3.5

Gothic and War, 1930–1991

AGNIESZKA SOLTYSIK MONNET

As a genre uniquely engaged with violence and extreme emotional and ethical conditions, the Gothic has been closely connected to the representation of war from its start.[1] Emerging historically from the first major world war, called the Seven Years' War (1756–63) in Britain, and known by some as the French and Indian War (1754–63) in the United States, the Gothic is indisputably a child of military violence. It is thus no accident that the first Gothic novel opens with a young man being crushed to death by a giant iron helmet, leaving his father without an heir and setting off the wild ride of a plot in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Since that first freakish death, the Gothic genre has remained close to the battlefield, providing a rhetorical palette for writers wishing to depict the psychological and physical effects of war throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This palette is both literary and visual and includes a set of readily recognisable tropes that have developed over the last two centuries, most of which are related to the dehumanising consequences of war violence, and which include uncanny, allegorical, monstrous and horrifically graphic effects.

Moreover, uses of the War Gothic can be subdivided into at least three main kinds: psychological trauma, body-violation and monstrous allegory. The first has to do with the psychological effects of war, including trauma, memory problems, denial, distorted time perception, battle madness and various kinds of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The Gothic tropes that lend themselves well to this treatment include ghosts and haunting, fitting tropes for repressed or insistent memories, both common side effects of traumatic experience; zombies and the living dead,

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[1] See Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke, 'Ghosts from the Battlefield: A Short Historical Introduction to the War Gothic', in Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke (eds), *War Gothic in Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. xi–xxv.

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suggestive metaphors for the shattering sense of loss or numbness felt by soldiers after combat; and werewolves, uniquely apt figures for the blood-lust and predation of men upon other men that occurs in war. In fact, the Gothic had been depicting the psychological costs of war with powerful figurative imagery long before the medical and psychiatric professions caught up with them with their diagnostic tools and institutional legitimation. If PTSD only gained full recognition among psychiatrists and physicians in 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association added it to their diagnostic manual, writers such as Ambrose Bierce had been depicting the ruined minds and confused perceptions of emotionally traumatised soldiers since the nineteenth century, at a time when the military and medical profession still considered them as malingerers or cowards. Thus, the Gothic has long been not only one of the most powerful literary devices available for depicting this kind of damage, but it actually filled a crucial gap in the cultural toolbox for representing trauma.

Besides depicting the many subtle or monstrous forms of madness that can be caused by war and combat, another strain of War Gothic focuses on the body and its violation. This is sometimes called Battlefield Gothic and is more closely aligned with horror.[2] The usual intention of this variation of the War Gothic is to demystify and criticise war, exposing its horrific violence through graphic depictions of injured bodies, often mutilated in strikingly unnatural or dehumanising ways. To put it bluntly, Battlefield Gothic is about human bodies becoming things, reduced to meat, the crucial boundary between the inside and the outside shattered and irrelevant.[3] The point is inherently to denounce war by highlighting the fragility – as Judith Butler would say, the *precariousness* – of bodies and lives.[4] The tone of this kind of War Gothic is often ironic and can venture well into black humour, gallows humour and the grotesque. Its effects usually depend on jarring juxtapositions between conventions and expectations and the horrors of what is depicted, whether

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[2] The term 'Battlefield Gothic' is taken from Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to a Modern War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 26.

[3] For this point, I draw on the distinction made by Guillemette Bolens in her excellent study of classical and modern paradigms of the injured body, which she sees as falling into a logic either of articulation (injuries along joints, and subject to cutting and cutting off of limbs) or of the body as envelope (in which injury or death is accomplished by penetration). Battlefield Gothic can display both kinds of injuries but the most shocking tends to be the breakdown of the envelope, in which that which needs to remain invisible and inside (the entrails or brain tissue) is exposed. See Guillemette Bolens, *La Logique du Corps Articulaire: Les articulations du corps humain dans la littérature occidentale* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000), pp. 9–10.

[4] Judith Butler, *Precarious Lives* (London: Verso, 2004).

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the conventions are those of war rhetoric and the reality of war experience, or the normative understanding of what a human body is and the consequences of violence to that body.

A third form of War Gothic, also identified as Imperial Gothic by scholars, involves an allegorical use of monstrosity in the service of empire or nationalistic war.[5] In these scenarios, war is depicted as a struggle between forces of good and evil, and a legion of Gothic tropes is deployed to depict enemies of the imperial nations as savage or subhuman monsters. Unlike the other two forms of War Gothic, this strain is generally militaristic rather than anti-war, and uses the Gothic in order to legitimate violence against gothicised others. Since excellent and comprehensive monographs by Patrick Brantlinger and Johan Höglund on this type of War Gothic exist, I will focus in this chapter on the first two, both of which have been less systematically examined by scholars.[6] There are still other uses of the Gothic in relation to war, and one that is worth examining in addition to the two mentioned above is the figure of the zombie, which rose to prominence in popular culture in the second half of the twentieth century but which originated in the US occupation of Haiti in the 1930s.

