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EDITORIAL NOTE

Welcome to Issue #19 of *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*. This issue is long overdue, so we are particularly delighted to see it finally dragging its pallid flesh out of the dank cavern of the early 2020s and into the light of day.

Issue #19 is the cursed progeny of our new editorial team, Janice Deitner, Orla Donnelly, and Dara Downey. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our excellent contributors for all their hard work and patience over the past few years. The last decade or so has been a difficult one for academics and creative practitioners alike, and the advent of large language models and generative AI is only one of many crises facing the arts and humanities in Ireland and globally. While we are interested in exploring post-humanity, technology, and various digital futures through a gothic lens, we remain committed to fostering and promoting human creativity and scholarship to counteract the threat these new technologies pose to our fields.

In addition to the destabilising influence of changing technologies, the everyday running of the *IJGHS* was severely impacted by changes to the Irish postal system, which has made it prohibitively expensive and administratively onerous to receive and distribute hard copies of books for review. It's been especially disappointing to no longer be in a position to send physical copies of academic books (prices for which often hit three figures) to PhD students and scholars who, like ourselves, are precariously employed on hourly paid, casualised, and short-term academic contracts - or no contracts at all. The scattered and unpredictable nature of such work, both during and since the pandemic lockdowns earlier in the decade, has directly and negatively impacted our own capacity to achieve the sustained focus that is needed to bring a journal issue to fruition in a timely manner. This situation has been extremely frustrating for ourselves, our contributors and peer reviewers, and our prospective readers, many of whom will also be experiencing uncertainty in terms of employment, housing, healthcare, and simply planning for the future. Thank you for sticking with us while we put things back together!

As a result of these delays, the issue that follows this editorial is a sort of time capsule, especially in regard to the reviews. In these pages, you'll be reminded of some of what you might have been reading or watching during those long, strange months of social isolation. You may also, however, come across texts and ideas that speak directly to the present moment. In particular, the articles and reviews featured in this issue seem to return again and again to topics

relating to authenticity and originality, particularly via the very gothic motifs of doubles and doubling, motifs that speak to anxieties around the permeability and autonomy of the self. In doing so, our contributors highlight the ways in which gothic and horror continue to help complicate and resist apparently natural constructions of authority, whether narrative, textual, or socio-cultural. They also draw attention to interactions (progressive, horrific, or indeed both) between different media, genres, bodies, species, and psyches, in ways that were echoed in a number of the discussions that took place at the International Gothic Association conference in Hull in August 2026, organised by longtime *IJGHS* contributor Kevin Corstorphine and his team.

Consequently, both the contents of this issue and its monstrously protracted birth pangs point to the extreme vulnerability of digital media and scholarly legacies in the current era. We have been repeatedly hampered by systems that routinely shut down the email addresses of academics who complete their studies or who come to the end of casualised contracts, so that prospective contributors and peer reviewers become impossible to contact. Around us, other publishing platforms have been closing, as streaming services remove films and series without warning, and precariously employed scholars lose library access and connections with formal and informal networks of peers and mentors. The threads of institutional memory are therefore often cut short, and lines of communication are all too easily broken. All of this is, of course, very gothic, but it also makes our job both more challenging and more urgent.

In order to foster those networks outside of the walls of academia, and to push back against the loss of accumulated knowledge and know-how, we have also recently been developing the Irish Network for Gothic and Horror Studies, a growing community of fans, scholars, creators, and genre-curious people that aims to promote and foster the breadth and vibrancy of gothic and horror fiction, media, events, and scholarship throughout Ireland and beyond. The network was initially set up in 2017 and relaunched in 2025. Our monthly film club, organised by Máiréad Casey, has provided a space for online discussions of easily accessible films, from *Gaslight* (1944) to *Frankenstein* (2025), since its inception in summer 2025. We have a discussion board for all things gothic and horror, including an ongoing short-story book club. We also send out a monthly email newsletter. You can sign up for our mailing list by clicking here or send us items for the newsletter at INGHS@irishgothichorror.com. One of our aims is to forge closer connections between the network and the journal. In doing so, we aim to build the network as a platform for people to promote their work, find out about new releases and events, and engage with like-minded people.

Finally, many thanks to all those who have submitted articles and reviews for upcoming issues - you will be hearing from us shortly. The range and volume of the submissions we receive is a testament to the vibrancy and diversity of work on horror and the gothic on this island and worldwide. Happy Halloween, a chairde!

