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**Artistic Monstrosities in New Gothic Art**

**creating shock waves which help us find a lost sense of ourselves**

*Maria Antónia Lima*

**Abstract**

At a time when the media are so preoccupied with projecting shocking imagery and violent narrative, obliging the public to consume violence as if they were completely detached and alienated from its origins, perhaps the role of contemporary art should be to produce the kind of shock waves which help people find their lost sense of self. In *Idée sur les Romans*, the Marquis de Sade observed that Gothic literature was the inevitable result of the revolutionary shocks which were felt all over Europe. New Gothic art is necessarily the result of the many contemporary cultural earthquakes that have shaken many regions throughout the world, haunted as we are in modern life by the fear of death in its many monstrous guises: for example, the war in Iraq, serial killers, paedophiles, guns and gang culture, environmental disaster and global warming. Gothic creativity and its dark imagery have sought to create a sense of control and orientation with a view to establishing coordinates to guide us towards recovering a sense of identity. Through some monstrous works of well-known artists such as Cindy Sherman, Robert Gober, Louise Bourgeois, Damien Hirst, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Paul McCarthy, Keith Edmier, Douglas Gordon and many other creative geographers of our contemporary horrors, through which we may encounter vital pieces of our fragmented and disintegrated selves.

**Key Words:** Artistic Monstrosity, Monsters, Gothic Art, shock waves, shock, identity.

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At a time when the media are so preoccupied with projecting shocking imagery and violent narrative, obliging the public to consume violence as if they were completely detached and alienated from its origins, perhaps the role of contemporary art should be to produce the kind of shock waves which help people find their lost sense of self. In *Idée sur les Romans*, the Marquis de Sade observed that Gothic literature was the inevitable result of the revolutionary shocks which were felt all over Europe. New Gothic art is necessarily the result of the many contemporary cultural earthquakes that have shaken many regions throughout the world, haunted as we are in modern life by the fear of death in its many monstrous guises: for example, the war in Iraq, serial killers, paedophiles, guns and gang culture, environmental disaster and global warming. Gothic creativity and its dark imagery have sought to create a sense of control and orientation with a view to establishing coordinates to guide us towards recovering a sense of identity. Through the monstrous works of well-known artists such as Cindy Sherman, Robert Gober, Louise Bourgeois, Damien Hirst, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Paul McCarthy, Keith Edmier, Douglas Gordon and many other creative geographers of our contemporary horrors, through which we may encounter vital pieces of our fragmented and disintegrated selves.

By definition, a shock wave is a type of propagating disturbance. Such waves are characterized by an abrupt, almost discontinuous change in the characteristics of the medium. During a shock there is always an extremely rapid rise in pressure, temperature and density of the flow. Such a wave travels through most media at a higher speed than an ordinary wave. Metaphorically speaking, Gothic aesthetics can be said to seek to create the same effect through its capacity to invent new techniques for instilling terror that surpass those created by a sensationalist media which is concerned to stimulate consumers’ addiction to its orgy of atrocities. However, we know that nowadays it is increasingly difficult to produce a rush of adrenalin or a quickening of heartbeat that might cause the desired sensation of “pleasurable pain”, a sublime paradox described so well by Edgar Allan Poe, which inexplicably justifies our perverse impulses for evil and our uncontrollable and irrational will to be terrified.

In *Limits of Horror*,Fred Botting compares certain aesthetic Gothic shocks to the shocking effects produced by technological progress that provokes fearful responses, concluding that they are part of the system of modernity. Defining a shock as an “experience which signals an unexplainable disjunction between phenomena and modes of habituation, whether cultural or technological”, Botting thinks it “marks a disruptive process of subjective and corporeal reordering.”[[1]](#endnote-1), provoking a deviation from the rules and a disruption of the uniformity and proportion that originates a “subjective manifestation of aesthetic deformity.” He thinks shock provides an index of a crisis, which like natural disasters and technological accidents produces “the reverberation of traumatic after-effects”[[2]](#endnote-2). If shock provokes derangement caused by a powerful violent event that disrupts the continuity of an artificial or mechanical situation, shattering tradition, the repetitive and mechanical use of shocks can exhaust consumers who become accustomed to them and are rendered incapable of stimulation or excitement. Consequently, at the same time that Botting considers that Gothic shocks have many new creative potentialities for producing terrifying images that activate “an instinct of self-preservation that invigorates the mind’s imaginative powers”, as “a response to a catastrophic reordering of the rhythms and expectations of everyday life”[[3]](#endnote-3). He notes that through repetition these shocks become too familiar and even pleasurable, stripped of effect as they are by their banality. In an essay entitled “Aftergothic: consumption, machines, and black holes”, Botting states that:

