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MULTICULTURALISM AND ITS DUNGEONS: THE CANADIAN GOTHIC AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

La présente étude est une introduction à la réflexion approfondie sur les rapports entre le gothique et la politique multiculturelle pratiquée au Canada. Le gothique est entendu ici comme une expression d'angoisse et d'appréhensions qui concernent l'identité sexuelle, nationale ou humaine au sens large. Ces inquiétudes sont bien visibles dans les nouvelles de Barbara Gowda ou dans les films de David Cronenberg dans lesquels elles sont illustrées à l'aide des motifs de la nature corporelle de l'homme. Il s'agit pourtant du corporel monstrueux qui ne se soumet pas facilement à la catégorisation. L'auteur de l'article constate que le but de la politique multiculturelle officielle est de gérer la diversité et les différences de façon à ce que la diversité en question rentre dans les limites acceptées sans déranger l'ordre établi. La politique multiculturelle ne tolère pas de monstres.

Multiculturalism (or liberal multiculturalism) remains one of the official policies of the Canadian government, regulated by the Canadian Multiculturalism Act passed in 1985. In the face of the weakness of Canadian nationalism and statehood, threatened as they have always been by internal conflicts, primarily the conflict between Quebec and the rest of Canada, the idea of multiculturalism has become an umbrella term believed by many to be the defining feature of contemporary Canadianness. This official "management of diversity," concurrent with the more general engineering of social life by the modern state, can be seen as a preventive strategy to shrink the areas of potential conflict. The politics of multiculturalism is one of the instruments employed by some modern states in order to create and sustain a healthy, well-regulated civil body politic.

But if multiculturalism is supposed to regulate Canada's public space, if it constitutes Canadian society's „living room,” so to speak, then a certain strand of postmodern Gothicism can be described, by contrast, as Canada's hidden or not-so-hidden “dungeons.” Indeed, it has been argued more than once that Canadian literature is pervaded by gothic themes, moods and conventions. This Canadian version of Gothicism may be defined as a predilection for the grotesque and the excessive which threaten the established boundaries, so dear to a culture outwardly dedicated to moderation and stability, to a pursuit of consensus in the spirit of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. The Canadian Gothic, on the other hand, explores the limits of consensual politics and a stable order, and it concentrates instead on grotesque incongruities, cancerous growths, dangerous transgressions, and uncontrolled sexual impulses. In an indirect way, then, the New Northern Gothic poses a challenge to Canada's official multiculturalism.

Not that the Canadian Gothic is necessarily *opposed* to multiculturalism. Indeed, the flagrant visibility of ethnic and cultural diversity (together with the extremities of climate and geography) is probably one of the most important sources of gothic anxiety within Canadian culture. Yet the Canadian Gothic challenges the narrow framework adopted by the official, „humanistic” multiculturalism, dedicated to the moderation of intercultural and inter-group relations, and keen on finding the „middle-ground” of mutual understanding and respect between different cultures and individuals. But what about entities that *defy* understanding and go beyond our capacity for respect, or even simple disrespect? What about Seth Brundle, the man-and-fly hybrid from David Cronenberg's classic horror *The Fly*? Or how will multiculturalism deal with the monsters that populate Barbara Gowdy's stories from the collection *We So Seldom Look on Love*? How do we manage diversity if it turns out to include a very romantic necrophiliac girl? What do we say about the equality and dignity of each individual when faced with a two-headed man? Does the material body (in its uneasy relationship with subjectivity) have a voice, or a form of agency? It would be fair to say that this postmodern strand of gothicism extends multiculturalism to the furthest imaginable limits, to the realm of the inhuman and the monstrous. What one can learn from these gothic works is that diversity is more radical, and less manageable, than bureaucrats and administrators have dreamt of; and that identities, just like bodies, are never as stable, clean and manageable as we would like them to be. They can even turn monstrous, unexpectedly, for no particular reason. In other words, the Canadian Gothic, at least in some of its aspects, could be argued to represent a very *radical* form of multiculturalism that recognizes each and every entity for what it is and what it becomes. A multiculturalism that goes beyond our received notions of the “human.”

