BOOK REVIEWS
Literary and Cultural Criticism

Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror after Saw*
(Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

Horror film's subgenre 'torture porn' denotes images of gory, gratuitous violence, and unbearable suffering. The mainstream press has vilified the subgenre, labelling the films as irredeemable, vacuous, repellent, vile, tasteless, gratuitous, and so forth. However, this type of negative criticism of horror films is not new, and in some sense is a continuation of the controversies and debates that originally produced the 'H' certificate in the 1930s. While the mainstream press continues to condemn horror films, it is ultimately the responsibility of scholars to unearth hidden meanings that lie behind the representations of blood and gore. As Jeffrey Sconce contends in his critical examination of *The Human Centipede 2* (2011), 'You know how this game is played. Anytime you see such a consensus of disgusted outrage […], something very interesting must be going on'.[1]

Although academic scholarship in the field of torture porn has grown in recent years (not least in the work of James Aston and John Wallis, as well as Steven Allen), a scholarly investigation of the subgenre as a whole has been absent — until, that is, Steve Jones published *Torture Porn: Popular Horror After Saw*. This text is an important addition to the critical examination of the subgenre in academic scholarship as it broadens the scope of analysis, which has predominantly focused on political-allegorical interpretations, such as those offered by Adam Lowenstein, and Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller.

Jones's text examines the various debates circulating around the term 'torture porn'. He deftly handles the negative connotations that have been attached to the subgenre by providing innovative and significant suggestions. Jones's methodology not only includes the use of press, director, and fan responses, but also incorporates concise case studies that exemplify his point(s). His examination includes forty-five key films (*Hostel* [2005], *Captivity* [2007], and *Saw* [2004]), as well as numerous lesser-known ones (*Penance* [2009], *The Book of Revelation* [2006], *Madness* [2010]).

Torture Porn is divided into three parts. Part One, '"Torture Porn" (Category)', examines how the label 'torture porn' has been attributed to a particular set of horror films,

[1] Jeffrey Sconce, *Lucid Despair*, <http://ludicdespair.blogspot.ie/2012/07/inhuman-centipede.html> [accessed 18 July 2014]

particularly those that have been released in the multiplex. However, as Jones contends, the term 'torture porn' has prejudiced and narrowed meaningful debate due to the press's propensity to castigate popular horror. This leads Jones to concentrate on press responses to torture porn that have formed the core tenets of the subgenre (excessive violence, torture, and imprisonment). He also observes how directors and fans of torture porn have contributed to the discourse surrounding the term in both negative and positive ways.

Part Two, '"Torture" (Morality)', expands the critical discourse that has, to date, focused primarily on allegorical interpretations of torture porn, which Jones contends confine the subgenre 'into a very specific politico-historical juncture' (p. 4). Disputing the common and indeed pejorative assumptions that torture porn lacks narrative and therefore does not incite audience empathy, Jones examines how various devices, such as *mise en scène*, structure, sound, camerawork, and so forth, promote viewer empathy. Viewer empathy, Jones asserts, is addressed through the various ways the camera situates the audience in relation to the victim/protagonist. Furthermore, while many critics have accused torture porn of promoting misogyny, Jones observes how camerawork and narrative structure complicate viewer identification. Examining films such as *Penance*, *Manhunt* [*Rovdyr*] (2008), and *Wolf Creek* (2005), Jones argues that the narratives are 'female-driven'; that they 'illustrate how the subgenre's lead female protagonists are typically demarcated as significant' and that the 'films encode [the female's] plight as the narrative's empathetic core' (p. 137).

Part Three, '"Porn": (Extremity)', examines torture porn's multifaceted makeup, including the implications that arise due to labelling these horror films as 'porn'. Taking issue with the term 'porn' used as a metaphor, Jones scrutinises the porn genre and breaks down the term in relation to representations of sexual violence and gender dynamics. By examining films that occupy a realm outside that defined by the multiplex and categorised as 'extreme porn', Jones exposes the limitations on the meanings equated with torture porn (which he asserts 'implies generic hybridity' [p. 5]) as a classification. In the book's conclusions, Jones declares that the narrow discourse that has labelled 'torture porn' generalises the subgenre as a fixed static category. However, as shown throughout the text, torture porn's content is a fluid, continuously evolving category. Further, as it illustrates, to generalise torture porn as '"extreme", "immoral", or "trash"' (p. 191) underscores the lack of critical engagement with the narrative content of the films.

One of the more interesting points made here is Jones's argument against detractors' accusations that torture porn endorses misogyny. As he notes, these accusations 'stem more from the label "porn" and its discursive history than from torture porn's content' (p. 130).