Dara, Janice, and Orla

Authenticity and the Gothic in Paul La Farge's *The Night Ocean*

Samira Aziz

Paul La Farge's novel *The Night Ocean* (2017), published in the year following Donald Trump's election, engages with the ideas of truth and authenticity through one of the characters, L. C. Spinks, who, to borrow the words of a White House aide during the Bush administration, 'creates his own realities' through a fraudulent cocktail of historical facts and his own imagination, the outcome of which is misleading and damaging.[1] *The Night Ocean* counters Lucas Townsend's claim in a discussion of H. P. Lovecraft's legacy that 'post-truth' instead of 'post-postmodernism' or 'metamodernism' may be the most accurate sobriquet to describe the contemporary. In particular, he highlights 'the twenty-first century cultural movement's noticeable absence of empirical (or "true") points of reference in the creation of "convincingly true" – but objectively false – narratives by mass media producers, political leaders, and celebrity figures'.[2] He continues: 'The twenty-first century feels like a Baudrillardian simulation [...] in which the origins of a "proven" fact and the research to support it are instead based upon simulacra – the replacement of the actual objects of study with decidedly unreal and distorted versions of themselves'.[3] Townsend's observations are astute as 'post-truth' became a commonplace term shortly after Trump's election, when his representatives boldly and publicly proposed the concept of 'alternative facts', bizarre versions of historical events that have nothing to do with fact. One famous example of this is Kellyanne Conway insisting in an NBC interview on the 'alternative fact' that the size of the crowd during Trump's inauguration was indeed the largest in history, an assertion 'utterly false and easily disprovable'.[4] As Grant Kien observes, 'America is clearly living in a "post-truth" world' where truth is malleable and counterfactual, and historical narratives can be challenged, often in strange ways.[5]

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[1] Timothy Noah, 'How the Bush White House Synthesizes Reality', *Slate*, 22 October 2004 <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2004/10/how-the-bush-white-house-synthesizes-reality.html> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[2] Lucas Townsend, 'Reading Lovecraft in an Era of Post-Truth', *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*, 8.1 (2021), 91-103 (p. 92).
[3] Townsend, 'Reading Lovecraft', p. 92.
[4] Aaron Blake, 'Kellyanne Conway's Legacy: The 'Alternative Facts'-ification of the GOP', *The Washington Post*, 24 August 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/24/kellyanne-conways-legacy-alternative-facts-ification-gop/> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[5] Richard Hand and Danielle Hancock, 'Beware the Untruths: Podcast Audio Horror in Post-Truth America', in *Make America Hate Again: Trump-Era Horror and the Politics of Fear*, ed. by Victoria McCollum (Taylor & Francis, 2019), pp. 165-74 (p. 165).

According to Amina Hussain, '[p]ost-truth today as it exist [*sic*], is an extreme manipulation of the fertile grounds laid by postmodern theories'.[6] Instead of arguing that the 'post' in 'post-truth' implies 'that we are past the era of truth', she refers to the 'prevalent marginalisation and trivialisation of truth'.[7] Post-truth is one of the most damaging legacies left behind by the now-historicised postmodernism, notorious for problematising truth and reality. Similar to post-truth, postmodern history examines how the historian's prejudices and decisions shape the 'facts' or the 'narrativization' of the past, as Hayden White puts it. From a postmodern perspective, he argues that facts contain no meaning in themselves; rather, it is the historian who bestows meaning through the 'narrativization' of the past, and this process is subject to the historian's own biases in choosing which facts to include in the historical record, indicating that history is not the narrative of a singular truth but of multiple truths.[8] While such a (re)imagining establishes history and historiography as 'an open or organic system,[9] there is also the risk or the possibility that the historian may, in his interpretation of 'facts', impose his own impressions. Consequently, he may come off as 'disrespectful'.[10]

Countering these postmodern mediations of the underlying narrative structures of historiography, Ihab Hassan affirms, '[h]istory, too, requires our tact, our respect'.[11] Unfortunately, post-truth politicians like Trump often lack this tact and respect, creating a destabilising reality. Post-truth is a disturbing exposition of how postmodernism, to use a gothic expression, thins the veil between reality and imagination. Indeed, post-truth, as a defining characteristic of Trump's presidency, epitomises postmodernism's 'gothic underside'.[12] That postmodernism would harmoniously intersect with the gothic seems only natural as both categories challenge authoritative versions of history and reality, in effect destabilizing the 'real' as we know it. In fact, one criticism Fredric Jameson had was that postmodernism championed a 'historical deafness', where history had lost its significance and was now only