In terms of historical timeframe, this chapter will focus mainly on the decades between 1930 and 1991. This is a period that covers the Second World War, the Cold War, wars in Korea and Vietnam, and the first major oil war in the Middle East, and which represents a period in which the War Gothic was already well established and familiar to readers and film audiences in Europe and North America and beyond. The Gothic had become an important mode for depicting battlefields and battle trauma already in the wake of the American Civil War and even more so during the First World War, when it permeated both poetry and prose as well as such films as Abel Gance's *J'Accuse* (dir. Abel Gance, 1919) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (dir. Lewis Milestone, 1930). The Gothic was thus readily available for depicting the Second World War, and began to be used almost right away, first to portray London during the Blitz and then other places and situations, especially in relation to the Pacific theatre, which was regarded as particularly horrific.

As far as the production of War Gothic is concerned, however, the most significant war during the 1930–91 period is the American intervention in Vietnam. Due in part to its ambiguous and failed military objectives, the

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[5] Johan Höglund, *Imperial Gothic: Popular Culture, Empire, Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[6] Patrick Brantlinger, *Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Höglund, *Imperial Gothic*.

racism and viciousness inherent in the policy of attrition (measuring success exclusively in terms of enemy body count), and the loosening of censorship across the media in the late 1960s, the war in Vietnam is the source of the most explicit and most extensive War Gothic writing and cinema (and other media) in the twentieth century.

Finally, the First Gulf War took place in 1990–1, and contributed to significant innovations in the War Gothic genre, but these only emerged later, in the 1990s and 2000s. This chapter will only briefly allude to these developments, as well as to the War Gothic video games that were beginning to be developed at this time. In short, the main focus of this chapter will be from the Second World War to the troubled wake of the war in Vietnam, focusing mainly on British and American culture (since the Gothic is primarily an Anglo-American cultural form) while acknowledging important instances of War Gothic in other national cultures where relevant. The terms 'mode' and 'genre' will be used interchangeably, for the sake of avoiding repetition, but the underlying assumption of this analysis – one widely shared by Fred Botting and other scholars – is that the Gothic since the eighteenth century has become a mode rather than a genre, and, as such, serves as a more flexible and malleable set of conventions and concerns that can combine with other forms and appear in a wide range of media.[7]

Invasion of the Undead

Zombies are an important part of the history of twentieth-century War Gothic and that history begins with the US occupation of Haiti (1915–34). The island had long been of economic interest to the US, with much of its debt held by US banks, and during the First World War it acquired an even greater interest as a site of a potential navy base. After a series of political assassinations, the US sent United States Marines to Haiti to restore stability for US business interests. The occupation began with the forced election by the legislature of a pro-American president and was followed in 1917 by the rewriting of the constitution to allow foreign ownership of land. When the legislature rejected the controversial law that threatened to allow foreigners excessive influence on the island, the pro-American president dissolved it and the legislature did not meet again until 1929. The occupation government was unpopular for many reasons, including its racial segregation policies,

[7] See Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 14.

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press censorship and forced labour practices, which resulted in peasant rebellions and strikes throughout the occupation.

It is from this tense neo-colonial occupation that the zombie, a figure of Haitian folklore, entered the North American imagination. The zombie was a human subject who had been mesmerised or entranced by black arts into a state of enslavement to a sorcerer or witch doctor. In the first Hollywood zombie movie, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), a Creole plantation owner played by Bela Lugosi enslaves the wills of political enemies, rivals, labourers and a white woman whom he covets (Fig. 5.1) . The threat depicted here is tacitly aimed at white American authority, and the conflict plays out between the Haitian villain and a neighbouring American plantation owner (the fact that the American owns Haitian land clearly situates the film in a post-1917 historical context and reveals the political stakes in the background). According to Laurel Recker, 'Americans could not legally own land in Haiti until after the US occupation and its forcible revision of the Haitian constitution in 1918', making the presence of US troops the tacit background of the story and 'subversively (if silently)' acknowledging 'the

Fig. 5.1: Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi (R) on the set of *White Zombie*, directed by American Victor Halperin, 1932 (Photo by Sunset Boulevard/Corbis via Getty Images).

history of violence and oppression in which the US occupation actively participates'.[8]