While those who object to torture porn limit their critical scope to categorising all films within the subgenre as pornographic and misogynistic, Jones undertakes a quantitative analysis of torture porn's content. The use of quantitative analysis underscores how critics misinterpret 'the quantity of sexual violence depicted' (p. 134) in torture-porn films. In the forty-five films surveyed, Jones's research convincingly demonstrates that a higher percentage of male characters are killed and/or severely injured in torture porn, but also that the scenes displaying sexual imagery do not dominate the content of the films. Even when misogyny is depicted, Jones contends that this behaviour, 'whether physically enacted or symbolic' (p. 135), is not glorified, nor is the audience ever aligned with the perpetrator's violence.

Overall, Jones's work is engaging and succinct. He provides a detailed, rich analysis of a genre that has been vilified in the press. *Torture Porn* challenges the oversimplification and superficial analysis that characterises and circulates within torture-porn discourse. In so doing, he opens up the debates about the nature and the significance of torture porn as a subgenre. Through the examination and the discussion of the way torture porn fits into the genealogy of horror film, the book provides a critical retrospection that is often overlooked by critics and scholars. Jones's detailed examination and conclusions about torture porn also open up the field of Horror Studies to new possibilities. Anyone with a serious interest in torture porn should read this book.

Lee Baxter

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Tony Williams (ed.), *George A. Romero: Interviews*
(Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011)

George A. Romero is primarily celebrated as the world's most intelligent populariser of zombie cinema, but this volume goes some way to expanding on the basis of that success. Taken as a whole, the interviews collected in this book substantiate the claim that Dan Yakir makes in his preface to a 1977 conversation with the director, that 'Romero is undoubtedly the most important regional filmmaker working in the U.S.' (p. 47). Although he now lives and works in Toronto — his most recent features, starting with *Bruiser* (2000) have all been filmed in Canada, even when set in the United States — Romero deserves attention for having carved out a space for himself in the film business via the road less travelled. Born in New York, Romero attended what is now Carnegie Mellon University and got involved in the

theatre. His most important career decision was to stick around in Pittsburgh. He founded a commercial film-production studio (The Latent Image) and made advertisements, promotional films, and took on freelance contracts before attempting a narrative feature. In a chronologically ordered selection of interviews, editor Tony Williams presents a vivid picture of a man whose career, while idiosyncratic and essential to the history of horror, has been anything but an unbroken string of successes.

The early interviews in this volume, particularly Sam Nicotero's from 1973, do a good job of explaining the long process of pitching, producing, shooting, and exhibiting *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), then conceived as a money-making venture for its funders (Image Ten, a group of Pittsburgh-area investors) but now regarded as a seminal intervention in the horror genre. These accounts of the struggle to make films outside of the auspices of the studios make for compulsive reading. One of the unexpected delights of this book is the chance to track a filmmaker's personal relationship to his work over a period of a few years. Between 1969 and 1973, Romero wavers and self-contradicts on a few points — the film's budget, for example, seems to change, as do some of the compromises made to get it to screen (shooting in black and white seems to have been both an artistic decision and a budgetary restriction) — but his enthusiasm and sense of retroactive self-awareness never seem to falter. As the book shows, Romero quickly loses his appreciation for some of his films, specifically *There's Always Vanilla* (1972), initially an attempt to look at what would happen to the burgeoning 60s youth culture a few years on, but realised on screen as a sloppy-but-quirky romance distinguished only by its location-based shooting (p. 42). But he likewise realises (rightly) that there is something special about the films he made between *Vanilla* and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). *Jack's Wife/Season of the Witch* (1972), *The Crazies* (1973) and *Martin* (1977) are premised on tropes that occupy the fringes of the horror genre (amateur occultism, inexplicable viral epidemic, and psychological disturbance leading to imagined vampirism, respectively), and as such their premises have remained fresh. While *The Crazies* was remade in 2010, Romero himself often claims that he would like to remake *Jack's Wife*, a film whose bored housewife and negligent husband could easily be adapted to the contemporary zeitgeist (p. 177). Speaking in 1973, Romero even claimed that 'I'm happier with *Jack's Wife* than I am with either *Living Dead* or *The Crazies*' (p. 22)!

More broadly, Williams's volume relates Romero's anxieties about his place in the film business, his duties as a politically aware filmmaker, and the precarious see-saw of fame and bankability. Both *Knightriders* (1981) and *Monkey Shines* (1988) are important to this book. In the former, Romero worked with a large budget while still maintaining autonomy, a

stock group of actors and co-conspirators, and the trust of production partner Richard Rubenstein. In the later film, he was working outside of his familiar idiom, making a film from an existing property for mini-major Orion Pictures. After *Knightriders*, Romero made his leap into the mainstream through his direction of *Creepshow* (1982), a collaboration with Stephen King. While Romero would maintain his relationship with King through his involvement in *Creepshow 2* (1987) and his eventual direction of the underrated adaptation *The Dark Half* (1993), several of these interviews allude to Romero's sense of missed opportunities throughout the long process of trying to make films of other works by Stephen King, specifically *Pet Sematary* and *The Stand*. Although both of these books were eventually brought to screen (*Pet Sematary* [1989 and 1992] as a two-film series directed by Mary Lambert, and *The Stand* [1994] as a TV miniseries directed by frequent King collaborator Mick Garris), we can't help but wonder what Romero would have done with the material.

