

Title: 'Towards a 21st Century Definition of Gothic Art'

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Synopsis: (300 words)

'Gothic' in art is today an ambivalent term. Although this term in art now references primarily a set of themes borrowed from the literature of terror (i.e., monstrosity, death, body parts, etc.) alongside motifs broadly referencing Goth subculture and horror film, the word 'Gothic' was originally coined not in literature but in the visual arts. During the Renaissance, 'Gothic' evolved in Italy as a term of opprobrium for the 'barbaric', 'awkward' or simply 'non-classical' art and architecture dating from the 11th to the 15th centuries. The twin predominant meanings of the word, first having to do with medieval visual art and second as the term for the literature of terror, find an early convenient overlap in the figure of Horace Walpole, conventionally seen as originator of both, as both author of the first novel in the genre in 1764 and the first revivalist work of the architecture, Strawberry Hill (1749-76). The subsequent relationship between Gothic literature and Gothic visual art is perhaps never again so easily resolved.

Across most of the 20th century -- indeed until as late as the mid 1990s -- Gothic in art had only to do with medieval and often nationalistic references; for example, the work of artists ranging from Auguste Rodin to Anthony Caro were described as Gothic because of their nationalistic overtones and the formal suggestion of cathedrals in their sculpture. Can we today discuss as 'Gothic' as an expanded term which has grown to encompass literary themes, for example, the use of modernist ruins in the art of Tacita Dean, or the staging of 'forbidden chambers' in the *Cell* installations of the late Louise Bourgeois? 'Towards a 21st Century Definition of Gothic Art' examines critically the hybrid use of the term in art today, and proposes a richer, more historically informed understanding and recuperation of the term 'Gothic' in art.

Bio

Gilda Williams is a Lecturer in the Art Department, MA in Curating programme at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a London correspondent for *Artforum* magazine. She is author of *The Gothic* ('Documents of Contemporary Art' series, MIT Press, Whitechapel, 2007), an anthology of Gothic themes and imagery in contemporary art, which is also the subject of her ongoing doctoral research.