Soviet Gothic-fantastic: a study of Gothic and supernatural themes in early Soviet literature

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the persistence of Gothic-fantastic themes and motifs in the literature of Soviet Russia between 1920 and 1940. Nineteenth-century Russian literature was characterized by the almost universal assimilation of Gothic-fantastic themes and motifs, adapted from the fiction of Western writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ann Radcliffe and Edgar Allen Poe. Writers from Pushkin to Dostoevskii, including the major Symbolists, wrote fiction combining the real with the macabre and supernatural. However, following the inauguration of the Soviet regime and the imposition of Socialist Realism as the official literary style in 1934, most critics assumed that the Gothic-fantastic had been expunged from Russian literature. In Konstantin Fedin's words, the Russian fantastic novel had "умер и закопан в могилу". This thesis argues that Fedin's dismissal was premature, and presents evidence that Gothic-fantastic themes and motifs continued to play a significant role in several genres of Soviet fiction, including science fiction, satire, comedy, adventure novels (приключенскіе романи), and seminal Socialist Realist classics. My dissertation identifies five categories of Gothic-fantastic themes, derived jointly from analysis of canonical Gothic novels from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and from innovative approaches to the genre made by contemporary critics such as Fred Botting, Kelly Hurley, Elaine Showalter and Eric Naiman (whose book Sex in Public coined the phrase 'NEP Gothic'). Each chapter analyses one of these five Gothic themes or tropes in the context of selected Soviet Russian literary texts. The chronotope of Gothic space, epitomized in the genre as the haunted castle or house, is readdressed by Mikhail Bulgakov as the 'nekhoroshaia kvaritla' of Master i Margarita and by Evgenii Zamiatnin as the 'drevnyi dom' of his dystopian fantasy My. Gothic gender issues, including the subgenre of Female Gothic, arise in Nikolai Ognev's novels and Aleksandra Kollontai's stories. The Gothic obsession with dying, corpses and the afterlife re-emerges in fictions such as Daniil Kharnms' "Stanukha" (whose hero is threatened by an animated corpse) and Nikolai Erdman's banned play Samoubiitsa (the story of a failed suicide). Gothic bodies (deformed or regressive human bodies) are contrasted with Stalinist cultural aspirations to somatic perfection within a utopian society. Typically Gothic monsters – vampires, ghosts, and demon lovers – are evaluated in a separate chapter. Each Gothic trope is integrated with my analysis of the relevant Soviet discourse, including early Communist attitudes to gender and the body and the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov's utopian belief in the possibility of universal resurrection. As my focus is thematic rather than author-centred, my field of research ranges from well-known writers (Fedor Gladkov, Bulgakov, Zamiatnin) to virtual unknowns (Grigorii Grebnev and Vsevolod Vasilusinski, both early 1930s novelists), and recently rediscovered writers (Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii, Vladimir Zazubrin). Three Soviet authors who explicitly emulated the nineteenth-century Gothic-fantastic tradition in their fiction were Mikhail Bulgakov, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii and A.V. Chalnian. Many mainstream Soviet writers also exploited Gothic-fantastic motifs in their work. Fedor Gladkov's Socialist Realist production novel, Tserment, uses the trope of the Gothic castle to dramatise the reclamation of a derelict cement factory by the workers. Nikolai Ognev's Dnevnik Kosti Riaibsetva, the diary of an imaginary Communist schoolboy, relies on ghost stories to sustain suspense. Aleksandr Beliaev, the popular science fiction writer, inserted subversive clichês from the Gothic narrative tradition in his deceptively optimistic novels. Gothic-fantastic tropes and motifs were used polemically by dissident writers to subvert the monologic message of Socialist Realism; other writers, such as Gladkov and Marietta Shaginian, exploited the same material to support Communism and attack Russia's enemies. The visceral resonance of Gothic fear lends its metaphors unique political impact. This dissertation aims at an overall survey of Gothic-fantastic narrative elements in early Soviet literature rather than a conclusive analysis of their political significance. However, in conclusion, I speculate that the survival of the Gothic-fantastic genre in the hostile soil of the Stalinist literary apparatus proves that early Soviet literature was more varied, contradictory and self-interrogative than previously assumed.

Keywords
Gothic literature, Soviet literature, Gothic-fantastic, Socialist Realism, Russian literature

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Recommended or similar items

For gothic metaphors in early Soviet literature, see Naiman, Eric, Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology (Princeton, 1997), and Muireann Maguire, "Soviet Gothic-Fantastic: A Study of Gothic and Supernatural Themes in Early Soviet Literature" (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2008). For a gothic reading of current Russian politics, see Khapavaev, Dina, Gotlicheske obschestvo: Morfologiia koshmara (Moscow, 2007); for a similar take on the newest Russian prose, see Lebedushkina, Olga, "Nasha novaia gotika," Druzhba narodov (2008): 11. Gothic literature derives name from barbaric Germanic tribe, the Goths. Both the literature and architecture are noted for savage, unrestrained, majestic style. Gothic Architecture Vaulting Arches- grasping for heavens Dr. Frankenstein! Watch for the following motifs in the works we will study (especially the poems of Coleridge, Byron, and Keats and Mary Shelleys novel Frankenstein. Consider the symbolic significance of interactions between the natural and supernatural worlds in these works. "Gothic literature is devoted primarily to stories of horror, the fantastic, and the darker supernatural forces. These forces often represent the dark side of human nature/rational or destructive desires.

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