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Trauma, Botox and the burqa: in polyvalent gothic stories.

Abstract:

Sarup (1996) in his writing notes that ‘identities are not free-floating; they are limited by borders and boundaries’ (p.3). The face conceived as a boundary of identity can often be conceived as a lineal narrative, one that changes over time and becomes more familiar and knowable with proximity. This process is one of the pleasures in reading. Yet not all characters are knowable. Sometimes it is the unpredictability, the changes and unknowability of a character that draws us in to a text. In February, 2011, the French president proclaimed the face as our passport but how can such an inconceivable concept exist? The face, like characters in stories, is a writing technology open to profound change in contemporary society. Not only can it change because of the technologies of science that have given us Botox but the inner consciousness of our subjectivity can also change what is written on our face. Postmodern writing has attempted to move beyond the notion of a fixed subjectivity yet when we invoke the face of a stranger, the representation often falls back on age-old templates fixing subjectivity in a discursive relationship between fear and desire. An investigation of the gothic genre is of interest in this discussion as the figure of the vampire can be seen as the representation of a character embodying characteristics of a fixed subjectivity. The vampire stands as the “ultimate stranger”, from which a comparative analysis of the various images of the face as a stranger can be read. It is possible to identify the emergence of the gothic in cultural practices and perceptions in the present. The focus of this paper will be to investigate the various stories a face might encompass and if it is possible to rethink the gothic genre as an appropriate genre to deal with contemporary ethical concerns in regards to the body.

Biographical note:

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The ethics of writing is something that has always troubled me. I think this is perhaps because as writers we are always complicit in our writing. Writers reflect their perception of the world and in turn the world or the cultural milieu in which they exist, with all its prejudices and uncertainties is reflected in their writing. In light of postcolonial theory we are now cognisant that if we do take up space in the published world we better give serious consideration to the ethical implications of our work because there is so much going on and so much inequity that is a matter of urgency. But at the same time it would be a disaster for writing if ‘precision and political correctness’ intruded to the point of contrivance. Therein lies the dilemma for contemporary writers. I usually write about things that frighten me so it is difficult in this context to avoid the prickly topics of race, gender, politics and place. My stories are usually placed in the home or my community but world events seem closer these days and the things that frighten me seem more overwhelming, more urgent of a writer’s attention. Australia’s present political landscape with its focus on economic wealth at the expense of the environment and its demonization of the other in its discourse on refugees speaks of collective fears and desires and these fears and desires, I believe, are being played out in a corporeal way in regards to subjectivity so perhaps this is why I am drawn to the gothic.

The gothic genre is about the uncanny and the excess and it is often theorised retrospectively to identify the unconscious desires and fears of the past. The vampires in *Dracula* (1887) written at a time of religious and sexual oppression were said to encapsulate Victorian sensibility whereby the threat of the new that came with the Industrial Revolution and the migration of workers also belied the immense promise of scientific research and medical innovation. The uncanny moment marking both a fear and desire for change in the present can be seen as an ideal site for narration in much the same way as the seminal text written by Stoker articulating a society in crisis resisting and desiring a shift in subjectivity. Hughes (2008) in summarizing the renewed interest in the gothic in writing programs notes Irish Studies focus their attention on Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in investigating the way the genre encapsulates both fear and desire of the other. Count Dracula was Eastern European and his workers as Gypsies reflected concerns that migration of Eastern Europe was a threat to English identity yet the figure of the vampire is also a highly eroticized figure.

Whether Bram Stoker intentionally set out to capture his readers by warning them of the dangers of the alien cannot be definitively ascertained but his fear of the loosening of moral boundaries in Victorian England has been noted in his essays. So the gothic genre is both constrained and subversive yet in taking it up writers must also be aware the gothic genre is unwieldy. It almost always exceeds its limitations drawing attention to the uncanny in unexpected ways.

