



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S55. Gothic Sublime / Subliminal Gothic

Thursday 31 August: 2.30-4.30pm & 5.00-7.00pm

Convenor: Max Duperray (University of Provence)

Email: max.duperray@free.fr

Co-convenor: David Punter (University of Bristol)

Email: david.punter@bris.ac.uk

This seminar will investigate the kinship between the Gothic and the sublime within a complex network of incommensurability, despite the instabilities and cross-purposes in the Gothic, originally and across time. Historical continuity in the Gothic reflects an overall anti-humanism, keyed in to fantasies of power and to the notion of submission. The anti-mimetic stance takes its effect without regard to immediate reference, leading up to a modern anxiety about the signifier, wherein the sublime reads like the threat of the indeterminate. A Freudian perspective might provide a key to what Harold Bloom called a “theory of creative catastrophe”, aimed not at satisfaction but at death.

A Cultural-Ecological Approach to Gothic Literature

Funda Civelekoglu (Ege University, Izmir)

Gothic, as a motif and motive, embodies the excess in that it is related with strive for the unknown. Since the unknown is limited only with the imagination of the human being, the sense of excess appears as boundless. Hence, it becomes the “high” and “erect” construction that seems to touch a single point up high above, which makes it the sublime itself. Hubert Zapf’s function model of literature as cultural ecology can be a key aspect in reading specifically gothic fiction today. His modelling consists of cultural-critical metadiscourse which represents the deficiencies of existing ideological and utilitarian systems; imaginative counter-discourse which confronts these systems with a holistic and pluralistic outlook which concentrates upon the issues that are marginalised, neglected or repressed; reintegrative inter-discourse which is the phase where the two former discourses reconcile and the repressed is reintegrated into the whole system of cultural discourses.

“Sheridan Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’: the Vampire on the Threshold between the Sublime and the Subliminal”

Magali Falco (University of Provence)

This paper proposes to read the vampire as a transitory figure reconciling the ambiguous relationship between the sublime and the subliminal. Sheridan Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’ will be taken as an example to understand how the subliminal and the sublime are actually

identical in essence. In Le Fanu's short story, the sublime female vampire settles as a subliminal presence in Laura's unconscious and nightmares. Laura's dreams can be read as subtexts where the subliminal and the sublime meet each other, simultaneously disclosing hidden desires and inspiring terror. 'Carmilla' demonstrates that the circularity between what is beyond and beneath the self's consciousness is symbolised by the vampire who locates herself on the threshold between the subliminal and the sublime.

“Women and the sea”: Subliminal Fears and Unutterable Secrets in Iain Banks's Post-gothic Novel *The Wasp Factory*

Monica Germanà (Roehampton University)

Iain Banks's debut novel deploys a number of gothic conventions, including a complex engagement with a crucial concept of the 'literature of fear': the sublime. This key concept to all gothic fiction repeatedly pervades Banks's own postmodernist text establishing a critical discourse with theoretical issues of the sublime. In particular, the sublime is affiliated with notions of death, the uncanny and power.

The disturbing episodes of violence disseminated throughout the plot of *The Wasp Factory* (1990) reflect a number of defining qualities of the sublime, as theorised by Edmund Burke's arguments exposed in his *Philosophical Inquiry* (1757). In the first instance, these constitute the language of terror, pain and, ultimately, death which the narrator uses to create his / her story.

Moreover, underneath the surface, such language is paradoxically suggestive of the unutterable truth which will emerge at the end of the novel: Frank, the self-fashioned misogynist and pseudo-castrated murderer is, in fact, a woman. As well as with death and fear, the sublime is, more disturbingly, associated with mystery and the unsettling voids of Frank's narrative. In this respect, then, Banks's novel exemplifies also Freudian notions of the uncanny – the disturbing coexistence of unfamiliar within the familiar – which, in the novel, merges with the sublime.

Finally, *The Wasp Factory* unveils concerns of power, particularly visible in the characters' relationship with space. Outdoors, determined to claim his 'territory' on the island, the narrator is involved in activities which clearly enact primitive forms of control over the surrounding (hostile) environment. Indoors, father and son / daughter also define their mutually exclusive spaces, articulating, through their spatial antagonism, the classic Gothic question of patriarchal authority. Such struggle for power, which Burke also identifies as a defining feature of the sublime, ultimately, however, defies the Law of the Father by seemingly bestowing knowledge – and therefore power – to Frank / Frances.

The Reversal of the Sublime in Le Fanu's *Haunted Baronet*

Gaïd Girard (University of Western Brittany)

The Haunted Baronet, a novella published in 1871 openly belongs to the Gothic tradition, as does Le Fanu's best-known novel, *Uncle Silas*. Its landscape descriptions bear an unmistakable radcliffian touch, mixing the picturesque and the sublime. Yet, the fells of Golden Friars, the impenetrable forest of Cloosted and the Snakes lake that separate the two look much more sinister than the steepest Alpine precipice. The sublime vistas are approached and entered into. The distance necessary to the experience of sublimity is

perilously reduced and the picture seen first at closer range, then with an insider's point of view, becomes hardly recognisable and therefore, uncanny. The landscape is haunted, perspective turns to be more temporal than visual. The forest tells of buried stories of the past, and the reader is reminded that the role of legends is to keep alive the essential closeness between places and men, far from the esthetics of the sublime. Could one argue that in Le Fanu's fiction, the gothic sublime gives way to the subliminal, and that the strange case of Sir Bale, who undergoes a private but horrible death, resembles the haunted tales of persecution to be found in the famed *In a Glass Darkly*?

