconic Gothic ruins, Heidelberg Castle, Catherine Spooner navigated a captive audience attending her plenary lecture at the biennial conference of the International Gothic Association through an unfamiliarly cheery mediascape of gothic lifestyle blogs, television make-over shows, fashion accessories, and finally Heston Blumenthal's *Gothic Horror Feast* (2010).[1] Blumenthal's extravagant, four-course gothic menu, culminating in an edible graveyard as dessert, drew powerfully on canonical motifs, from the Marquis de Sade to Bram Stoker, and was hence patently anchored in the tradition and history of the gothic, but something odd seemed to be going on. Yes, there was the extravagance, the showy pantomime, the pleasure-in-horror that we associate with the gothic, but this was a gothic to be enjoyed and consumed. This was a world in which vampires sparkle rather than terrorise, in which Goth fashion is high street rather than underground, and in which Frankenstein becomes Frankenweenie. In short, this was an act of gothic consumption making people smile and barely linked to the trauma, anxiety, gloominess, or nightmarishness generally linked with the gothic mode of writing. As fascinating, entertaining, and brilliantly presented as this ethnological survey of contemporary popular culture in her plenary was, one question seemed to keep returning: is any of this really gothic?

Spooner's answer to this question has now appeared in book form, and it is well worth the wait. What we witnessed in Heidelberg is, she argues powerfully here, post-millennial gothic and, as such, a new instance of the multiple incarnations, inflections, and transformations which have characterised the gothic since its eighteenth-century inception. The choice of the term 'post-millennial' for a book that deals with fifteen years of the new millennium at best may seem somewhat overstated, but this is an issue that Spooner explains effectively. The cultural anticipation leading up to the millennium, as well as specific cultural events around the year 2000 (such as the Columbine killings and the 9/11 attack on New York) caused such a dramatic cultural shift that it justifies this distinction. In the wake of these events, she notes, there was a shift towards comedy, romance, and consumption that she terms 'Happy Gothic' (pp. 5, 24). Spooner 'agrees that Gothic is no longer where it used to

[1]Throughout this review, 'Gothic' with an upper-case 'G' is employed to denote a particular style of architecture, as well as when referring to 'Gothic Studies' as an academic endeavour. The lower-case 'gothic' is used (outside of quotations) to denote the genre more broadly.

be, but rather than lament its passing, seeks to map its new territories' (p. 8). Spooner's 'post-millennial' inflection of the gothic is one that is associated with a lively lifestyle culture, with comedy, enjoyment, and romance; it is intensely visual and design oriented, with 'a sense of lightness, playfulness, comfort, joy or even euphoria' (p. 186). This is a gothic informed by consumption and consumerism, by popularity, and subcultural practices and appropriations. For many critics, however, such a form of cultural production is barely gothic. Referring to Fred Botting's descriptions of a sense of exhaustion in the gothic in his *Limits of Horror* (2008) and to titles such as Joseph Crawford's *The Twilight of the Gothic?* (2014), Spooner first sketches a familiar image of Gothic Studies, which views popular postmodern versions of the gothic as lacking authenticity. Rather than offer a model of a gothic in decline from its supposed pinnacle of cultural critique, Spooner instead asserts that the aim of cultural criticism should not to argue for any particular worth to these cultural practices or artefacts – cultural products do not have to be 'good', 'critical', 'anxious', or 'subversive' for them to be culturally significant and worthy of study, and authors do not have to argue for a particular political status of their objects of research. For Spooner, the popularity, economic success, and global reach of this post-millennial gothic is reason enough to map and analyse its manifestations in a serious manner. As we shall see below, there is also an important gender-political component to Spooner's project here, because the connection between 'Gothic' and 'Romance' has been dominated by criticism of the latter as a 'light-weight', populist cultural format enjoyed by women; Spooner argues powerfully for a re-assessment of such explicit value judgments and their implicit structural roles in defining the gothic as a 'serious' genre.

The eight chapters of *Post-Millennial Gothic* explore a range of topics, starting with gothic lifestyle and moving through a consideration of the new gothic aesthetic in fashion, and discussions of Goth subcultures, as well as literature, film, and television. Spooner's account begins with the exploration of the new gothic mediascape already mentioned. Navigating a terrain of advertising, leisure, interior design and fashion blogs, and finally lifestyle television programmes like *Grand Designs* and Heston's cookery shows, this chapter introduces a complex field of cultural production which traverses Goth subcultures, fiction, art, and consumer practices, to reveal a confrontation of fear and fun. These are tensions which impact on academic debates too, of course, as precisely this friction between 'anxious' and 'happy' modes of the gothic demands that we reconsider the critical framework through which we approach, categorise, and even define gothic. As is demonstrated by the example of Kevin McCloud's ill-chosen, fawning references to Strawberry Hill in season 8, episode 4 of

Grand Designs (2008, see pp. 43-45) as a supposed counter-point to the artificiality and bad taste of a working-class rendition of a Gothic castle (actually echoing, as it does, eighteenth-century responses to Walpole's gothic counterfeit itself), the priority of a canon based on 'horror' and 'disgust' over the pleasure of consumption poses serious questions of academic narratives surrounding the gothic too. To what extent does 'the gothic' have to actually 'do' anything or follow any specific aesthetic tastes? To what extent is McCloud's class-based hegemony mirrored by a gendered hegemony in prioritising horror over romance or trauma over titillation?

