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STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

BOOK REVIEW

War Gothic in Literature and Culture. Edited by Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke. (New York: Routledge, 2016. 264 pages, $148). ISBN 978-1-138-93821-2

by Jill Goad

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Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke's comprehensive, interdisciplinary essay collection studies the previously unexplored, yet enduring, relationship between war and the Gothic, from the American Civil War to the War on Terror. Each essay analyzes Gothic works that depict, serve as a metaphor for, or were inspired by war. The collection closely reads literature, film, visual art, video games, and comic books to posit the Gothic as both narrative tool and form of expression that best represents the military experience. Overall, the essays emphasize American culture, address the power of developing media technologies in depicting war, and see the "transformative political power" of the War Gothic without dismissing its conservative application (xx).

Monnet and Hantke's introductory essay, "Ghosts from the Battlefields: A Short Historical Introduction to the War Gothic," argues cogently for the relevance of the Gothic to contemporary theory. The Gothic is currently understood "in terms of performativity, what it *does*" ; however, "genre conventions and themes remain useful critical tools" (xi-xii, xii). The Gothic as narrative device is transgressive, critical of norms, analytical of human experience, and deceptively anachronistic. What connects the Gothic to war is its "critiques of repressive social institutions, ethical aporia, discordant affect, weird combinations of violence and humor and graphic bodily horror" (xii).

The introduction also gives the history of the ebbs and flows of the War Gothic's cultural significance to lend the collection context. The Gothic and war became fully united in art and literature after the American Civil War due to disillusionment with the myth of military glory. However, the War Gothic peaked in importance during and immediately after World War I, only to become more diminished after World War II. Since a cynical impression of a certain war and horror at its devastation predicts prolific War Gothic work, the genre became more prominent after the Vietnam War. With more current conflicts, the War Gothic has become mainstream but has gone largely unanalyzed.

The collection's first section on literature engages with popular and lesser-known novels and the occasional canonical work to broaden awareness of what constitutes war literature. Leigh McLennon's "'The Red Thirst is on this Nation': Vampiric Hauntings and the American Civil War" analyzes historically revisionist vampire novels through a Southern Gothic framework. The vampire represents war making men into monsters, but these novels do not simply classify the Civil War in Manichean terms of good versus evil. Ultimately, the vampire, a figure rich with theoretical possibilities through McLennon's analysis, mediates between past and present, calling into question the "truth" of the past. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's "Gustav Hasford's Gothic Poetics of Demystification" contains a powerful thesis: that Hasford's two novels use Gothic monsters to expose the meaninglessness of the Vietnam War, where thousands of American lives were lost for nothing more than American greed and ignorance. Hasford's work confronts readers with graphic violence, vividly recounted by Monnet, to remind them that war depends on the destruction of bodies. John Armstrong's "Haunted Jungles of Horror and Trauma: Elements of the Gothic in Vietnamese and American War Fiction" contends that the Gothic in Vietnam War writing may either resist or affirm historical portrayals of imperialism. By filling in the gap between language and war, the Gothic exposes readers to battlefield experiences and the resulting trauma. Most compelling in Armstrong's analysis is his dissection of the distinct portrayals of the dead in American and Vietnamese war literature; the former renders them metaphors, while the latter lends them substance.

The second and third sections on visual culture cover a broad swath of war history and the art and cinema contained within it. Jayme Yahr's "Evil Things in Robes of Sorrow: Albert Pinkham Ryder's War Gothic" examines the duality of Ryder's art that represented the Civil War through destroyed and untouched

landscapes. His Gothic sublime aesthetic made Ryder a subtle radical whose work confronted viewers with the potential of erasure and forgetting that comes with death. By comparing Ryder to his contemporaries, Yahr justifies classifying him as a standout with a unique set of experiences informing his work. Hans Staats's' "Mastering Nature: War Gothic and the Monstrous Anthropocene" uses an intricate theoretical lens in reading American comic books from the latter half of the twentieth century. Staats in particular focuses on Swamp Thing as an anti-war emblem that also calls attention to the environmental and geopolitical degradation of war, even a "glorious" one such as World War II.