Freud defined the uncanny as ‘unheimlich’ or as something familiar made strange at the same moment (pp, 342-7) and this definition has often been used to pinpoint some of the concerns of the gothic. My particular interest is the interface between cultural practices and perceptions of women and how these practices and perceptions may mark a moment of trauma or ‘unheimlich’ in cultural relations. In drawing on the template of traditional gothic fiction where the gothic was predicated on a wider

cultural malaise the genre can use the figure of the vampire to draw attention to the movement beyond human principles of empathy and compassion in cultural relations. This struggle with subjectivity marks a moment of trauma or unresolved grief in human relations. The gothic has often been noted as a genre of trauma because it accentuates extremes of fear and desire in its imaginative characters. Its themes are nightmarish and hysterical, its longings are beyond the limits of mortality often drawing attention to something that we cannot come to terms with or something we cannot put to rest. Freud (1893) writing in *Studies of Hysteria* notes the memory of trauma is like a foreign body residing within. In the gothic genre this ethereal presence bursts forth and takes form in the figure of the vampire who refuses resolution in death and instead disrupts the present as both a sinister threat and a promise of renewal.

The gothic genre has been widely theorised so it is perhaps necessary to discuss in terms of its specificity in noting its rising popularity and polyvalence in contemporary culture. Its elements have been utilized in both feminist and postcolonial literature to draw attention to binary oppositions and the haunted past in colonial discourse but it is also interesting to discuss the gothic as framing a wider malaise in cultural terms by being cognisant of the conditions that give rise to gothic imaginings. Mary Orr (2003) notes in her discussion of its intertextual function that the gothic genre is ‘a mirrored doppelganger’ in that it is a blending of old and new and in its traditional form it expresses a ‘fast coupling of anxiety and desire’ (p. 45). So it is possible to claim the tropes of the gothic are representative of the clash of fear and desire marking both a shift in subjectivity and a futile attempt to fix subjectivity at the same time. The vampire is both alive and dead, human and not. ‘The castle is a haven of safety but its structure is what allows the threat to exist’ (p. 45) according to Orr. Drawing attention to this doubling by using repetitive tropes can highlight the hidden terrors of the familiar. It can also highlight the way society normalises practices and perceptions or presents them as homely in direct contradiction to the ‘unhomely’ or ‘unheimlich’ as Freud notes. If the gothic genre is the ‘unmasking of the horror and uncertainty of the human experience’ as explained by Turcotte (1998, p. 11) in writing of the Australian gothic, then it is not difficult to identify the more sinister themes often articulated in contemporary Australian society through cultural practices and perceptions. While perceptions of women who wear the burqa and the cultural practices associated with cosmetic intervention may seem unrelated they can both be aligned with the gothic because they both draw attention to the anxieties and desires of an unsettled subjectivity.

The racist stereotyping of Muslim women who wear the burqa as both oppressed and terrifying can be seen in legislation that seeks to ban this practice. In early 2011 the French president proclaimed the face as a passport in justification of the burqa’s removal from public life. This attempt at colonisation of the ‘other’ speaks to the mirrored doppelganger referred to by Orr. The burqued face seems to invoke a twofold horror. The burqued woman is conceptualised as both oppressed and threatening at the same time casting the perception of the devout Muslim woman as one of abjection. Kristeva (1982) defines horror as abjection where there is leakage between the pure and the impure. Here she is drawing attention to the double bind of

fear and desire. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1982) uses Jewishness to draw attention to this bind by elevating Jewishness to the anti Semitic fantasy of weakness and mastery confusing the border between self and other. Today, the burqaed woman is placed as a similar receptacle to the way Kristeva uses Jewishness. She becomes the representation of collective economic, spiritual, national and cultural fear. She also represents the ultimate stranger or alternatively the stranger who embodies a secret leaving her vulnerable to all sorts of western fantasies. This is her power yet this representation can also suggest the abject. In writing of abject as beyond memory ‘the jettisoned object, is radically excluded...yet, from its place of banishment the abject does not cease challenging its master’ (p. 2). The representation of the stranger in this instance moves into the realm of the abject in resistance to the borders and positions that conform to the narrow definition of Western national identity. She is both demon and virgin, pure and impure, weak and threatening as a result of this secret and so the burqa has come to represent the hidden story of women’s faces to westerners. ‘Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons us and ends up engulfing us’ (47) Kristeva notes. The refusal to be presented in public certainly disturbs us as if hiding a part of the body were an affront at least in regards to the other. Yet the imagined face, while inciting fear is also an evocation of desire. What is this desire for disclosure of the other masked by assertions of her oppression? Do we imagine the ideal woman underneath the veil? Is it partly the desire for this ideal face, beyond judgement and scrutiny that invokes such envy? Or is it because the uncovered face, for western women, has become hyper-visible to disclosure? Gaston Bachelard (1958) speaks of the fear of the inside and outside as to do with the lack of certainty about the distinctness of the outside (p. 218). He is speaking of conscious and unconscious being but if the surface in any way reflects these states then perhaps there is a crisis of sorts in how we perceive our own bodily subjectivity that is masked by the obsession with Muslim’s women’s perceived oppression.