[6] Amina Hussain, 'Theorising Post-Truth: A Postmodern Phenomenon', *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 42 (2019), pp. 150-62 (p. 150).
[7] Hussain, 'Theorising Post-Truth', p. 151.
[8] Hayden White, 'The Historical Artifact as a Literary Text', in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (John Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 81-100 (pp. 83-84).
[9] Mehdi Ghassemi, 'Revisiting History in Hayden White's Philosophy', in *SAGE Open*, 4.3 (2014), pp. 1-7 (p. 3), doi:10.1177/2158244014542585.
[10] White, 'The Historical Artifact', p. 54.
[11] Ihab Hassan, 'Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust', in *Modern Greek Studies*, 11 (2003), pp. 303-16 (p. 305).
[12] Martin Fradley and John A. Riley, '"I Don't Understand How This Keeps Happening ... Over and Over Again': Trumpism, Uncanny Repetition, and *Twin Peaks: The Return*', in *Make America Hate Again*, pp. 195-210 (p. 196).

something to be consumed for entertainment.[13] This 'weakening historicity' and 'new depthlessness', terms that have since been used to define postmodernism, can also equally describe the gothic. As the late Allan Lloyd Smith observes, both the gothic and postmodern fiction are 'a playful admixture of inaccurate histories' with little regard for authenticity.[14] In particular, Catherine Spooner notes that the gothic 'has always been […] especially [about] fake history'.[15]

In interrogating the authoritative natures of established historiography, both the gothic and postmodernism expose '[t]he construction of fake histories', very much akin to alternative facts.[16] The gothic and the postmodern collapse the real and the fictional, the known and the unknown. In fact, many of the prime examples of historiographic metafiction have essential gothic elements. K. Kannan Prasad and G. Baskaran describe Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) as bearing the 'postmodern characteristic of a gothic text which questions everything [...] held as truth'.[17] Ashleigh Prosser argues that Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), a postmodern text, is 'a Gothic narrative of uncanny returns in which the spectres of the past are returned to the present',[18] subverting 'historical reality'.[19] In the same way, the gothic disrupts secure boundaries between the certain and uncertain; it 'exploits the audience's desire for the real, while simultaneously providing very little solid information'.[20] By 'question[ing] its own veracity', Julia Round notes, the gothic 'interrogat[es] the nature of fact and fiction'.[21]

It can be argued that post-truth implicitly serves the same function in the twenty-first century, as it ironically creates an illusion of authenticity. Sam Browse argues that 'post-truth' rose from postmodern depthlessness and calls it 'mimetic authenticity', which is 'constructed' or 'performed', and the speaker's personal details are used for material advantages.[22] In other

[13] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991) p. xi.
[14] Allan Lloyd-Smith, 'Postmodernism/Gothicism', in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. by Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage (Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 6-19 (pp. 10-11).
[15] Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 28.
[16] Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, p. 38.
[17] K. Kannan Prasad and G. Baskaran, 'Gothic Elements in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*', *Language in India*, 13 (2013), pp. 485-95 (p. 493).
[18] Ashleigh Prosser, 'No Place Like Home: The Chronotope of the Haunted House in Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee*', *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*, 2 (2015), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).
[19] Prosser, 'No Place Like Home', p. 3.
[20] Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, pp. 40-41.
[21] Julia Round, 'Gothic and the Graphic Novel', in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 335-49 (p. 342).
[22] Sam Browse, 'Between Truth, Sincerity, and Satire: Post-Truth Politics and the Rhetoric of Authenticity', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 167-81 (p. 171).

words, it is an act. These details are 'fabrication[s]' and 'complete opposite[s] of the truth'.[23] The speakers' own beliefs influence the 'truthiness' of their statements, annexing 'an explicitly moral dimension to' the 'negation of reality'.[24] What follows is 'dissatisfaction and impatience with the skin-deep performances of sincerity and authenticity', and 'a surface ringing hollow'.[25]

Ironically, as Browse continues, post-truth leaders, despite their 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', are popular because they are seemingly 'plain-speaking, gutsy and authentic', which shows a 'hunger' for 'reality', to borrow from David Shields, in our culture.[26] Browse goes on to use the example of Jeremy Corbyn, the former British Labour Party leader who rose to prominence during the same time as Trump, arguing that post-truth has shifted from the postmodern mimetic authenticity to the more recent depth-bearing 'curated authenticity'.[27] Curated authenticity is markedly altruistic and has to do with genuine conviction in the ideals one is upholding. It 'is about presenting and empathising with the "real" experiences of others'.[28] Curated authenticity, as exemplified by Corbyn, endorses objective reality over subjective perceptions, unlike post-truth.