A sense of cultural exhaustion haunts the present. An inhuman future is shrouded in old Gothic trappings emptied of any strong charge; past images and forms are worn too thin to veil the gaping hole of objectless anxiety. Gothic fiction, which served as earlier modernity’s black hole and has served up a range of objects and figures crystallizing anxiety into fear, has become too familiar after two centuries of repetitive mutation and seems incapable of shocking anew.[[4]](#endnote-4)

However, we are still fascinated by monsters and the dark side of the human imagination. We crave Gothic forms of stimulation for their immediacy and power to make our hearts race, our blood pressure rise, our breathing shallow and quick, and our stomachs heave, as Steven Bruhm confronts us with our special attraction for horrifying images that are strangely familiar, as uncanny as they are abject, which seems to explain why we require a Gothic fix. Bruhm comes to the conclusion that

we need it because the twentieth century has so forcefully taken away from us that which we once thought constituted our selves – a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe – and that wrenching withdrawal, that traumatic experience, is vividly dramatized in the Gothic.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Inexplicably, we adhere to the Gothic style and the horrendous images it produces because we enjoy the feeling of trauma, the negative sentiment that reflects the turbulent times we live in, fraught with uncontrollable circumstances, in which it is impossible to survive without a strong sensation of disorientation and discomfort, which has produced a society languishing in a permanent state of cultural pessimism and spiritual crisis. Gothic has become the stage on which trauma can be reenacted through its monstrous creations in order that it may be overcome and exorcised. If we consider that contemporary geography has made much of the assertion that, as Dereck Gregory puts it, “mapping is necessarily situated, embodied, partial: like all other practices of representation”[[6]](#endnote-6), Gothic can be said to use a kind of “geographical imagination” in order to seek a symbolic space for the recreation of its principal themes of horror, madness, monstrosity, death, disease, terror, evil and deviant sexuality in order to locate the source of our most secret fears and trauma and illuminate them. This is why it can be said that certain artists like Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Kiki Smith and Rona Pondick

have developed a model of art as ‘the re-experiencing of a trauma’, which they understand sometimes as symptomatic, acting out of a traumatic event, in which the art work becomes a site where memory or fantasy can be attempted, as it were a symbolic working-through of such an event, in which the work becomes a place where ‘treatment’ or ‘exorcism’ can be attempted.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Inspired by the uncomfortable realities that surround us, some artists can only find adequate expression in a disturbing and grotesque art, using aesthetic equivalents and many metaphors for the extreme experiences that haunt us insistently. They seem to believe in the power of art to shock and disturb, whenever they recreate the avant-garde drama of provocation and refusal of cultural glorification through works that, as the antithesis of all smiling faiths, may be called monstrous, nihilistic or morbid, but they also express a nostalgic faith in creativity for questioning the stereotypes and false appearances that constantly limit and prevent an in-depth perception of ourselves. Commenting on the presence of images of excessive and gruesome violence in contemporary art, which are usually intended to achieve a disconcerting impact, Christoph Grunenberg observed that “many contemporary visual artists share a common aesthetic, a preference for crude, fragmentary, and contorted forms which are employed to produce effects of horror as well as amazement.”[[8]](#endnote-8) The dual nature of these effects shows that Gothic thrills imply a certain sublimity due to the association of the beautiful with the ghastly, which produces ambiguous emotions of attraction and repulsion.