Writing Haunted by Sound: where “darkness makes abode” in *Lyrical Ballads*

Adrian Harding (University of Provence)

This paper proposes to re-examine the distribution of public and private hauntings, and the ostensible theories of language subtending them, in the apparently divergent poetics of Coleridge and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. The collection marks the intense repositioning of Sublime and Gothic modes, as of conscious and unconscious, as templates for the poetic re-organization of experience at a strange cultural hiatus between ontologies of old and new sensibility, systems of reason and contingencies of feeling, which has been seen as an originary moment of Romanticism. The “collection” itself is an ambivalent system of contingencies, a characteristic architectural structure of Gothic irony. The tensions in the seminal third book of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, “Of Words”, between arbitrary and motivated signs, prolonged through Wordsworth's “Preface”, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and beyond, are taken to stand unstably behind the thematizations of Sensation and Reflection, nature and mind, which govern the modes of transpiration of Sublime and Gothic figuration in the poems. The theoretical primacy of the thematic and linguistic material in *Lyrical Ballads* privileging poetic powers of natural and supernatural, over which Coleridge would later choose to position his difference from Wordsworth, may be read as supervened upon by configurations of poetic language that work performatively to redeem both Sublime and Gothic transcendence, for an astonishing experience of re-organized matter, both organic and inorganic, human and inhuman, which itself redistributes Coleridge and Wordsworth differently across the uncanny mortality of “that eternal language”.

“Cliffhangers”: the Cliff as Sublime Landscape in the Early 20th-Century Neo-Gothic Thriller

Beatrix Hesse (Otto-Friedrich-University, Bamberg)

My paper examines three “neo-Gothic” crime novels – Hugh Walpole's *Portrait of a Man with Red Hair* (1925), Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938) – that make use of the cliff as a sublime landscape in their climactic scenes. All three novels culminate in passages in which the protagonist almost goes over the edge, and the cliff hence assumes the symbolic meaning of annihilation averted at the very last moment. These texts may be dubbed “neo-Gothic” since they depart from the dominant English tradition of “cozy” crime fiction by concentrating not on detection but on the creation of maximum fear and by invariably coupling a particularly strong sadistic villain and a particularly weak submissive victim.

'Refinements of Evil': Iris Murdoch and the Gothic

Avril Horner (Kingston University) & Sue Zlosnik (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Iris Murdoch, whose writing career spanned over forty years, produced a handful of novels that critics have identified as Gothic, among them *The Bell* (1958); *The Unicorn* (1963) and *The Time of the Angels* (1966). These are structured through Gothic effects: a fallen priest, a legend concerning a drowned nun, a young woman incarcerated in an isolated building in a Celtic landscape, a father's sexual exploitation of his daughter - to name but a few. This paper will examine Murdoch's use of Gothic plots, tropes and devices during this period and will argue that they constitute an exploration of how to represent evil. For a writer preoccupied with morality and the Platonic 'good', this presents a particular challenge. As Michael wonders in *The Bell*, 'Could one recognize refinements of good if one did not recognize refinements of evil...'. Moral good in Murdoch's fiction is demonstrated by the ability of certain characters to love unselfishly and wisely. In her appropriation of the Gothic mode (which sometimes verges on the parodic), Murdoch seeks to explore desires which masquerade as love but which are founded on the need to control, manipulate and exploit others. At their darkest, such desires lead to 'nightmare(s) of violence' (*The Unicorn*) and the 'diabolical plot' of incest in which Elizabeth finds herself trapped in *The Time of the Angels*. Curiously, Murdoch's self-conscious appropriation of the Gothic mode has been relatively neglected by scholars, as if her excursion into melodrama and the irrational was somehow an inappropriate exercise for one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. This essay will reappraise Murdoch's use of Gothic, arguing that it represented an interesting experimental stage in her development as a novelist.

Ackroyd's "repressed Catholic past": from Subliminal Urban Gothic to Carnivalised Sublime

Georges Letissier (University of Nantes)

The Haunting Absence: Gothic Sublimity and the Instability of Presentation

Beatriz González Moreno (University of Castilla-La Mancha)

The sublime is an elusive concept that has been haunting Gothic writing from the moment it was established as an aesthetic category in the eighteenth century. My aim throughout this abstract is to map some of the transformations the sublime has experienced and how they have permeated Gothic writings. In this sense, I will explore how many of the changes that have taken place in the gothic sublime are mainly due to the pre-eminence of the Kantian or negative sublime instead of the Burkean and how the tensions arising from the conflict between mind and object have re-emphasised the notion of pain characteristic of the Gothic.

Edmund Burke's Sublime and the Liminality of Gothic Characters

Markus Oppolzer (University of Salzburg)

Details to be confirmed