

Gothic and Sublime in the work of Michal Macků

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Abstract

This essay focus on the analysis of the relationship between the Gothic and the Sublime as aesthetic categories through the work of Michal Macků (b.1963).

The Gothic and the Sublime are two closely related themes. Despite their different connotations - the concept of the sublime conveys ideas of light and spirituality, while the Gothic conveys an atmosphere which is dark, sensual and physical - their common aim is to draw our attention beyond the limit of any rational framework. The commingling of these two elements within a work of art generates a sinister yet fascinating vision which takes the viewer deep into the ambiguity of human nature.

Characterised by strong existential connotations and heavy themes of self-loathing, self-recognition, and ownership of one's own demons and body, Macků's photographic compositions create a physical manifestation of a spiritual struggle through distortion and fragmentation within a surreal, dark environment.

The Sublime and the Gothic as thematic framework.

The Sublime is an aesthetic category referring to a greatness beyond all possibility of calculation and imitation, something which is ineffable and unrepresentable. According to Morley, the English philosopher Edmund Burke defines the sublime as a consequence which is caused by a sense of fear and of a possible threat to the subject's self-preservation. As he wrote in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757):

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.¹

Engendered by a dangerous situation that menaces our survival, making us experience the potentially lethal power of Nature, the sublime excites dual feelings of Terror and Delight. The encounter with this uncontrollable natural force frightens us, generating a visceral response which leaves a deep mark in the self. By becoming more aware of the precariousness of the human condition, we feel thrill and excitement, challenged by the unpredictability of our status.² In addition, the vision of the Sublime in nature astonishes us, provoking 'that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror.'³ Confronted with this overwhelming experience, our mind takes refuge in and turns inward to our own unconscious, where it discovers its deepest desires and fears. According to Burke,

no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its power of acting and reasoning as *fear*. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous. (...) Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.⁴

Other elements analysed as direct sources of the Sublime are infinity, obscurity, darkness and suddenness, all associated with the semantic sphere of the uncertain and the nocturnal. Subsequently, the feeling of Sublime theorised by Burke belongs to the irrational, instinctive dimension of Pathos and it's characterised by the allure of the unknown.

This aspect of delightful terror is one of the reasons for the Gothic fascination with the Sublime. Traditionally, in the Gothic aesthetic obscurity, uncertainty, ambivalence, and the uncanny construct presentations of terror. Simultaneously obsessed by fear and desire for the transcendence and the afterlife, the Gothic character is driven by the urge of going beyond the human condition.⁵

Abandoned buildings and desolate, gloomy landscapes reflect moral decay and dissolution of self-integrity. The infinity and obscurity belonging to Nature and causing the feeling of the Sublime, become here a vertiginous sight into the dark abyss of the human soul. A journey through unspeakable, abject wishes, obsessions and nocturnal secrets. Through a mind poisoned by shame and repressed anxiety. Recalling Freud's psychology and theory of unconscious, 'Gothic sublimity demonstrates the possibilities of terror in

opening the mind to its own hidden and irrational powers.⁶

Terror in this form of loss of control and constriction of secret and visceral cravings can turn into a liberating force, leading up to the purification of the inner being from its internal self-alienation. Conversely, it can end up as a release of an uncontrollable, unnatural and destructive strength.

This element of psychological repression is connected with the aesthetics of the Uncanny. As referenced by Freud, Schelling defines the Uncanny as 'something that should have remained hidden as has come into the open'.⁷ The dimension of the unconscious is central in Freud's illustration of the Uncanny as a kind of terror which is not provoked by an external, natural vision – as in Burke –, yet by 'something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed'.⁸ As Morris has pointed out:

The uncanny achieves its strange and disquieting power by confronting us with a part of ourselves which we have denied and disowned, but which we can never entirely expunge or escape. The terror of the uncanny is released as we encounter the disguised and distorted but inalienable images of our own repressed desire. For Freud, such uncanny images inspire the same mixture of attraction and revulsion which is the fundamental law of Gothic emotion.⁹

The Gothic themes of the Uncanny, nihilism, supernaturalism and the internal, lacerating tension within the self are celebrated by contemporary artists concerned about the body and anti-social pathological state such as depression and alienation. As asserted by Momin:

less concerned with the production of grand and majestic terror, the current Gothic sublime reflects an apprehensive, morally ambiguous state of mind, characterized by the possibilities of self-dissolution, a sense of waltzing on the edge of the eternal abyss. Annihilation can make visible the desire to transcend the particularities of one's existence, a transformation achieved via extreme emotion.¹⁰

Contemporary artworks characterised by Gothic aesthetics present uncanny images revealing distressing, sinister dimension of familiar objects and human beings, rousing disturbing visions that were suspended in our unconscious.