Indeed, the loosening of postmodernism's grasp at the advent of the twenty-first century saw a return of authenticity, realism, and historicism, as a number of cultural and literary scholars have observed. Linda Hutcheon herself admitted that postmodernism was 'over' and that '[p]ost-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it and name it for the twenty-first century'.[29] Rising to the challenge, Dutch theorists Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen suggested the term 'metamodern' to describe the twenty-first century's 'dominant cultural logic'.[30] Metamodernism, they argue, is characterised by 'a kind of informed naivety' or 'a pragmatic idealism'.[31] As they continue, metamodernism 'oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity'.[32] In an article

[23] Browse, 'Between Truth, Sincerity, and Satire', p. 175.
[24] Browse, p. 174.
[25] Browse, p. 176.
[26] Browse, p. 168. See David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (Penguin Books, 2011).
[27] Browse, p. 168.
[28] Browse, pp. 178-179.
[29] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Routledge, 2002), p. 181.
[30] Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism*, pp. 1-19 (p. 4).
[31] Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2 (2010), pp. 1-14 (p. 5).
[32] Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', pp. 5-6.

co-authored with Alison Gibbons, Vermeulen and van den Akker posit that '[m]etamodernist texts […] produce a "reality effect" […] and ironically they create this effect by using many of the same postmodern devices', allowing for what they call 'depthiness', which counters postmodernism's lack of centre.[33]

If postmodernism is indeed de-centred, then La Farge conversely emphasises the need for a centre and for historical depth in *The Night Ocean*.[34] He achieves this by using a frame structure. Traditionally frame structures in postmodern and gothic literature such as Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* (1898) subtly remind readers that they are reading a piece of fiction. As Marshall Brown points out, frames can play havoc with any 'real experience' of history, since they impose a distance between the reader and the past.[35] La Farge himself admits a partiality towards the frame structure and gothic narrative techniques.[36] Conversely, instead of problematising truth and reality – and specifically historicity – La Farge uses what can be called 'anchors' in the extratextual world to prioritise historical verisimilitude. For instance, as I explore over the course of this essay, La Farge refers to the World Wars and McCarthyism several times. These 'anchors' remind readers that they are reading a novel about real people and that there is a historical basis for events in the narrative. As such, I argue that it would be incorrect to read *The Night Ocean* as a postmodern text, as does Matthias Regan, and I believe that it should instead be understood as a metamodernist text.[37]

La Farge never uses the term 'metamodernism' explicitly, but his preoccupation with authenticity identifies him as a metamodernist writer. In the last two decades, La Farge has written a number of historical books such as *Haussmann, or the Distinction* (2002) and *The Facts of Winter* (2011); despite the historical settings and intensive research that went into these novels, they were far from being historically accurate or authentic. For instance, the titular character of *Haussmann* is based on Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-91), who is credited with the construction of modern Paris. However, his love interest, Madeleine, is completely fictional. Even the blurb of the novel's Macmillan edition states that it is 'steeped in history [though] not bound by facts'. Meanwhile, *The Facts of Winter* is a translation of surreal poems

[33] Gibbons and others, 'Reality Beckons: Metamodernist Depthiness Beyond Panfictionality', *European Journal of English Studies* 23 (2019), pp. 172-89 (p. 174).
[34] Richard Hand and Danielle Hancock, 'Beware the Untruths: Podcast Audio Horror in Post-Truth America', in *Make America Hate Again*, pp. 165-74 (p. 174).
[35] Marshall Brown, *The Gothic Text* (Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 110.
[36] '"I Think We're Going to Need Some Scary Monsters": An Interview with Picador Professor Paul La Farge', *Aspeers*, 10 (2017) <http://www.aspeers.com/sites/default/files/pdf/AV.pdf> [accessed 4 July 2022].
[37] Matthias Regan, 'Weird Fiction Review #4: *The Night Ocean*', *Matthiasregan.org* <https://matthiasregan.org/tag/the-night-ocean/> [accessed 18 January 2024].