Cosmetic intervention is an ideal as a gothic trope and it is also one concerning women and specifically, the practice of injecting Botox although I acknowledge men are participating in this practice can be placed in a gothic category. Grayson Cooke (2008) defines the application of Botox as:

‘botulinum toxin type A’, produced by multinational pharmaceutical company Allergan. Botox is injected into muscles around areas of the face that form wrinkles or lines – corners of the eyes, between the eyebrows, around the mouth, the neck – and for a period of up to 6 months it ‘freezes’ the muscles so that the face is no longer able to perform the movements that produce wrinkles’ (p. 3),

drawing attention to the sinister aspects of a culture that makes aging a form of deviance in his dissertation on botoxulinum. The practice of injecting the face with Botox to make strange operates as a signifier of the gothic because there is a split between the imagined ideal and reality. The face or the ideal face has become a text to be written over with an uncanny representation of the past, a ghost like image that reflects and mocks the past at the same time as it rejects the present. Cooke asserts that intervention is a form of erasure. ‘Botox is secret writing... or the erasure of well kept secrets’ (p. 10). Cooke draws on the work of Derrida ‘there is no

democratization without control of the archive' (Derrida in Cooke 1995. p.4) to insist the act of erasure through Botox is 'a game played with the archive' (p. 9). The veiled face is also a secret. Nevertheless the threat of disclosure is always present just as secrets are always threatened by disclosure. Their power is in the desire and threat of disclosure in the present. It may be that a form of erasure is at work but the punctures necessary for Botox are also a form of rewriting into a ghostly past, one where this haunting suggests entrapment in the present. The subject is not at home in their body, there is a feeling of unsettledness or unheimlich and a haunting of the idealized past body suggesting a desire to return to the safety and security of a more stable era of subjectivity. This flight from the body is also indicative of entrapment in the body, a common trope of the genre. The trope of the gothic is also present in cosmetic intervention in what could be considered to be a vampiric consumption of youth. Botox is one of the most deadly poisons known and the absence of lines and wrinkles turns the aged face into an expressionless trance-like character in much the same way as the resulting trance of the victim who has been bitten by the vampire.

Puncturing the skin with a deadly toxin to remove all trace of the present then must surely suggest the present is in some way traumatic. Certainly aging must be seen as such. Trauma, or traumatic experience as defined by the *American Psychological Association* (1994) is a tragic event the mind is unable to come to terms with and so must replay it over and over again. This repetition can be identified as central in writing gothic fiction. Crawford (2010) points out that repetition and return is what is most frightening in the gothic genre citing an example of a card found at a bus stop as not frightening in the first instance but when the same card is found at the office and in the home the uncanny comes to the fore (p.3). In writing on trauma Cathy Caruth (1996) premises her work on the knowledge the sufferer may be overwhelmed so that the fragmented self pervades and disrupts a strong sense of a coherent self. The mask created by Botox commodifies the patient to conform to the stereotypical image of youth whereby nothing touches or scratches the surface, the false self hides the traumatised self in the present resulting in the fragmented self.

It is this aspect of trauma that can be so closely aligned with an inability to come to terms with the present in desiring the past and the love affair with cosmetic intervention as a result. In spite of the apparent popularity of this practice suggesting our fears are closer to home than the threat of the foreigner we continue to project these fears onto external threats. This suggests that identity is in crisis and the borders and boundaries necessary for a coherent identity have been disrupted.

This threat is not new. In the past women's constraining roles in society were fertile ground for the gothic. In Emily Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Stein writes Jane Eyre is 'the woman split into two selves; the monstrous sexual woman and the rational controlled woman' (Stein, 1983, 3). In contemporary culture the constraints are corporeal but she is nevertheless trapped in much the same way. Her ideal self is her younger face that hides the story of her face in the present. Her lived experience written on the face is removed creating a gap between reality and imagined reality experienced through the body. The practice of cosmetic intervention can be read as an attempt to contain the trauma residing in the body that threatens to write itself on the

exterior surface. Yet not only does the wound suggest disintegration but it also promises revitalisation. The character of the vampire and the botoxed face may be described as transfixed but they are also transformed to a form that can escape the ruin of aging and inevitable death. These tropes mirror the promise of botox in a return to a more vital self and a visual attempt to delay the aging process.