Michal Macků

Michal Macků (b.1963) is a Czech contemporary artist, expressing his own very singular sensibility primarily through photography and sculpture. He creates black and white works using carbon printing and his own photographic technique named *Gellage*, which is a process of transferring exposed and fixed photographic emulsion onto paper. 'This transparent and plastic material makes it possible to reshape and reform the original images, changing their relationships and giving them a new meaning during the transfer.'¹¹ Focusing on the figure of the human body, this manipulation generates distorted figures immersed into abstract, imaginative surroundings. In describing his artistic practice, the artist said:

I use the nude human body (mostly my own) in my pictures. Through the photographic process, this concrete human body is compelled to meet with abstract surroundings and distortions. This connection is most exciting for me and helps me to find new levels of humanness in the resulting work. I am always seeking new means of expression and, step by step, I am discovering almost unlimited possibilities through my work with loosened gelatin. Photographic pictures mean specific touch with concrete reality for me, one captured level of real time. The technique of Gellage which I am using helps me to take one of these "time sheets" and release a figure, a human body, from it, causing it to depend on time again.¹²

Macků's artistic choice to use black and white conveys a sense of timelessness and universality, as well as strong gravity. By presenting shadowy, ghostly presences consumed by deep anxiety and fears, he materialises and symbolises the unjustified drama of human existence.

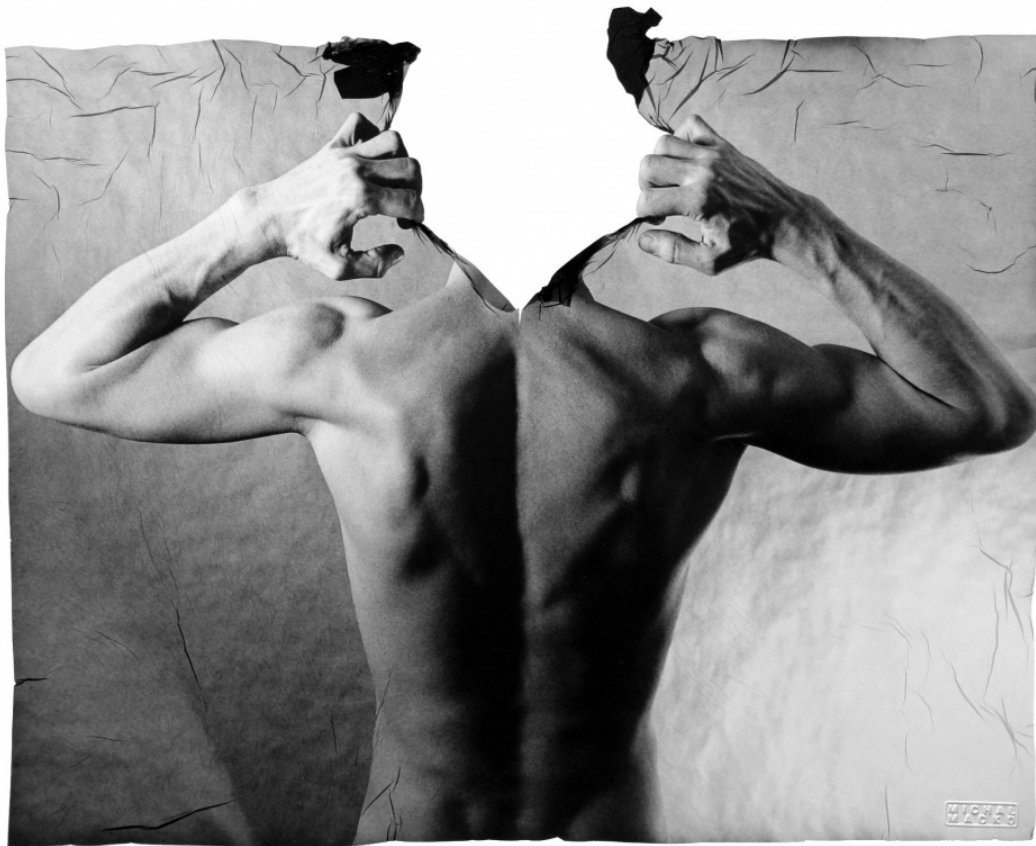
His Gothic, sensual figures, with the recurring motives of disfigured, broken bodies and frightful screaming heads, are characterised by the enchanting distinctiveness of his style and high aesthetic sensitivity.



Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 5*, 1989

A early series of portraits made in 1989 depicts a naked, statuesque male body – which, like in most of his work, is the photographer himself – lacerating his own flesh by ripping apart and scraping the photographic surface. The perfection of the muscular body presented recalls emblematic sculptures of mythological heroes with their attributes of might and immortality. The

aversion toward the transience and precariousness of his own body drives the figure to a violent act of self-destruction, in the attempt to escape the constriction of his own corporeality.



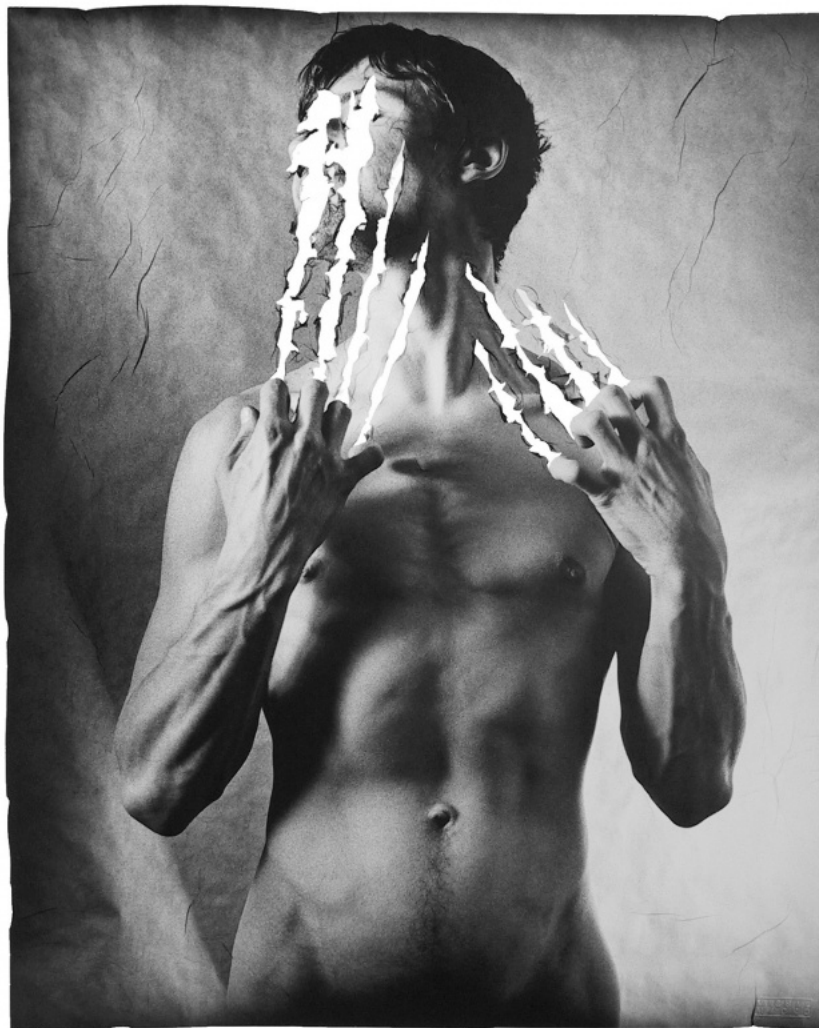
Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 6*, 1989

In *Gellage No. 5*¹³, *Gellage No. 6*¹⁴, *Gellage No. 7*¹⁵ the anxious gestures of self-mutilation, which visually annihilates the figure's head, chest and gut, are allegory of a deep internal conflict and a strong desire for freedom and control of his own destiny. Commenting *Gellage No. 7*, Lancer Speer stated:

We share the self(d)effacing gesture of Macku's portrait, a violent moment of angst, fear, self-loathing, and perhaps even the struggle to break free from the mortal vessel. The physicality of torn emulsion becomes a

metaphor for the damage of the torn soul. (...)The physical tears scratch the surface, but it is the soul that carries the scars. Without a face this individual becomes the whole, the archetype.¹⁶

The wounds opening the skin reveals a bright, white flash, a luminous breach. In these works we find the materialisation of the Gothic motif of terror leading to internal purification. A new state of illumination can be seen and reached through the horror and the violence of brutal gestures. The terror sublimates the sorrow.



Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 7*, 1989

Lately, Macků has created a new series of works called *Glass Gellage*. By applying gellage to glass, he transforms the image into a 3D object, realising photographic sculptures.

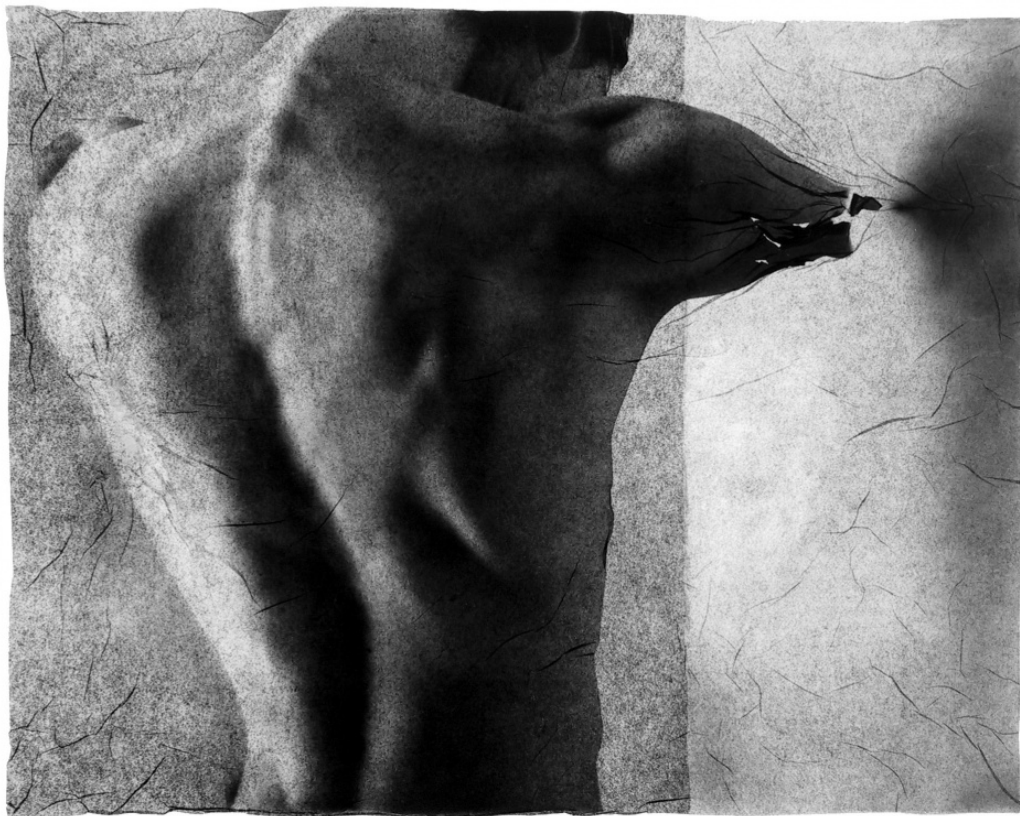
According to Momim. 'in the art of the past thirty years, the recurrence of the Gothic sensibility has often been characterised by an investigation of physical space, especially notions of imprisonment and claustrophobia'.¹⁷ A person penned in a cold, dark, small cell, abandoned to himself and left with only his own nightmares, with no possibility of escape, is a typical Gothic device for terror. The impossibility to escape creates a distressing, tormenting sense of breathlessness and claustrophobia. As well as physical imprisonment,



Michal Macků, *Glass Gellage No. XVII*, 2008

claustrophobia can also figure as a sense of powerlessness and an awareness of being trapped in a dark, inscrutable destiny.

One of his *Glass Gellage* pieces¹⁸, recalling Francis Bacon's paintings, represents a screaming human imprisoned in a cage. Suspended in the void and floating in an atmosphere of darkness, smoke and haze, the cage appears lightweight in contrast to the gravity of the subject-matter. Inside the cell, the figure is formed by the superimposition and layering of different images portraying the figure in different poses, at different times and intervals, conveying the visual and mental effect of a person contorting and writhing in agony or frustration within the endlessness of their pain. Moreover, the cubic shape of this glass sculpture, shielding the trapped image, better expresses the state of imprisonment.