by Paul Poissel, a little-known French poet. The book's blurb states that 'it is a fictional account of the imaginary loves of people who may or may not be real'. La Farge concedes to the historical inaccuracy and ambiguity of these texts and distinguishes them from *The Night Ocean*, in which 'historical accuracy, even in the smallest details, or maybe especially in them, *is* important because the book is trying to create a feeling of authenticity, and it's also about authenticity […] so I had a real urge to get things as right as I could'.[38]

At the heart of *The Night Ocean*'s plot is a preoccupation with the ambiguous relationship between Lovecraft and his much-younger protégé Robert Barlow, posing the question of whether they were lovers or just friends. The issue is potentially sensational, but La Farge handles the matter with tact and objectivity, as I demonstrate over the course of this essay. The frame narrative, focusing on the main character Marina Willet, encloses a series of nested narratives, creating a chain of transmission where she, a psychiatrist, begins by talking about her husband Charlie, who is suspected of having committed suicide after escaping from a mental hospital. Embedded in her frame is Charlie's narrative, which reveals how he became obsessed with the Lovecraft/Barlow connection. His interest is further piqued when he discovers a forgotten book called the *Erotonomicon*, a proven forgery by an unknown author named L. C. Spinks, whose narrative is embedded in Charlie's. Spinks' narratives are presented as transcripts of audio interviews, wherein he falsely claims to be the deceased Barlow (he, as Barlow, claims to have faked his own death), having had a clandestine romantic relationship with Lovecraft.

A superficial consideration of the chain of narration appears to encourage analyses predicated on postmodernism. Reviewers such as Matthew Keeley,[39] Amy Brady,[40] and John Copenhaver[41] believe that the chain demonstrates postmodern infinite regression or *mise en abŷme*. The chain of transmission can be understood in the following visual representation:

Marina → Charlie → Spinks → Lovecraft

[38] Eric Farwell, 'An Interview with Paul La Farge', 27 June 2017, *TriQuarterly* <https://triquarterly.lb.mtiapp.northwestern.edu/interviews/interview-paul-la-farge> [accessed 12 July 2024], emphasis in original.
[39] Matthew Keeley, 'The Depths of Paul La Farge's *The Night Ocean*', 24 March 2017, *Reactor* <https://reactormag.com/book-reviews-paul-la-farges-the-night-ocean/> [accessed 31 August 2024].
[40] Amy Brady, '"The Night Ocean" Brings Lovecraft Back From The Dead', 8 March 2017, *Chicago Review of Books* <https://chireviewofbooks.com/2017/03/08/the-night-ocean-brings-lovecraft-back-from-the-dead/> [accessed 31 August 2024].
[41] John Copenhaver, '*The Night Ocean* Excavates One Man's Obsession With H. P. Lovecraft', 3 August 2017, *Lambda Literary* <https://lambdaliterary.org/2017/08/the-night-ocean-by-paul-la-farge/> [accessed 31 August 2024].

If Marina represents an initial certainty about history, she paradoxically finds herself 'los[ing] her rational distance from the events'[42] as her encompassing frame moves further away from those of Charlie, Spinks, and finally Lovecraft, who, as this essay demonstrates, represents a complete dissolution of history. However, a reversal of the chain of narration emphasises historical depth and authenticity:

> Lovecraft → Spinks → Charlie → Marina

Although, even in this reading, Lovecraft remains inaccessible because he is ventriloquised by Spinks, the initial historical vacuity becomes more and more real: Spinks remains a shady figure, but Charlie's motives become more comprehensible, and finally, Marina, despite never completely recovering the truth, represents a growing historical certitude.

In other words, the metamodern chain of transmission depicts a progression of historical perspectives, beginning with Lovecraft, a nihilist horror writer of the Modernist era, and then Spinks, who is like a postmodern historian narrating an (inaccurate) version of the past disguised as historical truth. Following Spinks is Charlie, who suffers from actually believing postmodern history as truth. It is through the characters of Spinks and Charlie that La Farge explores the historian's ethics and responsibilities, the problems of imagination reconstructing the past. La Farge demonstrates the negative outcomes of the imposition of the historian's own views on a past that defies understanding. I conclude the essay by discussing Marina as an antithesis to Lovecraft's nihilism, as she strives to retain her rationality to find closure and meaning in an uncertain world – and perhaps even succeeds. Through Marina's narrative that closes the story, the novel ends with the acknowledgement of depression in the failure to understand the past, but proposes hope, altruism, and being grounded in the present as a remedy for despair and despondence.