The way I see the Canadian gothic in relation to multiculturalism seems to differ from the one suggested by Justin D. Edwards in *Gothic Canada*. Edwards

asserts that „the Canadian gothic becomes an important textual mode for trying to come to terms with a postcolonial past and its multicultural and diasporic complexity” (xxi). Ultimately, does the Canadian gothic have a therapeutic effect, the way a re-enacted trauma, in psychoanalysis, allows the subject to come to terms with the painful past and reconstitute him/herself as a unified self? Or does it re-open the old wounds again and again, sustaining the trauma rather than curing it? Or – let me posit a third, insane possibility – does it both cure and sustain the illness? In my view the Canadian Gothic, even if *does* have some therapeutic effects (one could agree, after all, that a dramatization of a fear is often the first step towards containing it), positions itself at the very limits of the apparently seamless notion of „Canadianness,” in the gaps and points of rupture, in the paradoxes of Canadian existence. With its disparate histories (indigenous, French, English, immigrant, queer) Canada may appear, both to itself and to the outside world, a Frankenstein of a nation(-state), an arbitrary entity stitched roughly together from a number of heterogenous elements and maintained by the enforcement of the politics of multicultural consensus. This is a vision of Canadian culture that I find, though in a milder formulation, in Smaro Kamboureli’s introduction to her anthology of Canadian multicultural literature, *Making a Difference*, where Canadian history is described as „haunted by dissonance,” a history that „bursts its seams” (1). Kamboureli rightly juxtaposes the irreducible multiplicity of voices and experiences against „persistent attempts to compose a unified vision of Canadian culture” (1). In a well-known essay „Disunity as Unity” Robert Kroetsch attempts to neatly reconcile the centrifugal and centripetal forces operating in Canadian culture by proposing that, paradoxically, the lack of an agreed-on national metanarrative is what holds Canadians’s story together. Disunity unites, says Kroetsch in a logical *tour de force* that not everybody would buy into. Unity thus remains a preferred term, a desirable social and cultural ideal, a reflection of the mythical idea of Order’s final victory over Chaos. But the opposite is also true: Order breeds the monsters of Chaos, as the Canadian Gothic amply attests.

Of course, „gothicism” itself should not be used as a term promising „a unified vision of Canadian culture.” Clearly, it cannot encompass the diversity of Canadian cultural expression, even if we agree that it is „an important textual mode” within it. Besides, as a literary and cultural convention, it is rooted in the white, Western tradition, even if writers with other than Western backgrounds employ the convention, or if readers choose to read non-Western texts through gothic spectacles. On the other hand, no Western tradition can be claimed to be „pure” any more (if it ever could) in an increasingly multi- and transcultural world, and Gothicism is inevitably susceptible to appropriation, hybridization and transformation. Still, for my own purposes I define the Canadian Gothic as an expression of primarily modern Western fears and anxieties.

Arguably, one of the most pressing modern anxieties is the anxiety over the boundaries of the „human.” With the mind-blasting inventions of advanced science and technology, we are increasingly haunted by the inhuman, post-human and non-human. Artists, but also scientists (remember the mouse with a human ear on its back?), provide us with human-animal hybrids, human-machine hybrids, or even human-animal-machine hybrids (at the end of Cronenberg’s *Fly* Brundle-fly merges with one of the telepods and becomes a double hybrid, as it were). At this late stage of (post)modernism, no longer capable of the innocent optimism of the Enlightenment, many find the received notion of „the human” to be increasingly insufficient. There exists in modern culture an identifiable desire to get out of the present conceptual box and move beyond: if not “ahead” (what do we know about progress?), then at least „elsewhere.” The Enlightenment concept of “man,” subsequently filtered by bourgeois culture, regulated by the social engineers of the modern State and largely reduced to the status of a consumer by the corporate culture of late capitalism, turns out to be too rigid, too impoverished, and too confining.

This post-Cartesian exploration of humanity involves the issue of what it means for human beings to be *embodied* beings, to live in flesh, to be meat. Bodies obstinately refuse to remain clean and proper; instead they acquire an agency of their own, some sort of independent (or cancerous) life. They shamelessly parade their materiality, malleability, instability. What strikes me as a recurrent gesture in many of the works of the Canadian Gothic is that of displaying the body’s (and the material world’s) “inside” – its very “meat” – to the curious eye of the audience. In the process bodies inevitably lose their integrity (a major theme in *The Fly*; cf. Smith 74), which invalidates the witty dictum that there is a way in which disunity may somehow serve as a unifying factor. This “aesthetic of the obscene” employed by some Canadian authors brings the dungeon to the living room, as it were, and thus undermines the very rules that govern the latter in „normal” circumstances.

Probably the best-known Canadian director to date, David Cronenberg, came to international prominence as the maker of the so-called “biological horror,” i.e. horror movies that explore the most corporeal aspect of human existence, relishing in representations of blood, wounds, open flesh and disease. “Contemporary horror,” says Linda Ruth Willimas, “has specialized in making the inside visible, opening it up and bringing it out and pushing the spectacle of interiority to the limit to find out what the limit is” (quoted in Grant 1). In his films Cronenberg obsessively returns to the question, What does it mean to be human? What does it mean for a human being to have an “animal” body which can at any moment develop an independent, cancerous life of its own? How does sexuality threaten our precarious social selves? And what does technology do to our bodies and, consequently, to our (unstable) identities? The human / non-human boundary is constantly tested, revealing the inadequacy of the narrow, moderate, bourgeois definitions of the “human.”