Apart from the fact that the movie zombie is a child of the US military presence in Haiti, it has taken on an even more pointed and central role in War Gothic by becoming a figure for the soldier. Originally, as it emerged from the brutal slave practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the zombie represented anxieties about enslavement and loss of self, and this is how the figure enters popular culture in the 1930s. Almost immediately, however, the zombie began to be used as a trope for the alienated and dispossessed body of the soldier. The 1936 film *Revolt of the Zombies* (dir. Victor Halperin) begins its story during the First World War and imagines a French colonial priest using a secret formula to turn men into soulless automatons. When the priest's formula is stolen, a group of Allied represen-tatives must travel to Cambodia to find and destroy the formula, but one of the men finds it before the others and begins to use it to create a private army as well as to steal the woman he wants from his rival. *Revenge of the Zombies* (dir. Steve Sekely, 1943), though set in Louisiana, already imagines the use of zombification in the service of Hitler. This is a trope that would return over and over again, well into the 1980s (e.g. *The Keep,* dir. Michael Mann, 1983) and up to the present (e.g. *Frankenstein's Army,* dir. Richard Raaphorst, 2013; *Overlord,* dir. Julius Avery, 2018).

Nazi zombies distil into a single unsettling (as well as often schlocky and ridiculous) image the many complex fears about enemy soldiers, the loss of individual autonomy while in military service and the dehumanising medical experiments conducted by scientists of the Third Reich. Soldiers occupy an ambivalent position in modern culture, hailed as heroes for their self-sacrifice but sometimes suspected of naive simple-mindedness in their obedience to orders, or suspected of secret blood-lust and an attraction to violence. This is true even of one's own soldiers, but especially so for enemy soldiers, often seen as thoughtless automatons in the service of a dangerous cause. The earliest zombie films reflected anxieties about armies of mindless slaves, while later iterations of this trope gathered potency from fears about brain-washing and psychological manipulation that grew stronger and more visible in the 1950s, especially in the wake of a series of defections during the Korean War. The zombie-soldier trope can be used in a subtle way to represent the trauma of combat and the damage it does to soldiers, and can also be used as

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[8] Laurel Recker, 'Zombie Palimpsests: Translating US Occupation in White Zombie', *M/ m* vol. 3, cycle 3 (August 20, 2018), <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/ zombie-palimpsests> (last accessed 23 June 2020).

an allegory for the dangers of training men to become killers. The theme of super-soldiers generally functions as a cautionary tale against tinkering with human nature to bring out its militaristic and predatory aspects.

If George Romero's work deserves a special mention in this context, it is because it has so pointedly engaged with the issue of militarism. When Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was released, it changed the genre of zombie films by fusing the mindless zombie figure with the flesh-eating ghoul, a monster from another colonial context that originated in pre-Islamic Arabia. Combined, the two monsters created a perfect trope for the mindless predation of soldiers upon other men, and more specifically for the way in which killing cannot be easily channelled to its correct targets but can easily become uncontrolled and undiscriminating. In *Night of the Living Dead*, which tacitly referenced the Vietnam War through the sound of helicopters during the final credit sequence, the militias that are ridding the countryside of flesh-eating corpses thoughtlessly kill the hero of the film, the lone survivor of a group of people who had taken refuge in a farmhouse.

Romero explores this theme more explicitly in *Day of the Dead* (1985), which imagines a world in which the living dead have taken over the entire planet, leaving only a few high-security compounds where soldiers and scientists co-habit uneasily. In this post-apocalyptic world, the military per-sonnel are so violent, unthinking and callous that some of the living dead begin to look more human and sympathetic than they do. With this incisive Gothic satire, Romero deftly captures the essence of civilian fears about soldiers, namely, that their blind obedience and authority to kill is propitious to abuse, either by nefarious military leaders or by devolving into a group that is seduced by its own power into serving only its own interests.

Dark London in Wartime

A more subtle and psychological strain of the War Gothic emerged from Britain during the Second World War. The strain of uncertainty about the future, the omnipresence of death and the unpredictable devastations of the Blitz cast a dark shadow over British culture in these years. As Sara Wasson has eloquently demonstrated, the city of London was particularly important in the rise of British War Gothic at this time, particularly because the Blitz made 'Gothic tropes become literal': 'people were buried alive in their own homes, night streets turned into a bizarre dreamscape where "banshee" sirens wailed and death howled down in the form of wailing bombs, shel-terers took refuge in open coffins and even familiar structures hid new and

unexpected horrors, like the ice cream vans commandeered to carry human blood'.[9] As the war continued, fears of the collapse of civilisation were joined by fears of degeneration, social regression and an uncanny sense that the First World War was repeating itself. While official accounts of the war years stressed British solidarity and emotional resilience, the War Gothic revealed the presence of dread, paranoia, mutual suspicion and the fear of madness. Wasson has also examined the work of writers such as Henry Green, Roy Fuller, Anna Kavan, Elizabeth Bowen and Mervyn Peake, looking at themes such as the 'carceral city', 'mechanised ghosts' and 'uncanny houses', as indicated by the chapter titles.

Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) offers a particularly interesting example of the dread and malaise that Wasson identifies with this period, although this is not a text that her study discusses in much detail. Greene's novel was adapted by Fritz Lang as the film *Ministry of Fear* in 1944. Ostensibly a spy thriller, the book and film contain many additional Gothic elements – insane asylums, fortune tellers, spiritualist seances, allegations of wife murder, fake blind men, ticking clocks, eerily foggy countryside and self-mutilation – that serve to evoke the strangeness, disorientation and dread of wartime England. Although the film lightens several key elements of the novel, stripping the main character of his sense of guilt over his wife's death and eliminating a period of several months in an insane asylum, it is still very dark in atmosphere and tone, and related, as such, to the film noir cinema of the period. Night-time bombings by the Luftwaffe hang over the entire action of the film and become a source of chronic anxiety, conversation and uncertainty about when and where anyone might die. The shelter where one character hides ends up being completely blown up, and the streets of night-time London see a mix of people going to the subway stations in their bathrobes and pyjamas, breaking down the boundaries between domestic and public space. In short, the war makes for an uncanny and dreadful backdrop to the story, a source of constant fear, suspicion and danger. People turn out to be not what they seem to be, Nazi spies have infiltrated the highest levels of government and British institutions and even one's friends and family can turn out to be murderous political operators. British War Gothic of this period shows a nation disintegrating from the inside, haunted by the threat of madness and social collapse. It is the nightmare accompanying the death rattle of the British empire.

[9] Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

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Horror in the Pacific

Although the Second World War generated fewer Gothic representations in American culture than in Britain, no doubt because the fighting and the dangers were both far away, there were some intimations of the horrors occurring abroad. For reasons that are too complex fully to explore here, but which pertain to the racial dimension of the conflict with Japan, the Pacific theatre became the principal source of wartime Gothic in the US. During and immediately after the war, the extent of the horrors of the Holocaust had not yet fully sunk into public consciousness, and the media avoided dwelling on atrocities in the European theatre, but the Pacific theatre changed the tenor of the war and its treatment in American culture. The belief that Japanese soldiers willingly embraced death rather than capture, the sense in which they were not bound by the same cultural values as Westerners regarding life, as well as their apparent physical resemblance to Native Americans – the savage 'Indians' of American cowboy and Indian mass culture folklore – made it easy to view the Japanese as a particularly cruel and inhuman adversary. Fear of capture, rumours of unheard-of tortures and news of Japanese cruelty (such as the atrocities associated with the so-called Death Railway, between Thailand and Burma, where thousands of Allied prisoners of war died during forced labour) created an atmosphere of extreme fear and savagery in the fighting in the Pacific.

This savagery went both ways, and one of the peculiarities of the Pacific theatre was that US troops began to mutilate bodies, collect trophies and generally treat the enemy in a dehumanised way that seemed new to American culture. In reality, American troops had been guilty of such practices throughout their many military campaigns against people of other races, from the Indian wars to their occupations of the Philippines, but never before had glimpses of this aspect of war leaked into mainstream American culture. One striking example of this appeared in *Life Magazine* in May 1944, a photo of Natalie Nickerson with a skull identified by the caption as a 'Jap' that was sent as a souvenir by a young man (possibly a boyfriend, the caption does not specify) from New Guinea (Fig. 5.2) .[10] The young woman is shown gazing at the skull, pen in hand, as she ponders what to write in her thank you note. The startling juxtaposition between the pretty middle-class American woman and the souvenir skull, silently testifying to the no-holds-barred savagery and corpse-desecration on the Pacific front, creates an ironic tension that lies at

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[10] *Life Magazine* (May 22, 1944), p. 34f.

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Fig. 5.2: Phoenix war worker Natalie Nickerson penning her Navy boyfriend a thank-you note for sending her a Japanese soldier's skull that he gathered as a souvenir while fighting in New Guinea. (Photo by Ralph Crane / The *Life* Images Collection via Getty Images / Getty Images).

the heart of the strain of War Gothic that Samuel Hynes has called 'Battlefield Gothic'.[11] This is the world of body horror, of the boundary between inside and outside of the body ruptured and the boundary between horror and humour made porous and irrelevant. The rhetorical device at the core of this kind of Gothic is irony, ranging from black and bitter to unsettling and uncanny.

After the Second World War ended, Europe began to rebuild and recover from the slaughter, but the US found itself facing another enemy in the guise of a recent ally: the Soviet Union. As wartime alliances were reconfigured into the standoff known as the Cold War, the US was soon involved in a new war on an Asian front, in Korea (1950–53). The US expected this undeclared war to end relatively quickly and easily but instead it became a stalemate that dragged on for three years, costing 36,000 US casualties and millions of North and South Korean lives. Although the Korean War has dropped out of sight so dramatically as now to be known as 'The Forgotten War', it produced one

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[11] Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale*, p. 26.

of the most interesting twists on the War Gothic, one focused on issues of memory, amnesia, brainwashing and repression. When the two sides exchanged prisoners of war after the cease-fire negotiations, over 10,000 Korean and Chinese prisoners refused to be repatriated, but what captured Americans' attention were the twenty-two British and American soldiers who had apparently converted to Communism and who wished to stay. The possibility that any American could renounce capitalism seemed so outlandish that many people suspected that the defectors had been brain-washed, even as they were roundly condemned.