The later part of this collection does a good job of updating our sense of where Romero stands today. While still a popular maestro for horror fans, he continues to make engaged (if sometimes uneven) films. In his discussions of *Diary of the Dead* (2007) (especially as related in an interview with Peter Keough), Romero comes across as a media watchdog — the decision to make the film in a largely confessional, *cinema-vérité* style seems to have less to do with the massive profitability of phenomenal successes like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and more to do with his fear of the potential duplicity of the blogosphere (pp. 164–65).

Williams himself contributes two interviews, one from 2000 and one from 2010. While complementary in some respects to the largely journalistic style of the rest of the book, they are immediately recognisable as the work of a literary scholar. Williams asks Romero precise thematic and interpretive questions that occasionally yield hidden insights, but just as often result in confusion. For example, the 2000 interview asks about Romero's influences. In Williams's *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (2003, Wallflower Press), a Romero-as-literary-naturalist thesis is used to frame an overall reading of Romero's work. While Romero is quick to acknowledge his debt to Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe, he is blunt in admitting that the American naturalist prose of the nineteenth century (specifically that of Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris) does not play into his ideas (p. 136). For good or ill, questions like these reveal the interpretive split between how an artist conceives their work, and how academic audiences (or audiences more generally) process such material.

Ultimately, however, *George A. Romero: Interviews* does a great service to scholars and fans interested in the thematic and intellectual depths of Romero's movies. The collected interviews do plenty to promote Romero's status as one of horror cinema's greatest living filmmakers, while at the same time redirect attention to his ambitions in other genres. On the whole, Williams has done valuable work for readers interested in Romero's ambivalent calling as the sometimes-reluctant paterfamilias of zombie culture.

Kevin M. Flanagan

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Cynthia Sugars, *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History and the Spectre of Self-Invention*
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014)

In the 1970s, Canadian broadcaster CBC Radio's *This Country in the Morning* held a competition, the goal of which was to complete the phrase: 'As Canadian as …'. The winning entry read: '… possible, under the circumstances.' It is within these various circumstances that Sugars bases her arguments in *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History and the Spectre of Self-Invention*, presenting a contemporary reading of Canadian texts that places them firmly within the gothic tradition and style. Sugars's focus on uniquely Canadian circumstances is developed in each chapter, identifying the gothic form within themes ranging from indigenous Canadians, through the postcolonial settlers, to French-Canadian identity and culture, and beyond.

In both the Introduction, 'Settled Unsettlement; or, Familiarizing the Uncanny', and Chapter One, 'Here There Be Monsters: Wilderness Gothic and Psychic Projection', Sugars goes out of her way to convince her reader that there is a case for the gothic to be identified and mapped within Canadian literary history. While Canadian society and landscapes may lack the traditional gothic castles and villainous aristocrats, her opening arguments illustrate the genre's centrality to its literature by drawing on two of Canada's most famous poems: John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' (first published in 1915 and often referred to as Canada's national poem) and Robert Service's 'The Cremation of Sam McGee' (1907). In using these two notable works, Sugars eases her reader into the idea of reading Canadian gothic texts as a unique form that nonetheless follows the same rules as conventionally recognisable gothic literature. 'We are the Dead', declares the narrator of 'In Flanders Field', setting the tone for the rest of the book, as Sugars skilfully picks apart the text to argue that McCrae's is a poem 'that emblematizes Canadians' own conflicted relation to their ancestral dead, not only in the

context of war, but in the context more generally of generational haunting as they have played themselves out in Canadian culture from the beginning' (p. 2). Hauntings play a major role in Sugars's application of the gothic to Canadian texts, and she goes to great lengths to establish the Canadian gothic as a separate form from traditional European gothic. Specifically, in both Chapter One and Chapter Two, entitled 'Haunted by a Lack of Ghosts: Gothic Absence and Settler Melancholy', Sugars sets up the concept of 'wilderness gothic' for her readers. Taking the title from Al Purdy's poem of the same name, Sugars places Canada's unique wilderness gothic in opposition to European and American gothic through emphasis on the multiple Canadian cultural and ethnic influences present in the genre. While European gothic is associated with the landscape of the sublime, Canada's wilderness gothic is distinct in that its inhabitants are not indigenous, but rather French and English settlers, whose response, Sugars writes, is a 'psychic struggle in working through the re-evaluation of values that is necessitated by [the] transplantation to Canada' (p. 40). She differentiates Canadian gothic from the wide-reaching genre of American gothic, whose characters often share such circumstances of transplantation. This distinction is explored in particular in Chapters Four and Five of *Canadian Gothic*, in which she examines the use of contemporary Canadian gothic as a form of cultural reinforcement and authentication in the face of 'Canada's sense of inferiority to the United States' (p. 70).