In Cronenberg, the body is always (potentially) monstrous, always potentially inhuman – not „by nature,” but because of how we have come to perceive the „monstrous” in the first place („I think most diseases would be very shocked to be considered diseases at all”; 82). Cronenberg sees very clearly the dialectic that links the beautiful and the repulsive („some of the things ... in my films are meant to be repulsive, yes, but there’s a beautiful aspect to them as well”; 66), a dialectic that corresponds to the distinction I made above between the scenic and the obscene. Interestingly, it is not only at the level of imagery that Cronenberg employs the body, he also aspires to involve it at the level of the film’s reception: the appeal of horror, he asserts, lies in the fact that it goes „right into the viscera, before it goes to the brain” (60). Thus the movie seems to acquire the status of a virus or a parasite that penetrates the viewer’s body and mind, possibly causing some sort of disease or mutation that might eventually re-position the viewer’s very „humanness.”

A classic example of Cronenberg’s fascination with the „idea of a creative cancer” (80) and his visual taste for the excesses of flesh is the 1986 cult horror *The Fly*, which I have mentioned above. In his Frankensteinian quest for a new, revolutionary means of transport (a quest triggered, appropriately, by something as trivial and corporeal as the scientist’s own motion sickness), Seth Brundle ventures to penetrate into the basic material level of existence of both inanimate and living objects, including humans. After his own seemingly successful teleportation, when he feels purified and „the real me finally” (a very ironic statement, since the audience knows what he does not: that he is already „mixed” with the fly), his aspiration to „dive into the plasma pool” becomes even more urgent and vocal. The simple lesson of „carnal knowledge” that he receives from Veronica is not enough. He shouts at her accusingly: “You can’t penetrate beyond society’s sick gray fear of the flesh! Drink deep or taste not the plasma spring! ... I’m not just talking about sex and penetration, I’m talking about penetration beyond the veil of the flesh!” This drive to expose and tinker with the most elemental „meat” of the physical world is the very stuff that modern science is made of. Science is, no doubt, the ultimate pornographer and penetrator of our times. One could recall here Rembrandt’s famous „Anatomy Lesson” as an early, perhaps paradigmatic, example of „carnal pornography.” Not that before 1630 European art was not permeated with representations of the body, often dead and/or mutilated, but Rembrandt’s painting captures modern science’s nascent interest in the „inside” of things, not merely the phenomenological surface. And so when Brundle’s telepod turns a baboon’s flesh „inside out,” and when Brundle himself turns into an obscene human-insect hybrid, we’re still in Dr Tulp’s mesmerized audience.

But Seth Brundle’s discovery of the body is simultaneously a discovery of the weak, feminine element in himself. With all the superhuman strength and virile potency that he acquires as a result of his fusion with the fly, he actually becomes vulnerable and loses control over his body, which now can

be compared to the pregnant body of a woman. It is fair to say that one of the main anxieties that the film dramatizes is the male fear of losing control over one's sexuality and body, which lack of control is culturally equated with the „feminine.” In a chapter entitled appropriately „David Cronenberg's Anatomy Lessons,” Linda Badley suggests that the protagonist „turns into a 'girl' in several senses,” and he represents „the male subject's confrontation with the alien or 'female' terrain of the body” (128). It's hardly surprising that the danger of „feminization” comes from a woman: it is Eve-like Veronica who introduces Brundle to flesh, and as she does so, his innocent Adamic body happens to be penetrated by a piece of his machinery. (Machines, by the way, are also traditionally gendered „feminine.”) „Sodomized,” as it were, the male body „opens up” and becomes susceptible to monstrous transformations, unruly and uncontrolled. The effect, then, is that the body „takes over” and acts out its own script whose ending no one can quite foresee – except we know it has to end tragically (as all monsters must end tragically for the „human” to survive). Brundle becomes Dr Frankenstein and his monster in one, while Veronica, with the help of her former husband and the physician who performs the abortion, manages to keep her body and her „self” in line with social norms and expectations.

