

Recensie

Isabella van Elferen (ed.). *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day* (2007).¹

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Isabella van Elferen's *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day* seeks to expand familiar definitions of the 'Gothic' from a literary-historical genre to "a gesture of pervasive cultural criticism" (Van Elferen 4). In sixteen critical essays on Gothic rewriting and remediation, the contributing scholars approach rewriting and the Gothic from a unity in variety perspective, and this eclecticism merits praise. The book will appeal to literary and cultural historians working on the Gothic, memory, post-modern and post-colonial reassessments of 18th and 19th century literature; and perhaps surprisingly, also to contemporary Goth subculture. Its subject matter extends from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* to Joy Division and cult film classics such as *Carrie*. The main questions it raises and addresses are concerned with modern perceptions of self-identity and the enemy within in the context of Gothic rewriting. Its multivalency and the invitations it extends to similarly wide-ranging critical responses are a key strength.

In her introduction to the book, Van Elferen states that "the Gothic shows reality in an uncanny mirror appearance: it thematizes the past in the present, the other in the self, transgression in nostalgia" (3). Rewriting is seen as an essential factor in the historical and contemporary Gothic alike. Nostalgia and perversion are represented as conducive and defining traits of Gothic cultural products. Van Elferen notes that nostalgia and perversion are in many ways still excluded from scholarly debates on the genre which, at least from a cultural and textual perspective, has otherwise been thoroughly described and analysed. She regards this critical lacuna as ironic, in light of the dominant presence of nostalgia and perversion in contemporary understandings of Gothic writing, music, cinema and subcultures (4).

The definitions of 'nostalgia' and 'perversion' in *Nostalgia and Perversion* are inevitably gradational and subject to the nuances of different periods, media and particularly critical perspectives. Gothic nostalgia, for the limits of this review, can be understood as a romantic longing for an ultimately lost past which is still regarded as somehow more ordered despite the simultaneous recognition of its apparent disorder or even primitive barbarism. The articles emphasise the performative and transgressive aspects of rewriting and its ambiguous stance towards real and imagined historicity, phenomenality and materiality. Gothic perversion stems from this paradoxical nostalgia, as "[...] the Gothic actively appropriates and acts out the symbiosis of nostalgia and transgression" by emphasising the "the transgressive force of nostalgia by deliberately perverting the orderly texture of the yearned-for past. The nostalgic incentive of the Gothic is not so much defined by its *looking at* the past (c.q. the supernatural, the irrational, the other), but by its *perverting endorsement of it*" (5). *Nostalgia or Perversion?* examines its namesake across the media of literature, cinema, music, television and fashion. Below I will outline the five-part structure of

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Van Elferen's book and describe in brief some of the content of the articles.

Part I, "Nostalgia or Perversion? Theorizing Gothic Rewriting" begins with Jennifer E. Dunn's discussion of the Gothic's 'double gesture' and persistent deferral of the longed-for past, which serves to heighten the sense of longing and spectrality in Gothic writing and rewritings (12). This essay on origins, authenticity and haunting argues that contemporary rewriting itself is a Gothic mode which further complicates the complex and often fraught relationship to origins and authenticity in earlier Gothic writing. Carol Margaret Davison's well-written and convincing essay approaches the Gothic as a genre of trauma responding to the shock of modernity. Davison explores female repression, mother-daughter conflict, matrophobia and domesticity in contemporary female Gothic film and literature, evincing the Gothic's destabilising effect on idealised notions of home. Joost de Bloois relates his discussion of Bataille's aesthetics to current academic and popular interest in the Gothic, establishing the latter as a sign of our times. This third essay is theoretically rich and thought-provoking, equating Gothic concerns with a sense of anxiety and rupture between two times: a past with a clear sense of history and order of things and a later modern, uncertain and ambiguous time of transgression. The language is sometimes unnecessarily obscure, particularly his description of the Gothic's nostalgia as an "epistemological slit," where my concern is with the neat and deliberate cut implied by the word slit (46).

Part II: "Gothic Rewriting: Reviving the Past, Rethinking the Past" focuses on the changes caused by rewriting. The section looks at nostalgia for the Gothic as longing for essentialistic identity, easily-identifiable origins and the perversion that occurs in rewriting as the contemporary Gothic casts doubt on what seemed stabilised in the traditional Gothic, further complicating the relationship between self and other, in a bid to fit the modern period. Sandra Hessels's investigation of Anne Rice's (Post-) modern vampire takes as its subject Rice's adaptation of the vampire myth to the twentieth century. The un-dead Dracula prototype vampire becomes a romantic, "supernatural" dandy vampire who shares the same doubts about immortality, pure evil, identity, and grand narratives of religion and science as the living do (64). Züleyha Çetiner-Öktem's essay goes on to show how *The House on the Borderland* by William Hope Hodgson in its rewritten graphic novel form, increases the original's Gothic eeriness by privileging the visual over the word. Funda Civelekoğlu's complex, brief and to-the-point essay on Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* employs Hubert Zapf's model of literature as cultural ecology to illustrate how Gothic literature acts as a counterbalance to the dominant cultural pattern by recognising the Gothic's registration of a cultural shift and providing a seemingly natural way out of the ensuing conflict.