Sugars's real strength in *Canadian Gothic* is her ability, first to define concepts of Canadianism clearly, and then to apply them both in terms of broad theory and specific textual readings. While this is standard fare, it is nonetheless much needed, particularly in relation to ideas of Canadian identity and culture, which has so many intricacies and facets that the average reader will benefit greatly from Sugars's often verbose, though immensely readable, prose, and her multiple explanations and applications. Her sensitivity to the presence of gothic tropes and iconography within a range of texts from early Canadian literature to postcolonial readings of contemporary texts makes *Canadian Gothic* an extremely accessible companion for the casual reader as well as the most interrogative scholar. The range of texts she studies, as well as the variety of topics covered in the seven comprehensive chapters, result in a thoroughly researched and deeply thought-out text that covers all available bases when discussing the gothic form in relation to Canada's unique cultural and transnational positions, as well as Canadian history and the identities borne out of it. While less well-read readers may struggle in parts with Sugars's digressions in the form of close textual readings and her sporadic use of extracts and quotations when discussing her chosen works in greater detail, this momentary confusion does not detract from Sugars's

arguments. Moreover, her writing style allows the reader to slip past the works with which he or she may be less familiar and instead focus on the concepts that she presents, with her transference of traditional gothic language to the Canadian literary tradition allowing them to be applied to a multitude of Canadian works as the reader chooses. For the well-read Canadaphile, however, Sugars's pairing of her original theory alongside established and contemporary literature creates a book in which the old is re-examined in a new light, and the new is presented in a separate sphere from the one in which it is placed by the transnational marketplace. While many readers and critics are all too hasty in their desire to place Canadian literature in tandem with American or British genres because of the previous colonial relationships between said nations, Sugars's interrogation of Canadian gothic as a form grounded in both the indigenous and settler traditions allows Canadian literature and identity to be repositioned within the gothic as much as within a postcolonial context.

It is rare to find a book of criticism and theory that works both for the casual reader and the scholar, but in *Canadian Gothic*, Sugars has created just that — a work that can be picked up and skimmed by those with a casual interest or poured over and cross-examined by those with a critical eye for both the gothic form and Canadian literature. Ultimately, Sugars's *Canadian Gothic* is very much a product of love's labour, and this transfers with great effect to her language and writing style — it's hard for the reader not to become engrossed in the prose, even when encountering unheard of works, and Sugars's new ideas and excavation of a traditional genre, from within an unexamined national literature. In *Canadian Gothic*, she has therefore created not just an engaging work, but one that successfully presents and argues an unprecedented case for a new frontier of Canadian gothic theory and criticism.

Eve Kearney

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Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (eds), ***Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century***
(Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012)

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben have edited a formidable collection of essays, which establishes neo-Victorian gothic as a serious field of study in itself rather than a sub-genre of gothic. *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century* neatly side-steps merging the gargantuan gothic and the new

kid on the block, neo-Victorianism — despite the editors' protestations that the two were 'doomed to converge, if not to merge, their union almost predestined by their common revivalist premises' (p. 2). Instead, the essays collected here position neo-Victorianism as a twenty-first-century David slaying the Goliath that has become 'Gothic Culture' and retrieving the genre's original radical energies, as it emerged in the eighteenth century.

Whereas gothic used to be the domain of the marginalised, now, in the twenty-first century, it is the Absolute, 'omnipresent, diffused through literature, film and other visual media' (p. 1). But has it over-reached itself, becoming the thing it despised — 'homogenised' and 'mainstream'? Its 'hegemonic power' seems to have robbed it of its original alterity, with Dracula's teeth reduced, in Fred Botting's phrase, to 'candygothic'. As Kohle and Gutleben put it,

> It is precisely by exploring the Gothic in relation to the nineteenth-century past and the period's specific cultural field that neo-Victorianism endeavours to circumvent the hypermodern, globalised and uniform presentation of the Gothic, in the process re-kindling an intensely disturbing desire that unsettles norms and redefines boundaries once more. (p. 2)

This is the third volume in Gutleben and Kohle's neo-Victorian series (Vol. 1, *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* [2010]; and Vol. 2, *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender and Sexual and Cultural Politics* [2011]). Split into three parts, 'Imperial Impostures and Improprieties', 'The Horrid and the Sexy', and 'Hybrid Forms', the eleven essays collected here uncover fresh conversations and interdisciplinary research into this relatively new field of study. Each essay, with its pertinent footnotes, provides a solid bibliography for students (both new-comers and the more informed). For instance, Cora Kaplan, Julian Wolfreys, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, Kate Mitchell, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, and Roger Luckhurst are all discussed. Most satisfyingly, the contributors suggest a who's-who of the latest neo-Victorian fiction, giving tempting critical insights and extracts from the works.