Steffen Hantke's "Troubled by Memories: The World War II Veteran as a Gothic Figure in William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1947)" in Section Three posits the war veteran as a Gothic trope: the veteran is surrounded by dominant culture's war narrative and its often-failed efforts to repress what defies the accepted narrative. Hantke seamlessly links the wounded war veteran to both Freudian and postcolonial Gothic theory to argue that Wyler's mainstream film is disrupted by repressed ideas: America reluctantly entered World War II and many returning World War II veterans were beyond repair. Ben Kooyman's "Snow Nazis Must Die: Gothic Tropes and Hollywood Genre-Fication in Nazisploitation Horror" promotes the cinematic trope of Nazi monsters as a means of dealing with the historical trauma of World War II. In effect, Kooyman argues that decontextualized representations of Nazis in horror films have value in bringing World War II awareness to younger audiences. However, he raises apt concerns that portraying Nazis as easy to kill, as some films do, does not give credence to the never-ending spread of Nazi ideology. Glen Donnar's "'Ah, You Lose You in There': Gothic Masculinities, Specters of Vietnam and Becoming Monstrous in *Southern Comfort*" contends that the film, an example of American Rural Gothic horror, reveals the impact of the Vietnam War on American masculinity and its institutions. Donnar uses a detailed visual and narrative analysis of *Southern Comfort* to point to the uselessness of institutional violence as a means of correcting emasculation and overcoming trauma.

Section Four on gaming elevates the theoretical possibilities of this popular genre. In Steven Holmes's "'You Are Not in Control': *Spec Ops: The Line and the Banality of War*," thematic connections between the game and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* include a non-Western enemy that is more backdrop than character and the Gothic double. Although Holmes lauds the game's depiction of war's psychological effects, he rightly avoids oversimplifying the game's purpose, noting that *Spec Ops*'s stereotypical depiction of Middle Eastern culture problematizes its status as universally anti-war. John Hoglund's "Virtual War and the Nazi Zombie Gothic in *Call of Duty*" interrogates the complexity of the Zombie Mode game setting; the zombie speaks to the desire to "enforce the borders that separate self from other, civilized from primitive, West from East" (177), but these borders are often porous. Hoglund thoroughly outlines the game's flaws – it renders war necessary and shooters as humanity's last hope – while addressing its revelation that war is perpetual. Gwyneth Peaty's "Beast of America: Revolution and Monstrosity in *BioShock Infinite*" offers a straightforward assessment of the game: it includes no idealization of conflict but instead emphasizes that "war ultimately makes monsters of us all" (193). Peaty examines the options available to players to conclude that the game actually provides only one option, the perpetuation of warfare as a metaphor for the human condition. The violence in the game only disappears when all the players die.

The colletion's final section examines commercialized young adult works. Kylee Hartman-Warren's "Operation Horcrux: Harry Potter's War Narrative in a Post-9/11 Context" argues that the Harry Potter book series is inspired by 9/11 and that the subsequent movies include explicit 9/11 imagery absent from the books to depict a particular war experience. Using recent war narrative theory, Hartman-Warren conducts a structured reading of the *Harry Potter* series trajectory that culminates in the contention that *Harry Potter* is more adult war hero than adolescent hero. Agata Zarzycka's "The Gothicization of World War II as a Source of Cultural Self-Reflection in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* and *Hollow City*" focuses on "the overt fictionalization and Gothicization of war-related themes" in the works that confront aesthetization and appropriation of trauma (229). The essay progresses from a point by point discussion of the books' connections to World War II and the Holocaust to a thoughtful analysis of the self-reflection inspired by these connections. Ultimately, Zarzycka argues, the books promote questioning why the individual and society are fascinated with trauma, where "trauma desire" comes from, and how "othering" can be controlled as a means to self-development (236). Karen J. Renner's "Conquering the Frontier Gothic in *Red Dawn*" places the film into the titular genre, where the teenage main characters, targeted by foreign enemies, are attacked for the sins of their forefathers. In contrast to the typical Frontier Gothic work, the teens in the film, joined by their parents, defeat the enemy because they are strong enough to end a long history of war. Renner's thematic application of the American and Frontier Gothic to the movie logically concludes that *Red Dawn* emphasizes the validity of warfare and American exceptionalism.

Although the essays have distinct theoretical preoccupations, they connect on one basis, as Monnet and Hantke note: a fascination with the horrors and complexity of war that only the Gothic can begin to explain.