According to Edmund Burke, the sublime is an aesthetic category able to produce “astonishment” and “that state of the soul in which all emotions are suspended, with some degree of horror”[[9]](#endnote-9). This allows us to conclude that the effects of shock depend on certain sublime elements such as obscurity, vastness, greatness of dimension, infinity, darkness, and a rugged and broken surface, associated both with beautiful and monstrous forms[[10]](#endnote-10). Kant also perceived this dual movement of the sublime, noting a first moment in which one is almost overwhelmed or shattered by an awesome sight or sound, followed by a second moment in which one apprehends intellectually the sublime experience, feeling a rush of power and not of loss. The first traumatic moment has interested many contemporary artists, such as Matthew Buckingham, Janet Cardiff, Stan Douglas, Douglas Gordon, Pierre Huygahe, Steve McQueen, Tony Oursler, Paul Pfeiffer, Pipilotti Rist, Rosemarie Troeckel and Gillian Wearing, who are engaged in projecting video and film images of both beauty and violent monstrosity.

On selecting a group of artists who have created powerful, shocking works, certain extremely influential figures cannot be omitted: for example, Kiki Smith, well-known for her interest in body parts: hearts, wombs, pelvises and ribs sculpted out of a range of materials including wax, plaster, porcelain and bronze. *Intestine* (1992) features a thread of gut in bronze, as long as an actual intestine, which is stretched out on the floor, the disemboweling acting as a metaphor for loss of self; the artist is especially interested in portraying the death drive and also violated women. Also dealing in body parts, Robert Gober sculpts male legs and buttocks in wax and other materials, displayed isolated on the floor, or in spare settings with unusual decor. He explains that his sculptures represent memories which have been recreated, recombined, and filtered through his current experiences. Gober has called his installations “natural history dioramas about contemporary beings.”[[11]](#endnote-11) He thinks we are like voyeurs of forgotten events, our lives being the result of an uncanny experience that seems to incorporate both past and present, the imagined and the real. Questioning the origins of desire, Gober also considers the nature of loss, and he creates an art of loss and survival in the age of AIDS, throwing light on his view that “death has temporarily overtaken life in New York City”[[12]](#endnote-12).

Cindy Sherman, also known for her monstrous images of the fragmentation of female bodies, which usually tell a story of violence and dismemberment, highlights the stereotyping of women in films, television and magazines. Through her photo series. In this series she combines whimsy, grotesque costumes and make-up, and unnatural lighting, to produce a series of self-portraits, she aims to comment on or portray porn actresses, fairy tales, pseudo-historical figures, or women in a variety of distressed states. Her images are both disturbing and humorous, penetrating an uncertain, violent zone, in which individual identity struggles with the collective imagination, stereotypes and issues of symbolic power, which can be either playful or very dark when they touch on horror and repulsion provoked by the decay and dismembering of the body. Such is the case of Untitled #153, which could be a still from a crime scene: a corpse growing cold and stiff in a lonely field. Both sublime and grotesque, her images shock us, the power of their monstrosity being drawn from that which makes us uneasy or uncomfortable. Commenting on the Fairy Tales series for *Vanity Fair* from 1985, Sherman points out that

In horror stories or in fairy tales, the fascination with the morbid is also, at least for me, a way to prepare for the unthinkable … That’s why it’s very important for me to show the artificiality of it all, because the real horrors of the world are unmatchable, and they’re too profound. It’s much easier to absorb – to be entertained by it, but also to let it affect you psychologically – if it’s done in a fake, humorous, artificial way.[[13]](#endnote-13)

That’s why her photographs are visually overwhelming and loaded with content that inspires extreme emotional reaction. The Japanese photographer Izima Kaoru is also interested in subverting stereotypes created by fashion images in his *Landscapes with a Corpse*, in which he depicts actresses and models in their idealized moment of death. He is attracted to creating a powerful and provocative setting for fashion shoots, through which he can comment on death and consumerism. He explains his intentions by saying that: “I wanted to illustrate the fact that fashion is part of our everyday life. I wanted to raise an awareness that death is always there. It’s part of life. Why, then, can’t it be appropriate for a fashion shoot?”[[14]](#endnote-14). Departing from the question: “What is an ideal death for human beings?”, Kaoru creates scenarios that contain a contrast between beautiful, stylized images and the horror of death, producing an art that prevents us from distancing ourselves from the natural monstrosity of death. However, his art possesses macabre and positive content, because its intention is to show death as a part of life, which cannot be ignored, even if we are wearing Christian Dior, Dolce & Gabbana or Yves Saint Laurent.