A gargantuan forty-eight pages, the introductory essay provides a comprehensive, and, in parts, dense definition and defence of neo-Victorianism. If anything, the editors play up the impurity of neo-Victorianism and its 'retrogressive innovation' (p. 4). It is 'by *nature* quintessentially Gothic' because it 'tries to understand the nineteenth-century [*sic*] as the contemporary self's uncanny *Doppelgänger*' [emphasis in original] (p. 4). A textual labyrinth, the introduction is repetitive in its focus on the '"(self-) alienated subject of postmodernity — a subject radically 'othered' and 'other' even to itself"' (p. 9, quoting from

their earlier work *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma* [2010]). It sometimes reads as if the editors are trying to convince themselves as well as their readers, bringing in repeated references to the 'other' and 'hybridity' with the rhythm of a sledge-hammer. The reader is not left with enough room to breathe and sit with one concept before another one is thrown at them. For example, an assertion that 'The "other" in this construction, it should be noted, indicates not a singular alter-ego, but a fragmented *plurality* of versions of otherness' [emphasis in original] (p. 9) is immediately followed by the notion that

> In neo-Victorianism, Gothic is not so much 'a language, often an a-historicising language, which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present' (Sage and Smith 1996b: 1), as it allows them to transfer an idea of the (self-) otherness of the *present* into the *past*. [Emphasis in original] (p. 10).

In such jargon-heavy sections, the introduction reads like a literary equivalent to the wall of sound. But do not let this put you off. My criticism does not do justice to the intricacies of the points they make.

Within the collection itself, Kohle and Gutleben have brought together an impressive list of global experts who offer fresh perspectives. The weighty matters covered include history and ethics, cultural memory, the Bildungsroman, sexuality and degeneration, the uncanny or monstrous child, the neo-Victorian variant of imperial gothic which the editors term Eco-gothic and steampunk, as well as urban gothic and sensational crimes (Jack the Ripper appears a few times), and postmodern and postcolonial gothic. In Section I ('Imperial Postures and Improprieties'), Andrew Smith interrogates historiography in 'The Limits of Neo-Victorian History: Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* and *The Swan Thieves*'. I enjoyed Cheryl D. Edelson's 'Reclaiming Plots: Albert Wendt's "Prospecting" and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's *Ola Na Iwi* (the bones come alive) as Postcolonial Neo-Victorian Gothic'. She provides a salient criticism of Western museum culture and the Enlightenment from a Hawaiian perspective, and breaks down the distinction between graverobbers and scientists and the academy.

Another nugget in this section is Sebastian Domsch's 'Monsters against Empire: The Politics and Poetics of Neo-Victorian Metafiction in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*'. Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's hybrid, miscegenic graphic novels prove fascinating 'examples of the artistic and political potential of the neo-Victorian Gothic, as they combine a visual and verbal steampunk re-imagination of the more monstrous side of the Victorian era with an almost excessive metafictional playfulness and thorough ideological

critique' (p. 98). Domsch explores how Moore and O'Neill blur the line between the monstrous and imperial ideology, as twentieth-century weapons of mass destruction are prefigured in steampunk's revision of late-Victorian technological warfare and idealism. Moving the discussion across continents, Jeanne Ellis discusses the South-African performance artist Leora Farber's *Dis-Location/Re-Location*, highlighting Farber's 'Bodily Metamorphics of Unsettlement'. At the heart of the work, Ellis argues, the doubled self of artist and Victorian settler are merged into a neo-Victorian gothic composite.

In Section II ('The Horrid and the Sexy'), Patricia Pulham revisits Colm Tóibín's 'biofiction' *The Master* (2004). She argues that the ambiguous, sexualised shadow plot of Henry James's novella, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), is spectrally mirrored in *The Master*, with its 'covert and haunting expressions of homoerotic desire' that play with James's 'afterlife' (p. 149). Max Duperry and Sarah E. Maiar both discuss, in different fashions, the *fin-de-siècle*'s shadowy, sensational 'Everyman', Jack the Ripper. They provide historical and literary perspectives on the reality and the myth. The 1888 Whitechapel serial killer created a gothic space in public opinion, and gave 'degeneration' a cross-class (perhaps cross-gender) polymorphic substance. The unsolved murders of prostitutes fuelled the vogue for Sensation and detective fiction. This literary climate at the time linked Edgar Allan Poe with Arthur Conan Doyle. In quintessentially gothic mode, this climate is still with us today, keeping the myth and presence of Jack the Ripper alive at the start of the twenty-first century. Kohlke closes Section II with her anatomising of 'Fantasies of Self-Abjection' in both 'Female Gothic' and its neo-Victorian counterpart. Instead of emancipating female characters, she argues, gothic involves a 'voyeuristic re-victimisation' which 'seems at odds with neo-Victorianism's ethical and liberationist agenda of bearing after-witness to unrecorded traumas of the socially disempowered and marginalised' (p. 222). Kohlke examines these tensions in three, 'as yet critically neglected', novels that she suggests are 'stopping-off points in the evolution of neo-Victorian Female Gothic: Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise-longue* (1953), Maggie Power's *Lily* (1994), and Kate Williams's *The Pleasures of Men* (2012)' (p. 222).

