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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 succ-
cumbing to the superimposition of fear and preju-
dice 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 xeno-
phobia and specifically with anti-Semitism, oth-
ers—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, predominant-
ly feminist, film theory (Carol Clover, Judith Butler,
Teresa de Lauretis), Halberstam develops an argu-
ment 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-eval-
uation even further, suggesting that the Gothic in
its more lurid, unabashedly violent and perverse
forms might actually be more of a source of em-
powerment than in its carefully articulated, un-
derstated, 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 unad-
vventur- ous and flat. *Frankenstein, Dracula*, and
*Jeckyll and Hyde* have consistently been for critics
of the literary Gothic what *The Silence of the
Lambs, The Birds*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Mas-
sacre* (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 insight-
ful scholarship on these texts already in existence, it
is sometimes difficult to recognize how provoca-
tive and challenging Halberstam's thesis really is
and how far it takes the discussion into new terri-
try; the asides to less canonical texts like
Bernard Rose's film *Candyman* or Oliver Stone's
*Natural Born Killers* hardly make up for Halber-
stem's caution in straying from the canon(s).

*Skin Shows*' greatest strength, however, is
that it allows for other critics of the Gothic to pro-
cceed more self-consciously about the presupposi-
tions that particularly psychoanalysis has intro-
duced into the academic discussion. In this re-
spect the book's significance might be like that of
Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Mani- festo," 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 de-
piction of, say, the figure of the terrorist or the
figure of the homeless in recent Gothic fiction. Simi-
larly, it would be fascinating to see a critic as eru-
dite 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 com-
pany 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-in-
formed, and provocative piece of writing that it is.
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