Douglas Gordon is another artist who focuses on the traumatic, obsessed as he is with psychological, imagistic, formal and thematic splits so often associated with the image of monsters and clones. In order to explore his main theme of the split personality, he uses split screens, on which he projects scenes by Hollywood directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Martin Scorsese divided in two halves, seeking to highlight a fragmented subjectivity. *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1996) is a video projection that contains extracts of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* which are projected on two screens, one a positive image and the other negative, splitting the personality of the main character. *Monster* (1996-7) revives this division, with which Gordon feels he is identified, through a dual self-portrait in which one photograph shows of his expressionless face and the other his face Scotch-taped into a grotesque mask. Gordon demonstrates his interest in a well-known movie which deals with the theme of schizophrenia, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, producing a hypnotic effect by slowing the film to a catatonic pace and calling it *24 Hour Psycho*. Sometimes he interrupts his films to create hysterical effects produced by quick stops and starts. He is also able to induce experiences of bodily shocks or traumatized subjectivity through flicker effects produced by the rapid-fire alternation of clear and opaque frames, stimulating the reflexes of the body. His images possess a psychological intensity capable of portraying the power required by our subjectivity for adapting itself to contemporary experiences that demand a close encounter with imaging devices that force us to survive and even to thrive on technological shocks.

Paul McCarthy is one of the most obscene and darkest artists of American Gothic Art, depicting all structures of identity – especially the family – in dissolution. In his works, he inverts the order of both natural and cultural worlds through anti-aesthetic actions which in the 1970s were transformed into performances in which his body became the brush, using food products like ketchup as paint, presenting a portrait of the artist as infant and madman. In his most recent performances, which are filmed or videotaped, McCarthy attacks the conventional figures of male authority, using grotesque masks and bizarre costumes based on deranged pop-cultural icons, through which he ridicules the figure of the artist. Objects like stuffed animals, dolls and artificial body parts found on the street or in junk shops are used in his installations to defy all boundaries between young and old, human and animal, person and thing, thereby creating characters that move beyond stereotype and grotesquerie and become examples of artistic monstrosities.

In all the disturbing works created by these artists, there is a common message, expressed by the Portuguese artist Nuno Cera on referring to his film *Lost Souls:* “It is a metaphor for contemporary culture and social collapse. Anyone can turn into a force for evil. It’s about the inescapable dark side, exploring the blurred frontiers between mind and body, real and unreal.”[[15]](#endnote-15) This is the shock of recognition which New Gothic Art is so powerful in producing, contributing towards recovering the lost sense of our human identities through the revelation of our monsters: our own selves.

**Notes**

1. F Botting, *Limits of Horror – Technology, Bodies, Gothic*. Manchester University Press, New York, 2008, p. 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.,* p. 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.,* p. 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. F Botting, “Aftergothic: consumption, machines, and black holes”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic Fiction*, J. Hogle (ed.),Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 298. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. S Bruhm, “Contemporary Gothic: why we need it”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic Fiction*, J. Hogle (ed.),Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 273. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. D Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations.*Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford,1994,p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. H Foster; R Krauss; Y Bois; B Buchloh (eds), *Art since 1900 – Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. Thames & Hudson, London, 2007, p. 645. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. C Grunenberg, *Gothic – Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*. The MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 1997, pp. 210-209. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. E Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.Oxford University Press, New York, 1990, p.144. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. R Gober, "Interview with Richard Flood," in Lewis Biggs, e d., *Robert Gober*. Serpentine and Tate Galleries, Liverpool and London, 1993, pp. 8-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Gober quoted in *Pankett*, 27, March, 1991. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. C Sherman interviewed by Fuku, N., “Interview with Artist Cindy Sherman – A Woman of Parts” in *Art in America*, June, 1997. Accessed March 2012 at <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/04/interview-interview-with-artist-cindy.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. F Gavin, *Hell Bound* *– The New Gothic Art*.Laurence King Publishing, London, 2008, p. 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid.,* 22.

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