Chapter Two turns to Tim Burton's films, to contextualise the apparent turn to an increasingly visual manifestation of the gothic in the years before and after 2000, and which manifests most clearly in the design and fashion products described in the preceding chapter. Of course this visual 'turn' may be seen more correctly as a return to the architectural and visual aesthetic from which the gothic emerged as a literary mode in the final third of the eighteenth century, as Spooner herself briefly sketches out (pp. 52-54), but, in terms of contemporary gothic, Burton is said by many to have developed a 'Burtonesque' aesthetic that prioritises the visual over the narrative. In Burton's films, the gothic is evoked most clearly in visual terms and quite often deliberately rejects the abject horror typically associated with other gothic movies. Burton has established a style of acting – using selected performers (such as Helena Bonham Carter and Johnny Depp), particular forms of stage design, and production strategies – Spooner argues, that has become a lucrative brand and has encouraged other directors (like Brad Silberling and Guillermo del Toro) to follow suit. The case for this being a 'new kind of Gothic' (p. 25) seems a little overstated, especially following Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnic's work on *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005); the re-opening of Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill following a very public restoration campaign; and multiple exhibitions centred around Gothic art and architecture, including *Gothic Nightmares* at the Tate (2006) and *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill* at the V & A (2010). Nevertheless, Burton's role as a talisman of a gothic aesthetic aligned with Goth subcultural identities has come to define gothic production since 2000 in ever-more important ways. This is a broader, more inclusive sense of the gothic, one that involves both a set of aesthetic principles developed since the 1760s *and* contemporary (sub)cultural practices based on, re-interpreting, and re-producing these principles as part of a daily performance.

Chapters Three and Four return to a more sociological approach to Goth subculture, tracking the lifestyle and fashion components of this now-broader conceptualisation of the

gothic in Spooner's terms, and discuss an 'ongoing renegotiation of Goth identities in response to moral panics elicited in the media' (p. 21). These are key chapters in understanding a new, positive, and self-confident Goth identity since 2000, even if cases such as the murder of Sophie Lancaster in 2007 show that this confidence is not shared by all areas of society. These chapters document an increasingly accepted and sympathetic role for Goth cultures, one which casts them as tolerant, creative, articulate, and self-expressive, and this section of the book shows how this emerges through and is represented in public and social media, as well as fiction, film, and television. Spooner points towards the development of 'Perky Goth' identities here, noting that, in Goth subculture, 'Perky Goth began as a joke, but is fast becoming a dominant paradigm' (p. 77). Arguing that Sophie Lancaster's murder acts as a catalyst for a new positive image of the Goth, Chapter Four then turns its attention to highly popular forms of cultural production such as the *Twilight*, *Being Human*, and *True Blood* phenomena, understood here as expressions of this 'new' currency of this perky gothic. There is an important gender-political component to Spooner's argument here: whether among scholars of the gothic or the wider public, much of the criticism surrounding these phenomena focuses on their specifically 'female', 'immature', and 'lightweight' nature, in opposition to more 'mature' or 'serious' gothic productions that articulate cultural, socio-economic, and environmental anxieties born of the contemporary neo-liberal global regime. That this mirrors critical responses to the gothic romances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shows that this post-millennial incarnation, rather than being a degenerate half-sister, actually plays through a similar logic of cultural negotiation and transaction that prevailed in the gothic from its earliest inception. In this respect, perhaps the most innocuous-looking term in the title, 'Romance', turns out to be one of Spooner's most important critical concepts and decisions, enabling her to locate these products within a gender-biased hierarchy in gothic discourse that has lasted almost as long as the gothic itself has existed.

The subsequent chapters follow on from this renegotiation, exploring what this model of the gothic as romance might mean for contemporary cultural products, looking at teenage fiction and films, comedy and camp versions of the vampire, and self-consciously constructed stereotypes of Goth masculinities in television sit-coms. In Chapter Five, the focus is on 'the whimsical macabre' (p. 100), a phrase Spooner develops to describe a genre of fiction which predominantly represents teenage girls and which is marketed towards young women in particular. Here, the monstrous is no longer terrifying but rather cute – much like Tim Burton's animated figure, Frankenweenie. As Spooner explains, this movement 'reconfigures