Part III: "Gothic Rewriting: Re-enacting the Past" deals with re-enactments and manifestations of the past in music and film. Rebekah Ahrendt shows how the so-called medieval elements in contemporary Goth music testify to a desire to experience a nostalgic past not as medieval embodiment, but as an indeterminate sense of pastness in which its fans can lose themselves. Harun Maye's essay on George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) forms an excellent companion piece to Adam Simon's documentary *American Nightmare*. Maye shows how Romero's film at once employs the generic symbols of classic horror while making the genre itself (un-)dead by refusing to act out the same symbols. Atte Oksanen's essay studies the "hollow spaces of psyche" in the lyrics of Joy Division and Diary of Dreams, where the "empty urban spaces" evoked by the lyrics symbolise the empty psychic spaces which are a reflection of the alienation and social problems of post-industrial societies

(126).

Part IV: “Rewriting Gothic Identities: Self vs. Other” considers the Gothic as a genre of emancipation. The Gothic enemy within is frequently understood as a reflection of a culture’s generalised fears of an otherwise subjugated Other. The essays in Part IV look at women, homosexuality, race and the colonised other. Agnes Andeweg’s analysis of Frans Kellendonk’s *Letter en Geest* discusses the pressure and problems of conformity and publicly proclaimed (sexual) identity in the post-war Netherlands. Andeweg argues that Kellendonk uses the classic ghost story and its concerns with the problematic definition of being as a bridge to address the effects of sexual emancipation (149). Rosemarie Buikema and Elisabeth Wesseling consider the representation of motherhood, domesticity and child-rearing in two Renate Dorrestein novels, arguing that Dorrestein criticises “scientifically based” child rearing handbooks through her exposition of the darker sides of home life (152). Anita Raghunath convincingly links the origins of Gothic horror to British imperial fears of race and decadence among Caribbean Creole sugar planters. Well-argued and illustrated, her essay shows how the 18th Century British Gothic was primarily concerned with fears of a low-born, decadent and threatening other. However, Raghunath is not immune to post-colonial area studies hobby-horsing; by linking Gothic terror so closely to the Caribbean outpost of British imperialism, concurrent fears of the other as enemy within closer to home, for example in Ireland and Scotland (where the colonised other could be argued to be a more frightening enemy within because of the difficulty of pin-pointing him as colonial other on the basis of race) and elsewhere in the British Empire remain unaddressed. In the final chapter of this section, Andrene Taylor “suggest[s] that the American Gothic is haunted, if not obsessed, by sex” as well as race (188). Her discussion of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* reveals how Gothic rewriting can be employed to write an alternative history for oppressed subjects by transgressing boundaries.

The essays in Part V: “Rewriting Gothic Identities: Shady Spaces of Selfhood” further analyse the possibilities provided by Gothic (re-)writing for constructing alternative identities. They focus on remediation, the body and the merging of self and other in a single perspective. For Renée T. Coulombe emancipation of the female body is achieved *without* nostalgia or perversion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Gülden Hatipoğlu’s chapter on Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* takes his portrayal of Ireland as a grotesque and “traumatic bodily image” (223). Hatipoğlu’s essay suffers from some language problems and is therefore not as clear as one would like, but succeeds in addressing some interesting questions about haunted memories among the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy and their “possible memories” of myth, displacement and purgatory (228). Maria Antónia Lima reflects upon the creative and aesthetic aspects of rewriting as a destructive, transgressive and nostalgic act, and this final essay serves as a meta-conclusion to the book as a whole.

Van Elferen’s *Nostalgia and Perversion* is a useful and interdisciplinary collection of essays. The international scholars gathered here and their various views to Gothic rewriting achieve the book’s aim to show the Gothic as “a gesture of pervasive cultural criticism” while also providing new and insightful critical readings of classical Gothic literature and contemporary Gothic cultural production (4). The broad scope covers Gothic nostalgia and perversion in film, literature, television, music and examines the social, racial, class and gender issues that continue to shape and be affected by these media. In addition to addressing a number of current scholarly debates, the many references to popular culture make the book accessible to the general public and academics alike.

Isabella van Elferen (ed.). *Nostalgia or Perversion? Goth's Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. ISBN: 9781847182470.

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