Richard Condon's 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate* draws loosely on this incident for its plot about a decorated American veteran of the Korean War who is actually a sleeper agent after he and his entire platoon are subjected to brainwashing by Chinese and Soviet scientists. A war hero and successful intelligence officer after his return to the United States, the main character is actually an assassin manipulated by cues and triggers to kill mindlessly anyone he is ordered to kill, with the Gothic unease of the narrative vastly heightened by the revelation that his own mother is his handler (and more Gothic still, à la Horace Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), his lover). In this way, Condon deftly fuses Cold War fears about domineering mothers and the loss of masculinity with the fears of mental manipulation, subliminal control and conspiracies that permeated the post-war era.

Veteran Gothic

The war veteran has been an uncanny and Gothic figure since Ambrose Bierce's fiction of the American Civil War of the 1860s, and the Second World War veteran was a muted but no less unsettling presence in post-war culture. What is now known as the 'greatest generation' was also one of the most silent, and this near-total lack of discussion of combat and war trauma resulted in a sense that repressed violence was lurking just beneath the surface of ordinary life. One of the most powerful post-war films to deal with the difficulties encountered by veterans was the 1946 film by Willie Wyler, *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Focusing on three veterans, the film explores psychological trauma through a character who is haunted by night-mares, bodily trauma through a character who is adjusting to the loss of both hands and symbolic trauma through an incident in which a civilian tells one of the veterans that his sacrifice has been for nothing, that he was betrayed by political elites, and that the US fought on the wrong side. All three issues are

central to the sub-genre of Veteran Gothic, which aims to expose the dark side of military service by revealing its consequences and demystifying its supporting ideological structures.

Another key film of this period that addresses the veteran's potential to bring violence home with him from the front is the Humphrey Bogart film noir thriller *In a Lonely Place* (1950). Bogart plays a Hollywood script writer who is strangely out of tune with other people and the normal range of human emotions, with a history of violence and a latent potential for rage that is never quite out of sight. When he is suspected of murder early in the film, an attractive neighbour helps clear him of guilt, and they begin to fall in love. Yet Bogart's ability to hide his violent propensities gets harder and harder to maintain, and the film ends with the character nearly choking to death his now fiancée. Although he is cleared of the murder for which he had been accused, the film shows that he is nevertheless guilty of being capable of it, and his relationship with his fiancée is destroyed. With this bleak ending, *In a Lonely Place* joins the larger work of the film noir genre at this time in reminding spectators that all was not well in the Technicolor world of post-war prosperity and suburbia. Although veterans were largely silent, these darkly psychological thrillers and crime stories often did the work of cultural memory – even if very indirectly and figuratively – in a time when more explicit treatment of the war was not possible.

The one medium in which at least some Second World War veterans did describe their experiences was the war novel. The genre affiliations of these works ranged through naturalism, ironic realism, black humour and dark satire, but they can nearly all be productively examined through the heuristic lens of War Gothic. Three novels in particular stand out from this period: Normal Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and James Jones's *The Thin Red Line* (1962). All three are cynical, disenchanted, long and sometimes rambling narratives of death and obscenity. The horror of war is a running theme of all three, but in both Mailer's and Heller's work there are particularly grotesque scenes of bodily violation that serve as the narratives' climax. In *The Naked and the Dead,* this climax comes when two men carry an injured comrade suffering an agonising stomach injury who eventually dies. In *Catch-22,* the entire novel revolves around a scene of body horror that is fully revealed only at the end, when a young airman named Snowden slowly dies also from a stomach wound: 'Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out.'[12] As

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[12] Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Dell, 1955), p. 449.

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in many examples of War Gothic that turn on bodily mutilation and the fragility of human flesh, the point of this passage is to remind readers that human beings are no more than their bodies: 'The spirit gone, man was garbage . . . That was Snowden's secret', the narrator muses.[13] Referring to the body as 'garbage', or in other cases, as 'meat', is not intended to dehumanise the soldier for its own sake, but rather to show how combat injuries dehumanise and destroy the precious life force that makes a body human in the first place.