The final three essays in Section III ('Hybrid Forms') focus on the metafictional playfulness and postmodernist, interactive possibilities of neo-Victorian gothic. Van Leavenworth's 'Epistemological Rupture and the Gothic Sublime in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*' examines the re-appropriation of Victorian gothic detective fiction in an 'interactively produced steampunk narrative' set in an insane asylum in a reimagined London in 1885 (p. 254). *Slouching Towards Bedlam* (2003) is an 'Interactive Fiction (IF)' — a

hybrid form of literary narrative and video game. The player/reader uses text commands to control the characters. Focusing on the gothic effects of the sublime, Leavenworth discusses the interface between the character/player (in the fiction) and the player/reader (in solving the puzzle). The race is on in this game/text to contain a mysterious epidemic, the 'Logos', that threatens to disrupt both the Victorian and contemporary twenty-first-century systems of classification. The gothic sublime here is the 'recognition of something incomprehensible which drastically undermines the coherence of one's self' (p. 264). The reader becomes infected with the sense of epistemological breakdown and fears that contemporary culture may be haunted by Victorian anxieties. Kym Brindle's 'Dead Words and Fatal Secrets: Rediscovering the Sensational Document in Neo-Victorian Gothic' also plays with narrative unreliability. Drawing on Beryl Bainbridge's *Watson's Apology* (1984) and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) (which fictionalise two real-life murder cases), Brindle interrogates the 'provenance and transmission of documented events' (p. 283). As she puts it, rather than unearthing the 'truth', neo-Victorian writers 'revisit infamous crimes to orchestrate an unstable narrative mix of citation and invention that exploits inconsistencies, gaps, and secrets in historical documents that claim to evidence the "awful truths of human existence"' (p. 280, quoting from Bainbridge). Christian Gutleben fittingly closes the collection with his 'Reflexion on Humour in Neo-Victorian Gothic'. He suggests that neo-Victorianism is characterised by 'an intertextual form of irony typical of postmodernism' (p. 302). This sets up a critical distance between gothic and neo-Victorianism, one which privileges the latter. Neo-Victorian revision, he asserts, allows 'an ontological reconsideration of the concepts of otherness […] precisely because humour encourages a reflexive attitude' (p. 302). The resulting neo-Victorian text becomes a 'playful hybridisation' that signifies a 'new novelistic species' – fundamentally open-ended and fun (pp. 302, 324).

Overall, I have to admit that Kohlke and Gutleben's *Neo-Victorian Gothic* is a thorough piece of scholarship which enhances and opens up the fields of gothic, Victorianism, and neo-Victorianism.

Edwina Keown

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David Simmons (ed.), *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft*
(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

Is H. P. Lovecraft an 'Outsider No More?', David Simmons asks in his introduction, so titled to reflect the unease with which the 'respectable' academic approaches a writer who has been treated with little more than derision for most of his posthumous career. Simmons's inquiry sensibly acknowledges that those taking Lovecraft's work seriously are still on the back foot, while the anthology itself makes a further contribution to the gradual yet steady repositioning of Lovecraft's work from paraliterary curiosity to canonical credibility: his writing is now to be found on the shelf of your local Waterstones in Oxford University Press, Penguin Classics, and Vintage Classics editions.

The essays contained in this anthology ably demonstrate why this shift in his reputation has occurred in the first place: Lovecraft's weird tales are an amazingly fecund resource for scholarship, reflecting as they do a squirming, tentacular mess of twentieth-century neuroses, modernist angst, and philosophical shock. Those ignoring Lovecraft's *oeuvre* based on the unexamined claim that he is a 'bad writer' are missing out on an author whose unique take on the weird tale not only precipitated a paradigm shift in genre fiction, but contorted into numerous fantastical and compelling shapes the many anxieties of his age.