The ruined face just like the ruined castle can be taken as a gothic trope. In delaying death the face rejects the gothic at the same time as it takes it up. As long as the process is repeated the figure is able to surpass the natural aging process at least on the surface. The vampire too, can delay death as long as they feed on the blood of humans: the character can live forever. In *Dracula*, Lucy's trance like quality after she is bitten by the vampire, alludes to the anxieties over reason and emotion so particular to the Victorian era. The conscious and the unconscious become in the novel the dichotomy between passivity and action. Yet Lucy is also revitalized in the process as it releases her from the moral constraints of the present. Comparatively, the botox injection must also be a release from the constraints of the aging face in this era, which marks the moment when aging becomes a form of deviance. Crawford (2010) says gothic fiction 'was born as a methodology for writing nightmares...and the nightmares need to be reoccurring ones' (p.1) in order to effectively frighten us. The reemergence of a younger face on our own could, in a nightmare, be truly frightening, especially if each time we began to age, the younger face reappeared. This would be a nightmare of entrapment so common in the tradition but it is an entrapment we seem more ever willing to make for the promise of eternal youth. Often unspeakable horror that cannot be spoken in words emerge in the practices of a culture in distress.

The *True Blood* series inspired by Charlaine Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001) set in the Southern States is one such attempt to blur the fixed boundaries of subjectivity in regards to sexuality. Reviews of the series suggest the vampire is allegorical in unsettling ideas of a fixed subjectivity in regards to sexuality but I rather think it is also an attempt to come to terms with the racial tensions of place in the Southern States. Tsolkas' (2005) *Dead Europe* also deals with alienation of minority groups along with the transported fears and revenges of a dead Europe to a postcolonial setting. This text unsettles the binaries between good and evil in regards to race and gender yet its intent is ambivalent. The main protagonist is confronted by his inherited prejudices when he returns to Europe but these attitudes are not resolved in the course of the novel. The eroticized figure of the vampire stands as both threatening and desirable at the same time. The vampire exudes an obtuse sexuality that demands recognition as a homosexual identity yet the line between human and non-human is not drawn clearly in this contemporary piece of work. Conversely, Bill in the *True Blood* series is feminised asserting a more sensitive new age male but his position is always as outsider. Both works draw attention to the gothic in societal 'norms' attempting to brutally fix subjectivity. Yet even in these contemporary works the gothic relies on its genesis where there is always the binary human/non human no matter how much the gothic figure desires acceptance to mainstream sensibility and the inability to resolve this fractured subjectivity opens the

gothic to critique. Nevertheless, it can capture the fears and desires in the border between human and inhumane expressed by French presidents and ordinary citizens.

It may just be that the French president is right. The face may be a document. In the future the face could choose a unique line or beauty spot to demarcate us from each other but I rather think it more likely that our faces are at risk of becoming commodified to look exactly the prototype of one ideal youth. In that case, something as irrefutable and distinct as a passport would be out of the question. Finally, in asking ethical questions of the gothic genre and in taking it up to write of cultural practices and perceptions in Western culture writers might come closer to understanding why we so greatly fear and dehumanize the stranger and at the same time desire to become strangers ourselves through the practice of cosmetic intervention.

Telling the story is in Muecke's words an invitation by 'the respectful gesture of allusion, or the leap, capture and cut of quotation' (Muecke, S 1997. p.173). The narrative relies on both masquerade and illusion: A gesture, a silence or a pause. The quotation mark metaphorically speaking is the boundary between the human and non-human in gothic fiction. Contemporary gothic does not expect a one-dimensional character, nor a fixed subjectivity but neither is it expected that the human will be hidden completely or free floating to the extent that nothing is recognizable. If this were the case the narrative might become incomprehensible. The vampire is most frightening because the character is recognizable in excess of what it is to be human and the vampire enters into a discursive relationship between writer and reader, one where the past and the present come into play in multiple forms. This aporia of meaning in the gaps and fissures between the cut and quote is what makes the genre so interesting. The non-human in fiction can work to draw attention to the threat of humanness, our imagined fears and more sinister desires. In returning to the notion of ethics perhaps in facing our own complicity in the overwhelming threats of our time by implicating ourselves in this process and by calling our practices and perceptions as beyond the human we may urge others to be more understanding and tolerant. This, to me, is the ethics of writing.

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