the gruesome and grotesque as playful, quirky and even cute, and often draws upon imagery associated with childhood' (p. 99). The chapter traces a compelling narrative through nineteenth- and twentieth-century receptions of Romantic gothic, encompassing Emily Brontë, Lewis Carroll, Heinrich Hoffmann, and Tim Burton, and also considering such mass-marketed product lines as the Monster-High dolls. Chapter Six follows up this focus on children and playful versions of the gothic in order to consider the 'sympathetic monster' more fully. Focusing on the vampire in particular, the chapter traces the development of comic iterations of the vampire since Stoker's *Dracula* through to Burton's *Dark Shadows* (2012) and Sharon Needles' *Dracula* (2015), leading Spooner to consider the 'monster-to-hero' trajectory of the vampire noted by critics such as Crawford and Botting in recent years (p. 122). *Post-Millennial Gothic* takes an original approach to this normalisation of the monstrous, however, in that it looks not only at the transition to the humorous and pleasant monster, but also at the role that the vampire has played in the genre of comedy more broadly, drawing on such diverse sources as Abbot and Costello, George Hamilton's *Love at First Bite* (1979) and of course *Sesame Street*'s Count von Count. In this account, the vampire appears as a 'comic subject rather than object, one who is the author of their own laughter' (p. 124). Chapter Seven continues this focus on comedy to look at stand-up comics such as Tim Minchin and Andrew O'Neill in particular, but also extends to critical considerations of the stereotyped Goth in mainstream television series such as *The Mighty Boosh* (2004-07), *The IT Crowd* (2006-13), and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present). This chapter also includes a consideration of television makeover-shows, and argues that the dandy-like image of the male Goth transported from popular sit-coms becomes a 'riskier' lifestyle choice for men in 'reality' television, one 'that flouts social expectations' (pp. 145-46). While each of the chapters follows its own distinctive trajectory, they seem to fall into two distinct groupings. Chapters One to Three are more theoretical in scope and address contemporary gothic cultural artefacts as a way of engaging critically with existing research paradigms in a manner which will be of interest to readers of popular-cultural theory and Gothic Studies alike. Chapters Four to Seven are linked by a recurring engagement with the figure of the vampire, and offer a coherent and convincing overview of young-adult fiction and more mainstream film and television productions that will be of interest to researchers working on these market segments in particular.

Chapter Eight rounds off the study with a return to gothic as a lifestyle and leisure practice, turning our attention to a specifically gothic-inspired tourism industry. Of course,

Whitby is the primary location for studying these practices of 'dark tourism', which is defined as a form of 'consumption of sites associated with death and suffering' (p. 166). Looking in particular at Whitby Abbey, The Dracula Experience, and the Whitby Goth weekend, Spooner's argument both invokes and transcends 'dark tourism' as an interpretive model, arguing that Paul Magrs's *Adventures of Brenda and Effie* series (2006-present) actually celebrate a mainstream, carnivalesque, pleasurable form of located Goth lifestyle in Whitby that becomes a source of 'humour and play, distilled and intensified by their location' (p. 27). Thus, Whitby becomes a 'template for a subcultural community united in difference in which the paramount values are playfulness, tolerance and fun' (p. 181). Where Spooner's book argues for a 'distinctive shift in Gothic sensibilities since the late 1990s' (p. 184), it is arguably in the annual pilgrimage to Whitby that this shift finds its most colourful and lively (re-)incarnation.

Post-Millennial Gothic is a critical tour de force: across its ten chapters, Spooner draws on an encyclopaedic knowledge of literature, film, popular culture, and sociology to paint one of the most compelling accounts of contemporary gothic cultural expression to have been published in recent years. What emerges is an account of contemporary gothic that argues powerfully for changed relations between 'Goth' and 'gothic'; where the emergence of Goth subcultures in the late 1970s and early 1980s could be understood as an influential appropriation of traditions and motifs drawn from a 'canon' of gothic literature, art, and film, the image of the gothic that emerges here is one where 'Goth now affects the *production* of Gothic texts' (p. 184). Alongside her account of this re-jigged relationship between lifestyle and fictions, Spooner's most persuasive argument lies in her assertions regarding the visual, even *spectacular* nature of contemporary gothic, with visual aesthetics increasingly prioritised. In both cases, the 'happy Gothic' that she describes could, perhaps, have been more strongly anchored in older critical discourses relating to similar popular forms of the gothic aimed at spectacular visuals (such as Walpole) and widespread consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (such as German dramas on the London stage). While Spooner is correct in identifying a tendency in Gothic Studies to prioritise the more anxious or trauma-centred forms of the gothic, critics have been too quick to downplay the fact that many of the original gothic texts of the late eighteenth century were themselves bestsellers among the middle classes, and hence more difficult to identify as 'subversive' or 'critical' of the bourgeois quotidian than the canonical, Foucault-inspired studies of the 1980s and 1990s have encouraged us to think they are.

That said, such a transhistorical view is not the aim of the present study, and Spooner does punctuate her argument with some indicators of this popular tradition, most notably in her discussions of the gender politics of the romance. To echo the famous phrase from Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Spooner's *Post-Millennial Gothic* is Gothic Studies, 'up-to-date with a vengeance' and like the gothic she describes, I'm more than 'happy' to recommend it to students and scholars alike.

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