There is a fiercely critical thrust to the horror foregrounded in these novels and a shrill protest against the glorification and normalisation of injury and death that is produced by militarist discourse and patriotic dogma. Against the allure of military duty and glory and honour, the War Gothic insists upon the barbarity and degradedness of actual combat and the behaviour of men in such conditions. As one character in Jones's *The Thin Red Line* discovers, the most logical reaction to war was 'a massive horror . . . that any creatures who spoke a language, walked upright on two legs dressed in clothes, built cities, and claimed to be human beings could actually treat each other with such fiendish animal cruelty'.[14] In order to unveil the truth of war, these novels delved deeper into obscenity and graphic violence than most war fiction before them had dared.

The relentless grimness of these works is leavened only by black humour and a frankness about sexuality that was also new to the genre. Heller's novel is populated by prostitutes, Jones's novel examines homosexuality among enlisted men, and Mailer's novel is notorious for its misogyny as well as its unfortunate decision to replace the frequent word 'fuck' with 'fug' in order not to offend the general public. Not surprisingly, the same prudishness that required Mailer to mutilate and sanitise the language of his fiction dominated over post-war representations of the Second World War. As a result, most treatments of the war in popular culture during the 1950s and 1960s were reverential, sentimental or comic.

Vietnam: Descent into Hell

The Vietnam War, beginning in the early 1960s and ending in the early 1970s (either in 1972 or 1975, depending on which events are taken as its end for the US), inaugurated a new era of War Gothic unlike anything that had existed

[13] Heller, *Catch-22,* p. 450.
[14] James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 157.

before. It brought together all the different strains of the mode – the uncanny, the spectral, black humour, Battlefield Gothic, and Imperial Gothic – and began a cycle of dark and demystifying narratives of war that continued for decades.

Although a shift in the way in which the media represented the war in Vietnam could be used as an argument for why this war lent itself particularly well to the genre of horror, especially the availability of images of violence and destruction, something even more profound than injured bodies was exposed in the Vietnam War: the deeply fraught relationship between civil society and its military branch. The intervention in Vietnam had been started by John F. Kennedy sending Special Forces and advisors to help prop up an unpopular client regime, and it was expanded by Lyndon B. Johnson without any clear plan or purpose or even confidence in its outcome. The Pentagon Papers that were released a decade later showed that the war had been considered unwinnable from the start, and that the government had lied to the American public about every aspect of the war.[15] Its prosecution was nevertheless both aggressive and cruel, heavily reliant on expensive equipment and high-tech weaponry (including the use of napalm and white phosphorus on people) to attack a peasant army and measuring success exclusively in terms of casualties. As a result, even those who enlisted voluntarily were not sure about the purpose or morality of what they were asked to do, and many more were reluctant draftees.

When the US left Vietnam in defeat in 1975 (or arguably already in 1972) and the lies about the war were exposed, many veterans felt betrayed. As one veteran poet put it, reading the pages of the Pentagon Papers turned into 'a journey through an unholy house of horrors where all one's worst fears and darkest nightmares had suddenly become reality, hard, cold, and immutable'.[16] Worst of all, the lives lost in the war seemed to have been sacrificed for no good reason – unlike the Second World War, which was universally seen as necessary – and nothing stirs horror in people quite so much as pointless death. The insult to soldiers asked to die and to kill for a dubious cause had been aggravated by the way in which neither Johnson nor Nixon (who continued the war from 1969 to 1972) had the political courage to ask the general public to make any sacrifices (unlike the Second World War, which was characterised by a general mobilisation, rationing,

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[15] H. Bruce Franklin, *The Vietnam War and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), p. 54.
[16] W. D. Ehrhart, *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 172.

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and collective effort). Consequently, civilians seemed oblivious to the fact that American soldiers were fighting and dying in Vietnam, and this disconnection between the war front and 'the world' (at home) appeared as one of many grotesque ironies surrounding the Vietnam War. These ironies and gaps between rhetoric and reality made War Gothic the natural and dominant mode in representations of the war.

Although none are strictly speaking 'horror' films, the first cycle of Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War all reach to the Gothic for their keynote moments. These works, such as *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Coppola, 1979), take madness, murder and suicide as their main focus, with the war serving as both ultimate cause and backdrop. The legal and medical case for war-induced mental illness was gathering momentum in these years and culminated in the recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1980; these first prestigious films produced about the Vietnam War made it their point of departure. *The Deer Hunter* examines the different forms that post-war madness takes, and although unrealistic in many ways, it accurately foreshadows the epidemic of mental illness and suicide that would grip the veterans of Vietnam after their return. *Apocalypse Now* also focused on an unhinged protagonist (played by Martin Sheen) who has been charged with a mission to assassinate a rogue high-ranking officer who has gone mad in a story loosely modelled on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

