

**Judith Halberstam.** *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters.*  
Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-1663-3.



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**Published on** H-PCAACA (December, 1995)

Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows* discusses the historical changes the figure of the monster has undergone in the development of the Gothic. Ranging from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*, Halberstam's analysis focuses primarily on the dichotomy between surface and depth or inside and outside, which the monster "embodies" through the visible layer of its skin and the secret depths underneath. Based on this central trope, as well as the etymology of the word "monster" itself, Halberstam suggests that Gothic monsters are overdetermined signifiers, figures of excess that organize the interplay of several discourses, inviting the reader to suppress some strands of discourse while foregrounding others. Gothic monsters, by making the very process of interpretation visible, reveal more about the interpreter than about themselves. They expose the "stitches," the artifice, the seams of what our culture wants us to perceive as whole, organic, and seamless. Ultimately, they always mean too much, and therefore too little.

Based on this "incitement to discourse," as Foucault would call it, the Gothic monster provides the crucial trope for Gothic discursivity. On the one hand, it embodies the excessive Gothic text itself—a reading that Halberstam inherits from Chris Baldick and, to some degree, from Eve Sedgwick. On the other hand, it stands for the interaction of author, text, and audience, drawing our attention to the ambivalent pleasure that we as readers derive from what's cheap, sensational, and tawdry, even though we really should know better. The paranoia, which readers experience when faced with the double-play of deviance/normality within the Gothic text, also implicates the author. Gothic authors must ask themselves what it means to produce a text that demonstrably falls below the standard of the accepted literary norm, which Halberstam equates largely with the well-mannered and well-made realist novel of the late 19th century.

Thus exposing the rhetorical devices of ideology in the making, the figure of the Gothic monster is a textual machine or discursive technology that produces ideology with one hand while de-

constructing it with the other. And this is exactly the position from which Halberstam sets out to argue for a re-evaluation of the Gothic. If the Gothic isn't itself self-conscious, then at least it will produce a reader who is. And this alert and therefore uneasy reader will be able to resist succumbing to the superimposition of fear and prejudice that the Gothic is so good at. While she is honestly acknowledging the rotten reputation of the Gothic, Halberstam traces its politically more suspect characteristics throughout some crucial changes and transformations of its history. A chapter on Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* deals with homophobia, one on Stoker's *Dracula* with xenophobia and specifically with anti-Semitism, others—those on *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II*, Hitchcock's *The Birds*, and Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*—raise the problem of misogyny.

And it is here where Halberstam genuinely begins to read the Gothic "against the grain." After discussing the specifics of the visual apparatus of cinema with the help of recent, predominantly feminist, film theory (Carol Clover, Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis), Halberstam develops an argument about the connection between technological and cultural changes in representational forms, and thus accounts for the transition of the Gothic from the pages of a book to the movie screen. These passages of her analysis make for the most fascinating part of *Skin Shows*. A critical reading of psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's two case studies on para-noia, takes this process of re-evaluation even further, suggesting that the Gothic in its more lurid, unabashedly violent and perverse forms might actually be more of a source of empowerment than in its carefully articulated, understated, and sublimated forms.

Although Halberstam's take on the Gothic sheds new light on the rhetoric of the genre, for the reader of Gothic fiction the book's selection of texts for close analysis remains somewhat unadventurous and flat. *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Jeekyll and Hyde* have consistently been for critics

of the literary Gothic what *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Birds*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (part I or II) have been for critics of the Gothic in film—that is, the most widely discussed, most painstakingly combed-over texts of the genre. With all the thorough and insightful scholarship on these texts already in existence, it is sometimes difficult to recognize how provocative and challenging Halberstam's thesis really is and how far it takes the discussion into new territory; the asides to less canonical texts like Bernard Rose's film *Candyman* or Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* hardly make up for Halberstam's caution in straying from the canon(s).

*Skin Shows'* greatest strength, however, is that it allows for other critics of the Gothic to proceed more self-consciously about the presuppositions that particularly psychoanalysis has introduced into the academic discussion. In this respect the book's significance might be like that of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," inspiring further investigation, providing a polemic to labor with or against, and breaking new territory. One would like to imagine someone picking up where Halberstam left off and applying her ideas about the construction of literary monstrosity to the depiction of, say, the figure of the terrorist or the figure of the homeless in recent Gothic fiction. Similarly, it would be fascinating to see a critic as erudite and lucid as Halberstam herself examine, with the central thesis of *Skin Shows* in mind, such non-canonical—for academic scholarship, that is—texts as Michael Blumlein's *X,Y*, Jack Cady's *Street*, or Bradley Denton's *Blackburn*. In the company of writers who have, just like Halberstam as a critic, inherited a compromised, problematic genre to work with, a study like *Skin Shows* would stand out more clearly for the intelligent, well-informed, and provocative piece of writing that it is.

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**Citation:** Steffen Hantke. Review of Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. December, 1995.

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