The book is divided into two sections, each containing six articles contributed by a variety of authors. Simmons opens Section One, 'Lovecraft and His Fiction', with an examination of 'abject hybridity' in Lovecraft, especially as applicable to Lovecraft's racism, which Simmons suggests is a valence of his more fundamental nihilism. Simmons identifies manifold negotiations operating in tales including 'Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family' and 'Under the Pyramids'. These evidence his assertion that when Lovecraft's indifferentist philosophy, or 'Cosmicism', is 'considered alongside the abject, it becomes an interesting means of suggesting that the ostensibly prejudicial elements of Lovecraft's fiction warrant a decidedly more complex analysis than to merely be labelled racist' (p. 19). In the subsequent essay, 'Lovecraft's Liminal Women', Gina Wisker takes a similarly non-reductive look at representations of the female in Lovecraft's stories, asserting that while there is a 'fascination with women as a source of disruption and disorder' in Lovecraft's work, his focus is (typically) miscegenation rather than simple misogyny (p. 31). As she asserts, female figures consorting with 'the alien Other' represent the potentiality for 'degeneracy and the end of humanity as we know it' (p. 51). In 'The Hysterical Female Gothic', Sara Williams narrows the focus to one tale, 'The Dreams in the Witch House', and

thoroughly mines the rich Oedipal seams running through that text's delirious body horror. This opening triptych of essays demonstrates a far more productive engagement with Lovecraft than a mere kneejerk dismissal of his work based on political squeamishness.

In 'Slime and the Western Man', Gerry Carlin and Nicola Allen situate Lovecraft within wider modernism. The justification they use is a suggestive one: 'the dissolution of time' associated with both modernism and with Lovecraft is 'a great leveller, reducing man to imagined or actual oblivion at the turn of the page, and rendering barriers between high and low art, modernist literature and popular genre fiction, the greatest inconsequence of all' (pp. 73, 88). The next two essays are close readings of two of Lovecraft's most celebrated tales. In 'Lovecraft's Mirages', Robert Waugh takes a fine-tooth comb to *At the Mountains of Madness*. He investigates Lovecraft's use of optical hallucination and the phenomenon of 'looming', which disorients polar explorers with darkly foreboding misperceptions of indistinct and exaggerated land masses on the horizon. Donald R. Burleson has an impressive track record in producing perspicacious structural readings of Lovecraft, and here, he takes on 'The Dunwich Horror' with typical ease, accommodating monomyth, cryptography, and category pollution in his discussion, concluding a section that gives a fair indication of the many valences of Lovecraft's fiction.

The second section of the book, 'Lovecraft and His Influence', begins with J. S. Mackey's account of the much-maligned August Derleth's (mis)handling of Lovecraft's immediate posthumous legacy. Derleth — who contorted Lovecraft's rigorously atheistic vision into a cosier, morally centred battle between good and evil — is a bad enough writer to throw Lovecraft's achievements into sharp relief. Having said that, Mackey's close analysis of Derleth's deviations and failures conveys a keen sense that, although Lovecraft he ain't, reading Derleth can still be a great deal of fun. Derleth's efforts precipitated a subsequent cottage industry of 'Mythos' cultural production. In 'Recent Discourse on H. P. Lovecraft', Steffen Hantke identifies some of the ensuing tensions between Lovecraft as 'the product of a community of readers and fans'; Lovecraft as a candidate for academic canonicity (within 'a more broadly emerging valorisation of pulp fiction'); and Lovecraft as the subject of cinematic adaptation (p. 139). Discussing Guillermo del Toro's ill-fated project to translate *At the Mountains of Madness* into a Hollywood blockbuster, Hantke speculates that, had that film been made, the cultural capital of Lovecraft's legacy would once again have been called into question, and that his admirers may have once again been bifurcated between two cultural camps: 'readers of the Library of America on one side, lines of fans at the multiplex box office on the other' (p. 153).

Lovecraft has received far happier treatment in the pages of comic books than at the cinema, as Chris Murray and Kevin Corstophine detail in an audit that ranges from the 1940s to the present day and has an international reach — the Argentinian artist Alberto Breccia's expressionist take on Cthulhu is especially striking (p. 171). Although Lovecraft's interest in music amounted to little more than a fondness for Gilbert and Sullivan, Joseph Norman takes a productive survey of the various Lovecraftian manifestations to be found in the recondite subcultures of extreme metal, while Martyn Colebrook teases out the 'tensions and convergences' apparent between weirds old and 'New' in 'H. P. Lovecraft and China Miéville' (p. 209). Mark Jones closes the volume with a more general discussion of the 'Lovecraftian Being in Popular Culture'. His identification of 'a bleak confirmation of Lovecraft's disdain and distaste for humanity' (p. 241) in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) almost made me want to watch it again — almost, but not quite.

Simmons has done valuable work in assembling and editing this timely collection, given a stamp of authority by veteran Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi's foreword. There are of course lacunae. For example, there is little acknowledgement of the recent philosophical engagement with Lovecraft's work by Graham Harman and others under the auspices of Speculative Realism, and scant evidence that Lovecraft was one of the most productive correspondents of the early twentieth century — an archive as yet largely untapped by the academy. However, such omissions are more evidence of the richness of the source material rather than any shortcomings of this impressively variegated collection. It will hopefully inspire much further, similarly engaged and engaging, analysis of Lovecraft and his work.