However, the very first Vietnam horror film was made earlier than these Hollywood productions. *Deathdream* (also sometimes called *Dead of Night,* dir. Bob Clark, 1974) is an independent film featuring a dead soldier who has returned from Vietnam as a kind of vampiric zombie who needs blood to ward off decay. Although acting strangely and withdrawn, Andy (played by Richard Backus) is sufficiently 'normal' enough at first to fool his parents into believing that the notice of his death they have received had been an error. At first sight, the film appears to be about the truism that soldiers bring violence home from the front, and, to an extent, this is certainly the case. Andy kills a series of innocent people in order to keep himself alive and has clearly learned how to murder without hesitation or remorse. However, the film broaches a much deeper and less obvious issue when it raises the question of the relationship between civilians and soldiers who have been asked to die 'for' them. In a truly defensive war, this relationship might still be ambiguous, but in a seemingly pointless war of aggression, one mostly ignored by civilians who unthinkingly support it while going on with their lives and remaining indifferent to the fate of soldiers far away on the front lines, the

relationship between the two is necessarily strained if not actually antagonistic. As he is about to kill his family doctor, Andy says, 'I died for you, Doc. Why shouldn't you return the favour?' This brilliant moment in the film again recalls Abel Gance's *J'Accuse* (1919), mentioned earlier, where an army of dead soldiers rises up from the field of battle and marches upon their hometown nearby to see if the people there are behaving in a manner worthy of their sacrifice. Of course, they find that the population is busy with their own lives and distractions, not solemnly grieving. The question of civilian worthiness is always an anxious question because how can anyone ever truly deserve someone else dying 'for' them? How would one determine such a thing? There is thus necessarily a dread and unease around the civilian–military relationship and this is especially true for the non-defensive neo-colonial wars that have been fought since the 1950s.

Two major fiction writers would emerge from the Vietnam War: Tim O'Brien and Gustav Hasford. O'Brien would become the most prolific and the most accepted veteran author of the war, with books published from the early 1970s (*If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, 1973) to the 2000s. His most famous work is the collection of stories *The Things They Carried* (1990), which has plenty of horror, both bodily and psychological, but the most harrowing novel O'Brien wrote was *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994). This is a truly Gothic tale of PTSD, and depicts an ageing veteran, now a respectable politician, taking a vacation in the woods with his wife after losing a senatorial campaign. When his wife disappears one day, the novel takes us on a journey through the protagonist's life and Vietnam experience, including his participation in the notorious My Lai massacre, which he has erased from his file while working as a clerk in the records department.

More importantly, he has attempted to erase or repress these memories from his psyche, an occlusion that ends up having potentially murderous consequences as it becomes increasingly likely to the reader that he has probably also murdered his own wife, disposed of her body, and then repressed it from his memory. The novel uses the Gothic to make the point that the violence and cruelty of US actions in Vietnam cannot not be erased by historical amnesia and denial, and that the trauma of veterans, both as victims and as perpetrators of atrocities, will eventually leak out into their lives and homes.

Though most writers and filmmakers dealing with the Vietnam war turn to the War Gothic at one point or another, no writer has done so with as much consistency and fierce conviction as Gustav Hasford. His name is not widely known today, but his contribution to the popular imagination of the

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Vietnam War is unparalleled. Stanley Kubrick's highly acclaimed and influential film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), though often credited to Michael Herr for the screenplay, is almost entirely based on Hasford's novel, *The Short-Timers* (1979).[17] This short book, along with its 1990 sequel *The Phantom Blooper*, constitutes the most powerful and withering critique of the Vietnam War that has been written to date, and the mode of both novels is pure horror. The novels rely on a cluster-bomb of key Gothic tropes, such as the werewolf, the vampire, the zombie and the ghost or phantom, all of which are used to lay siege to the American myths and self-deceptions (about Vietnam, about veterans and about American society itself) that, in Hasford's view, led to the Vietnam War in the first place. These tropes, as well as the Gothic themes and imagery of the novels, allow Hasford to pursue his multi-fronted project of demystification by moving from the abstraction and euphemism of official war discourse to what he calls some 'unendurable truths'.[18] The most important one of these is the idea that sixty thousand Americans died in Vietnam (and many more afterwards) for *nothing*. If, for Hasford, the war was a mistake, a product of American arrogance, ignorance and greed, then there is no way to conceptualise the bloodshed that occurred as anything except a meaningless waste of bodies and lives. This is the disenchanted truth that Hasford in *The Short-Timers* uses the Gothic genre to express in all its ugliness and brutal materiality.

Two notable novels have also emerged from the Vietnamese side of the war. Both rely heavily on Gothic tropes and images, including ghosts, haunting, desolate wilderness, corpses, madness and disjointed memory. Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1990) is written in a stream-of-consciousness style and begins with the North Vietnamese soldier-narrator collecting the bones of his dead comrades for burial. The novel chronicles the disappointments and many acts of desecration and immorality that the main character has observed during the war. Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995) is also about disillusionment, the horrors of jungle combat and the madness or fantasy worlds that soldiers escape into as a result. Both novels depict battlefield gore in a style reminiscent of First World War graphic detail and irony, but also include depictions of more specifically Vietnamese acts of veneration, memory and folklore surrounding death and the dead.

