

Review of *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film*

By

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Title: *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film*

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Jack Morgan's *The Biology of Horror* is noteworthy because of two things: 1. its elegant and engaging writing style; 2. its broad interdisciplinarity, moving across explorations of the multiple faces of the Gothic principally in literature, film, poetry, and contemporary popular culture. One of its central thrusts appears to be showing that horror and the Gothic are primevally and intrinsically tied up with the somatic or bodily—they are “bio-psychological.” “The horror imagination is somatic; its fears, for all their ‘mental’ manifestations, are deeply situated in the ungraspable bio-logic of hormone chemistry and nerve synapses and in the reciprocity between those and the ‘exterior’ organic environment of which humans are protein variations” (p. 7). Because of the tantalizing title, “The Biology of Horror,” and the cleverly punned Chapter One heading, “Mortal Coils: The Comic-Horror Double Helix,” the reader with a Biology background might be lulled into thinking that what Morgan attempts is a grand synthesis between the language games of a formally scientific vocabulary with a critical cultural and literary perspective. Morgan, not being a biologist, but an English film and literary critic, stays squarely within his areas of expertise, and examines the somatic metaphors (as opposed to scientific corporeality) of the gothic and horror in relation to theoretical frames as diverse as Romantic aesthetics, phenomenology, feminist philosophy and popular cultural depictions of crime, such as those of serial killers.

One of the strengths, in my view, of Morgan's book is its insistence that the nature of the Gothic cannot be restrained by specialized, academic definitions. As he writes: “I think a ‘loose’ definition of the literary gothic in fact comes closer to the mark than does a ‘purist’ historical one” (p. 24). Though he does distinguish between the more cerebral ghost story and the more visceral serial killer/slasher narratives, as well as hybrid versions of the two (such as the *X-Files*), Morgan moves easily across less overtly canonically “gothic” texts, such as the notorious anti-Semitic “documentary” film, *The Eternal Jew*, to the more contemporary fiction film *Blair Witch Project* (which appropriates the “documentary” look), to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a novel that recounts the events leading up to the slaughter of the Clutter family by two serial killers (based on real life events). The power of Morgan's analysis thus lies not only in his almost encyclopedic display of the ubiquity of the gothic, but also in its porousness—its mirror-imaging kinship to comedy, its movement across rhetorical registers of fact and fiction, its emotive and biologically based stimulation of “lower” nerve centers, in which registers of fear and thrill-seeking pleasure lie in close proximity. Nevertheless, Morgan is quick to preserve a central insight of Kant's characterization of the “sublime” experience (of which the Gothic, and

the horrifying are iterations); the “captivation” or “fascination” that artistic representations of the Gothic enable, while they seem so somatically rooted, is really grounded in the detachment that artistic evocation allows. The peculiar pleasures of watching Hannibal Lecter wreak his peculiar brand of “justice” against the “rude,” would not be so enjoyable if one were actually watching a real serial killer cannibalize or torture his victims, no matter how aristocratically, eruditely, or “artistically” the cannibalism or torture were effected. The implications of this statement extend far beyond the realm of entertainment. Artistic mediation, or Kenneth Burke’s concept of “symbolic enactment” are the means through which we may probe into and come to terms with, to some extent, our fears and aversions, which in turn cement the moral and spiritual foundations of society. As Morgan puts it: “The death of Christ enacted in the Catholic mass is not literal carnage; it is a framed ritual pageant for the purpose of contemplation and mediation” (p. 17).

Morgan is smart enough to lay all of his cards on the table in the first chapter, and immediately disclaims any pretensions to a specialized literary and critical monograph. Instead, he claims to “[cast] a wide speculative net” (p. 11) around persistent thematic elements that embody the Gothic, such as malevolent locales, bodily invasions, pestilence, lethargy, infertility, the carnivalesque, among others. And indeed, it is a pleasure to behold the wide assortment of Gothically inspired treasures Morgan’s net dredges from the subterranean depths of literature, poetry, film and popular culture. If Arthur Koestler’s characterization of “bisociation” (the juxtaposition of two frames that are usually held apart, producing either laughter, scientific synthesis or artistic confrontation) as the touchstone of creative activity is accurate, then the book virtually teems in myriad creative forms—moving from a parallelism drawn between the horrifyingly callous sacrifice of a concubine in the Bible’s Book of Judges to a similar situation of endangerment in George Romero’s film, *Night of the Living Dead*, to the haunted spaces that form the backdrop to Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Roman Polanski’s *The Tenant*, among others.

Morgan warns as early as Chapter One that all exploration of the possible “therapeutic” function of horror and the gothic will be available only in his last chapter, and he goes as far as advising the reader who wants this up front should probably skip to the end first and then return to the middle for some browsing. The problem is that if Chapter Ten, “The Soul at Zero: Dark Epiphanies” is the climax of the book, then it falls short of its promise. Compared to the preceding chapters, and in particular to Chapter One, it is thin, both in terms of quantity of pages, and the content of its arguments. It is clear that Morgan seeks to pose an explanation for the ubiquity and fascination that the Gothic/horror continue to exert, as social forces, and as forces that have potential moral and criminological ramifications. Yet his explanation is by now practically a standard ideological explanation. Citing principally Stephen King’s *Danse Macabre* and Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, Morgan returns to the well known thesis that horror/the Gothic, despite their indulgence in shattering taboos, are ultimately conservative in their thrusts; these genres eventually violently punish transgressions, thus enabling the return to “normalcy”—a reversion Morgan chooses to call “regenerative” rather than “hegemonic” (p. 224). What is unique to Morgan is his persistent attempt to forge a vocabulary that maintains the somaticism of his earlier insights; thus, he substitutes a homeopathic metaphor for standard metaphors of catharsis or purgation. Consequently, Morgan envisions this therapeutic process as (p. 227):

A small quantity of morbid material—dilute smallpox vaccine for instance—provokes the body’s healthy energies to muster themselves, and thereby tones them. Small doses of arsenic and similar substances, according to homeopathic theory, can have the effect of invigorating the body’s immune responses, awakening listless organic functions. Analogously, horror literature involves ‘not resistance but an unveiling of the abject’ (Kristeva 1982, p. 208).

What results is something similar to Friedrich Nietzsche’s vitalistic theory of regenerative forces in the *Birth of Tragedy*, involving an interplay of creative (Apollonian) and destructive (Dionysian) principles—principles that birth the realms of great art, as well as life and nature. The Gothic’s and horror’s masked therapeutic functions are thus recuperative: “Horror texts, filmic or literary, would thus seem to present these benign possibilities, this arrival at an awakened sense of fertility and vitality” (p. 228). If Morgan is right, then there really is little difference between the horrifying and the comedic because they are ultimately both concerned with the return of Health, Normalcy, and Social Cohesion. And given how somatically wired horror and the Gothic are, that impulse to recuperation, even when it is masked, it is as much socially ingrained as it is biologically and artistically hardwired. The thesis is bold; it’s a question of whether the book really provides the empirical evidence for this contention. But then again, other than the Lombrosian alternative, which is now for the most part criminologically under siege, what other rhetorical alternatives are there? For raising this, and other such questions, the book is a valuable resource.