Michal Macků, *Glass Gellage No. XVII*, 2008

Another Gothic theme traceable in Macků's works is the bodily dislocation and fragmentation, ascribable to the aesthetics of the grotesque. According to Grünenberg, 'Gothic comes in the shape of formless and horrendous images of mutilated and rotting bodies with limbs covered in boils and wounds.'¹⁹ His Gellages often present limbless or headless torsos crumbling into the void, with fragments floating and cutting the space around like splinters. Specifically, in *Gellage No. 36*²⁰ the lack of appendages suggests a difficulty in moving and operating, as well as the inability to communicate. Although surrounded by others, these friable and precarious figures are lonely, isolated from the others by the space which consumes them. Their flesh looks like it has been ravaged and eaten by a vacuous, fierce emptiness.



Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 47*, 1993

Moreover, many of Macků's works show repetition and rips of body parts, which in some cases are joined together creating uncanny conglomerates. As in *Gellage No. 47*²¹ and *Gellage No. 53*²², these compulsive lumps emphasise the tension and the strength of the human body and the force of the congregation. Furthermore, this compact union of limbs joined together into a single, cohesive organism conveys the idea of someone's constant, tenacious struggle to keep inside the innermost of his secret compulsions.



Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 53*, 1993

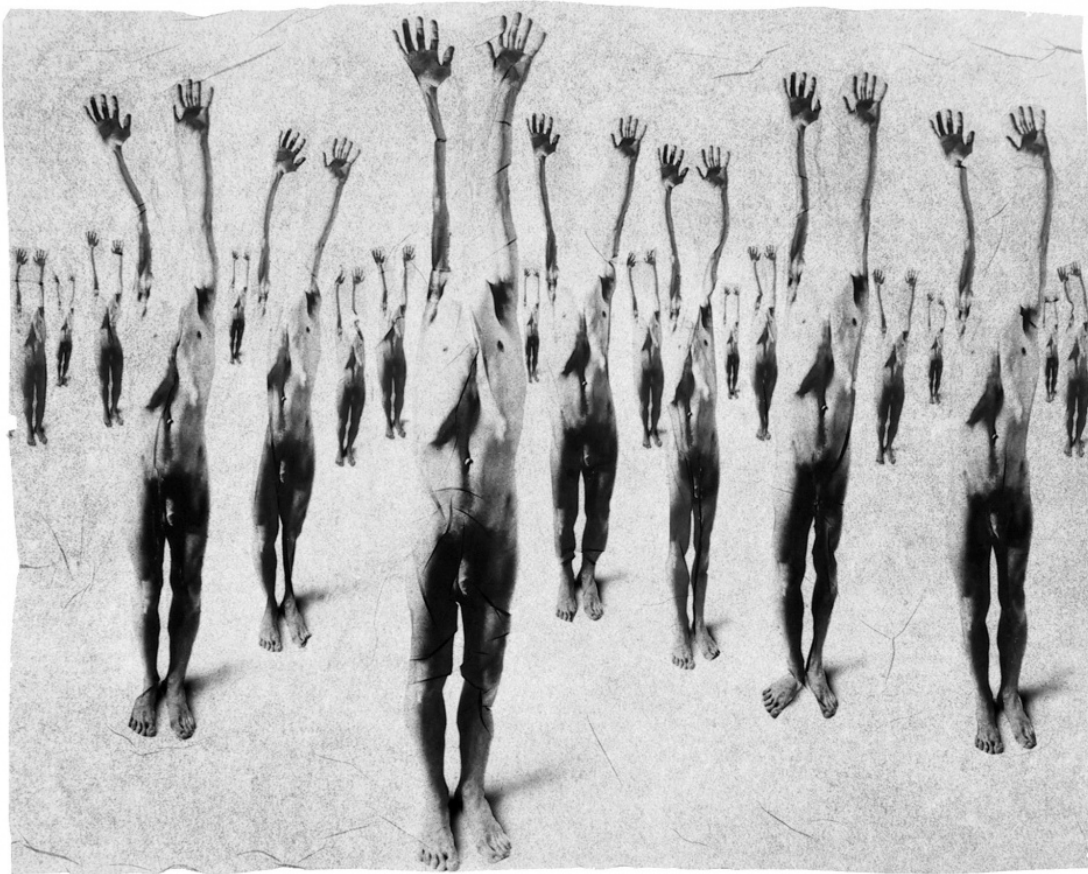
Commenting one collage made by the multiplication of his arms and hands, he said:

We normally see ourselves only as hands. That's what's in our operating field, so to say, what we see the most: the world around us and our hands. And, I at least, also take hands as a symbolic expression of the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds; with hands the spirit influences the surrounding, material world. That's for instance where the intertwined hands motive came from. There, the basic or fundamental function of the hands is turned upside down; the grasping of material becomes a limitation and forms a barrier; bars which don't let us into the open space behind, beyond the form.²³

In *Gellage No. 8*²⁴ and *Gellage No. 17*²⁵ a multitude of incredibly thin and lengthened figures stand noiselessly, raising their hands. Faint like anonymous shadows and surrounded by a grey, empty setting, they seem to belong to another dimension, out of place in space and time. This vision of men as small, trembling candles in the darkness evokes a sense of vulnerability and solitude. According to Birgus, the multiplication of the same identical picture creates a crowd of spectral, lonely people, acting in unison as a singular entity and losing their individuality in the throng.²⁶ The strong tension upwards of the bodies suggests the desire to escape from a miserable reality, while the open palms can be associated with openness and the longing for communication. Especially in these works, beside the Gothic connotation of his style, becomes evident Macků's consonance with the thematic of the Existentialism.

Another manipulative intervention on the celluloid giving shape to the Uncanny in Macků's artworks creates hybrid creatures which share human and monstrous features. The destructive pain disfigures the man's face into a cruel

grimace. His attempt to release the agony fails turning into a silent, glacial scream. The intensity of this image conveys a deep sense of desperation. The strange familiarity of this Uncanny figure deeply involves and touches us, making us feel and share his pain, which is also ours.



Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 17*, 1989

Conclusion

Despite the classical nature of the Gothic and the Sublime, these aesthetic categories are still relevant to analyse our contemporary world. Their thematic and motif of Uncanny and Terror have always been used by artists to describe and interpret the human condition. A Gothic sublimity has been traced in many artworks of the past as well as contemporary artists describing through their art the ancestral fear settled into our collective Unconscious.

In this essay, we have analysed the Burkean sublime, characterised by its nihilistic and existentialist aspects, as powerfully manifested in Michal Macků's artistic production through profoundly evocative and dark Gothic imagery. His original and engaging style expresses a postmodern sensibility, while the vision of his impalpable silhouettes delves into us and reflects our "self", like a simulacrum of our innermost being.

Notes:

- [1](#)Burke, E. (1757) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste*, Part One, Section VI, trans. A. Mills, New York: Harper, p. 51.
- [2](#)Morley, S. ed. (2010), *The Sublime*, London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- [3](#)Burke, E. (1757) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste*, Part One, Section VI, trans. A. Mills, New York: Harper, p. 72.
- [4](#)Ibid, p. 72-73.
- [5](#)Beville M. (2009) *Gothic post-modernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, New York: Rodopi.
- [6](#)Morris, D. B., (1985) 'Gothic Sublimity', in *New Literary History*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 306.
- [7](#)Freud, S. (1919) 'The Uncanny.', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol.17, trans. Strachey J. et al, London: Hogarth Press. p. 241.
- [8](#)Ibid.
- [9](#)Morris, D. B., (1985) 'Gothic Sublimity', in *New Literary History*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 307.
- [10](#)Momin, S. M. (2004) 'Beneath the Remains: What Magic in Myth?', *Whitney Biennial*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, p. 49.
- [11](#)<http://www.michal-macku.eu>
- [12](#)Ibid.
- [13](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 5*, 1989, 79x66cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.

- [14](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 6*, 1989, 66x79cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.
- [15](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 7*, 1989, 79x66cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.
- [16](#)Speer Lanced, (2002) 'The Unknowable scheme of things', *The journal of contemporary photography*, vol. 5.
- [17](#)Momin, S. M. (2004) 'Beneath the Remains: What Magic in Myth?', *Whitney Biennial*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, p. 47.
- [18](#)Michal Macků, *Glass Gellage No. XVII*, 2008, 29x39x4cm, Glass and combined technique.
- [19](#)Williams, G. ed (2007) *The Gothic*, London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge: The MIT Press, p.38.
- [20](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 36*, 2008, 66x79cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.
- [21](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 47*, 1993, 66x79cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.
- [22](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 53*, 1993, 79x66cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.
- [23](#)<http://www.michal-macku.eu/>
- [24](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 8*, 1989, 66x79cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.
- [25](#)Michal Macků, *Gellage No. 17*, 1989, 66x79cm, manipulated silver print on paper, limited edition of 12 copies.
- [26](#)<http://www.michal-macku.eu>

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Web pages:

<http://www.michal-macku.eu/>

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