A final work of War Gothic emerging from the Vietnam War worth mentioning here is the 1990 film *Jacob's Ladder* (dir. Adrian Lyne).

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[17] Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1979).
[18] Gustav Hasford, 'Still Gagging on the Bitterness of Vietnam', *Los Angeles Times* (30 April 1980).

A masterful compendium of War Gothic themes, this psychological thriller operates within the framework of the fantastic, offering two possible frames of interpretation throughout yet only to finish with a twist that leaves both astonishingly behind. The film opens in a jungle in Vietnam where the protagonist, Jacob Singer (Tim Robbins), and his unit are under attack, going berserk and killing each other. The film them jumps forwards several years to find the protagonist living in New York with his girlfriend. During most of the film, the viewer is invited to hesitate between believing the Vietnam veteran protagonist is suffering from flashbacks and hallucinations and the possibility that he is uncovering a conspiracy around medical experiments with mind-altering drugs conducted on his unit. The 'crazy vet' trope is thus played against the 'super soldier' trope. The purpose of the experiment, as Singer comes to believe, would have been to enhance combat performance, but as is often true in the Gothic, the experiment goes awry and soldiers turn on each other instead of pitting their energies against enemy combatants. We are never quite sure if Jacob was the victim of such an experiment or if he is simply haunted by symptoms of PTSD. In this way, the film evokes issues of madness, trauma, battlefield confusion, memory distortion, brainwashing, temporal disjunction and veterans struggling to adjust to post-war life.

The film turns out, in fact, to be a variation of Ambrose Bierce's masterpiece, 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' (1890), in which a Confederate soldier who seems to escape during his hanging and to find his way home to his wife and plantation turns out to be merely imagining this escape and journey as he dies. The dilation of subjective time during one's final moments returns to the theme of *Jacob's Ladder* as well, when the film ends with the protagonist being pronounced dead on an operating table in Vietnam and the viewer realising that the entire film was a fantasy unfolding in his mind as he struggles between life and death during his final moments. In this way, the film contributes to a longstanding Gothic tradition of exploring subjective distortions of time under circumstances of extreme duress or violence and pays tribute to an early American master of the modern War Gothic.

Conclusion

If the Vietnam War became a nightmare for an entire generation, the Persian Gulf War was meant to heal that trauma by being quick and efficient, in the tradition of the 'splendid little war' of an earlier era, such as the Spanish–American War of 1898. And the war was indeed short and successful by most

immediate standards, a veritable *blitzkrieg* that was over in less than two months. However, the Persian Gulf War also ushered in a whole new and disturbing phase in global warfare. It not only prepared the way for the quagmire-like intervention in Iraq a decade later, making the desert into the dominant war zone of the twenty-first century, it also generated a new visual semantics of war horror in the mainstream media: burned corpses on the so-called 'highway of death', Kurdish civilians gassed by chemical weapons, night vision cameras that turned Baghdad a luminous green. In fact, one of the most striking new technologies to emerge from the War in the Gulf, and one which would migrate into both the horror film and the new gaming developments, was the first-person, point-of-view camera used by military personnel and 'smart bombs' during the invasion (as well as drones in more recent years). The images generated by these cameras and surveillance equipment, often enhanced with infrared, thermal or other night-vision devices, have become the new lexicon of war in visual culture. This is true for early first-person-shooter games such as ID Software's *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993), as well as the later found-footage films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999), *G.I. Jesus* (dir. Carl Colpaert, 2006), *The Zombie Diaries* (dir. Michael G. Bartlett, 2006) and many others.

The period from 1938 to 1990 saw an extraordinary development in the use of Gothic and horror to tell narratives about war and combat, a tradition that dated back to the earliest Gothic novels but which had assumed an unprecedented role in the literature of the First World War. The two main uses of the arsenal of the Gothic have remained the same since that time: one, to reveal and accentuate the horrific damage caused to bodies by combat, usually in order to denounce and demystify war; and two, figuratively to depict the less visible ways in which combat and war violence effect soldiers and civilians on a psychological level, especially through fear and trauma. A third form of War Gothic involves the dehumanisation of enemies by portraying them as monsters. All three forms are concerned with the ways in which war robs humans of their humanity, though the first two are largely critical of war while the third is basically a form of militaristic jingoism. All three have been crucially important the latter half of the twentieth century and will no doubt haunt the stories beginning to emerge from the forever wars in the Middle East.[19]

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[19]   I use the term 'forever war' to refer to the way in which the war in Afghanistan has now become the United States' longest war, as observed by Dexter Filkins in his book by this title. The phrase also alludes to Joe Haldeman's sci-fi classic *The Forever War* (1974), which allegorised the war in Vietnam as an intergalactic war lasting centuries.