Let me shift this gender dynamics to the level of national and international politics. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act was adopted at a time when Ronald Reagan was still in office and Rambo was internationally recognized as the supreme representation of the United States as a world actor (while the actor-turned-politician was internationally recognized as the Rambo of world politics). With such a supermasculine neighbor, the liberally oriented Canada with its politics of multiculturalism could only be coded as feminine, or at least „not-masculine-enough.” Multiculturalism, that soft liberal policy calling for respect and political correctness, has never been officially adopted in the United States. Cronenberg's 1986 classic can thus be interpreted as a dramatization of Canada's perception of its own insufficient virility, its vulnerability to transformation which can lead, ultimately, to an unforeseen monstrosity. The famous (and later disproved) hypothesis that the HIV virus entered North America through a Canadian citizen, Gaëtan Dugas, referred to as „Patient Zero,” could only add to that sense of Canada being the „weak link” of North America, an opening through which aliens bodies could infiltrate the continent.

If the Canadian politics of multiculturalism is perceived as dangerously „soft,” it is because it makes room for exceptions in the liberal political system based firmly on individual rights and freedoms. In his seminal discussion of multiculturalism, Charles Taylor argues against the procedural model of liberalism represented, for example, by the United States, a model that is „inhospitable to difference” (60), or even „inhuman (because suppressing identity)” and „highly discriminatory” (43). The multicultural model, on the

other hand, is ready to make certain exceptions on behalf of „collective goals,” particularly the survival of „distinct societies” such as les Québécois. Even if such crucial pictures of the 1980s and 1990s as the *Alien* series and *The Fly* share a morbid fascination with transforming bodies and /as pregnancy (particularly male pregnancy), in the former it is usually breach of procedures that allows the enemy to penetrate the human, whereas the Canadian director concentrates on the paradoxes of identity and the instability of cultural and biological boundaries. In its constant management of difference, multicultural liberalism weighs and measures, draws a line and scissors / censors out, in order to ward off any potential cancerous monstrosity. Yet, for the better or worse, the monsters do tend to reappear.

Monstrosity, however scary, has one secretly longed-for effect: it erases existing differences and thus releases the tensions and anxieties related to the hard task of sustaining and managing clear boundaries. At the level of sheer biological existence all human politics, all gender, or class, or ethnic differentiation dissolves into a universal „meatiness.” „Insects have no politics,” as Brundle-fly perceptively remarks. In the absence of any political project, it is the body that acquires a form of agency. And as it transforms itself in an unpredictable direction, it cannot leave identity intact. Says Brundle: “I know what the disease wants. It wants to turn me into something else. Something that has never existed before, mutation as monstrous birth. Most people would give anything to be turned into something else.”

The disease, let us notice, is attributed with volition and an internal logic of its own. The transforming body will give birth to a new form being, complete with a distinct new identity – or else, with no identity at all, at least not in the human sense. Much as this prospect sounds terrifying, it is also strangely attractive: „most people would give anything” to get rid of the burden of their identity, to mix illegitimately and promiscuously with other forms of being, to transform and hybridize, even if the hybrid must be perceived as a monster and rejected by the society of „proper humans.” In the end, monsters carry with them a certain promise, as Donna Haraway would have it: the promise of a much-feared, much-desired change.

In his book *The Monstrous and the Dead* the political philosopher Mark Neocleous observes: “[t]he monstrous ... points to our understanding of the precariousness of human identity, the idea that human identity may be lost or invaded and that we may be, or may become, something other than we are” (5). Canadians, many of whom are constantly aware of the fragility of their national and cultural identity, may be particularly sensitive to the precariousness of *all* identity – human, cultural, gender, sexual or other. Arguably, by fetishizing difference, administrative multiculturalism attempts to prevent interbreeding and hybridization, stabilize the cultures and identities for their effective management. The Canadian pursuit of consensus is often argued to moderate the „dangerous character” of certain social and cultural

differences which might potentially trigger conflict, violence or disintegration of social and political institutions. Radical difference is monstrous, but difference acknowledged within reasonable limits can be safely contained and managed. And so it seems that the goal of the politics of multiculturalism is to blunt the sharp teeth of the Monster of Difference.

In her critique of the liberal politics of multiculturalism Stephanie A. Smith wonders: “[H]ow is it that the concept of diversity has been neatly disengaged from any complex consideration of how *difference* comes to be at all? How is it that „diversity” now appears to denote nothing more than acceptable stylistic or cultural variations on the theme Human?” (189). Multiculturalism is all too easily understood as a simply hygienic practice, like hair- or nail-trimming or the excision of unwanted, potentially cancerous tissue in an attempt to cut the „human” to its proper shape and measure. Some artists choose to retrieve the monster from the dungeon, revive it and give it a voice, even if, in the end, it must be killed again, or at least tamed and pacified. But, as we have learnt from Gothic narratives, the monster always returns. Return it must, as the „human” can only constitute itself in (brotherly) confrontation with the monster.

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