James Machin

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Jim Kelly, *Charles Maturin: Authorship, Authenticity and the Nation*
(Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011)

Jim Kelly's book on Charles Maturin is an important study, not just of the work of Charles Maturin, but also of gothic literature in general, not least because it is the first academic text to encompass all of Maturin's writings. The book begins with discussions of Maturin's first two novels, *Fatal Revenge* (1807) and *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808), moves into an engagement with his magnum opus, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and culminates with an examination of his final works, *The Albiginses* and *Five Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church* (both published in 1824). Kelly situates Maturin at the heart of the gothic genre,

while at the same time examining how Maturin's work engaged with issues deeply connected to European Romanticism, an area of Maturin scholarship that has been neglected up to this point.

Kelly clearly outlines what he regards as the key themes and issues within Maturin's writings in his introduction to his book: 'Maturin's work returned obsessively to questions regarding the relationship of affective literature to political agency, artistic integrity to commercial gain, and the gendered status of genres — issues that preoccupied writers in Britain, Ireland and Europe in his time' (p. 9). These concerns are highlighted by Kelly throughout his study of Maturin's texts, enabling him to make interesting points about the connections between Gothicism and Romanticism. In particular, Kelly highlights how both artistic movements advocated fluidity in terms of subject formation and rejected notions of fixed or stable identity categories, whether they are national, racial, or sexual (among others).

One of the important influences on Maturin's work was certainly Edmund Burke, and Kelly effectively argues that Maturin's use of affective literature was modelled on Burke's writing style, particularly in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) where the death of Marie Antoinette is described in a highly emotive, almost gothic way. As Kelly argues, 'The modern post-Revolutionary age […] is one in which aesthetic affect is met with hostility, incomprehension, or banal indifference. Maturin's fiction and drama transposes the Burkean view to Ireland after the Act of Union — for Maturin the post-Revolutionary modern world was inimical to the kind of aristocratic sensibility embodied in his characters' (p. 31). In Kelly's view, Maturin's work plays out the clash between tradition and modernity as one between an aesthetic sensibility and a banal, consumer-driven modern world. Moreover, the book argues that affective, gothic writing can be used as an agent for political change, a contention that marks Maturin out as being an important precursor to Revival writers such as Yeats and Synge.

In addition to placing Maturin very clearly in the literary and political contexts of his time, the text also demonstrates how Maturin's work anticipates and accommodates many of the postmodern theories (primarily, but not exclusively articulated by Judith Butler) concerning how identity is a performative construct. Kelly notes how many of Maturin's characters are martyrs to performance and their sense of self is articulated through theatricality. The disturbing question that is raised by these acts of identity construction is whether they are masks that are being put on willingly or whether the people wearing them feel compelled to do so by the society in which they live. If the latter is the case, then those characters are living what Martin Heidegger would later term 'inauthentic lives'. By

privileging nurture over nature in texts, Maturin is, according to Kelly, portraying both tradition and modernity as being primarily matters of style. Although the book never mentions Oscar Wilde, these arguments implicitly link Maturin to his fellow Anglo-Irishman since Wilde is well known for creating characters who regard any notions of 'natural' behaviour as being abhorrent.

Possibly the most compelling chapter in Kelly's book is the one dealing with *Melmoth the Wanderer*. The arguments concerning how the interdependence of oral and written forms of representation is a major theme in that novel are extremely rich and convincing. Through an examination of the storytelling style of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Kelly demonstrates how the endurance of an oral tradition is only guaranteed through the process of writing down those tales. As he argues, 'The oral tradition […] can be seen as not so much outside of a textual, public domain, as relying on that domain to grant its symbolic capital in the national sphere. An amorphous body of stories, songs and practices can only become an "oral tradition", that is something somehow uncontaminated by a commercial modernity, through its definition in print' (p. 155). The process of giving validation to oral culture, as outlined by Kelly in this chapter, is exactly what occurs in Maturin's magnum opus in which verbally delivered narratives are given structure in the form of a novel.

With *Charles Maturin: Authorship, Authenticity and the Nation*, Jim Kelly has provided a very important study of Charles Maturin and also of the period in which he lived and wrote. The broad scope of research and the perceptiveness of critical insight that is evident in this text makes it of value to established Irish Studies scholars and also useful for newcomers to the field. The Charles Maturin that emerges from this text is a major literary figure who powerfully represented in his writings an Ireland that, because of its irrevocable loss of tradition, is in fact one of the 'only truly "modern" countries in post-Napoleonic Europe' (p. 193).

Graham Price

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Matthew J. A. Green (ed.) ***Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition***
(Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013)

Alan Moore is the *grande dame* of the graphic novel, shooting to fame in the mid-1980s with his radical reworkings of mainstream comics. Among the most acclaimed of these are his eco-warrior take on DC's *Swamp Thing* (1984–87), his bold deconstruction of the superhero