Lovecraft

> What I do know is that Charlie was planning to write a profile of Magnus, but then, one day in the summer of 2006, the two of them started talking about H. P. Lovecraft, whose stories, it turned out, they both admired: 'Who's that?' I asked. "You don't know?" Charlie said. 'Only the greatest American horror writer since Poe.'[43]

As a classic gothic writer, Lovecraft is often credited with inventing the genres of weird fiction

[42] Copenhaver, '*The Night Ocean*', n.p.
[43] Paul La Farge, *The Night Ocean* (Penguin, 2017), p. 11.

and cosmic horror, offshoots of mainstream gothic.[44] Fiction that sits within these subgenres tends to be dark and despondent, underscoring the insignificance of humanity in the grand scheme of the universe. According to Kevin Corstorphine, 'Lovecraft's own conception of horror was shaped by developments in science and culture [...]. His writing demonstrates a horror at the lack of meaning in the universe, as it is playing out the nihilism predicted by Nietzsche's madman […] as he sinks into despair'.[45] Lovecraft is best known for his Cthulhu mythos, which comprise stories that Charlie succinctly summarises in *The Night Ocean* as being 'about a universe inhabited by powerful alien beings, who feel about humanity the way a person coming home from a long trip might feel about an infestation of spiders'.[46] Lovecraft considered himself to be a literary descendent of Edgar Allen Poe.[47] Like Poe, he was not well-known 'during his lifetime',[48] but now, after his death, he is considered as one of the most noteworthy writers of the twentieth century, with his legacy manifest in a variety of fiction and other media.[49]

Creative authors have generally sidestepped writing about Lovecraft as a historical figure, instead preferring to engage with Lovecraft's literary creations. For example, Stephen King's short story 'Crouch End' (1980), which is set in the real London suburb of the same name, is explicitly positioned within Lovecraft's fictional universe, depicting the malevolent entity Shub-Niggurath, who consumes many of the human characters and drives others insane. In T. E. D. Klein's short story 'Black Man with a Horn' (1980), the anonymous protagonist discovers, to his horror, the real existence of the Tcho-Tcho tribe (which he had previously thought to be another one of Lovecraft's fictional creations), who regard the mysterious figure of a frightening black man as a harbinger of doom. The protagonist tries desperately to distance himself from this man, who repeatedly threatens him, but ultimately realises that there is no escape. An earlier novel, Colin Wilson's *The Philosopher's Stone* (1969), invokes various motifs from the Cthulhu mythos; it narrates the story of two researchers who make a horrifying discovery about the history of humanity's origins. In fact, as this example suggests, Lovecraft's

[44] Acep Hael, 'What Does "Cosmic Horror" Mean? Five Writers Weigh In', *The Lovecraft Ezine*, 13 May 2016 <https://lovecraftzine.com/2016/05/13/what-does-cosmic-horror-mean-five-horror-writers-weigh-in/> [accessed 19 January 2024].
[45] Kevin Corstorphine, 'Introduction', in *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, ed. by Kevin Corstorphine and Laura R. Kremmel (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-17 (pp. 4-5).
[46] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, pp. 13-14.
[47] James Machin, 'Lovecraft, Decadence, and Aestheticism', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1223-37 (p. 1224).
[48] Townsend, 'Reading Lovecraft', p. 92.
[49] La Farge, 'The Complicated Friendship of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert Barlow, One of His Biggest Fans', *The New Yorker*, 9 March 2017 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-complicated-friendship-of-h-p-lovecraft-and-robert-barlow-one-of-his-biggest-fans> [accessed 30 March 2022].

fiction itself often depicts a mysterious and terrifying past that invades the present, pushing characters to the edge of sanity.

Critics like David Punter note that Lovecraft's preoccupation with hidden histories positions the past as harbouring disturbing secrets that carry destructive implications for the present. Punter asserts that Lovecraft's writing 'hinges on an unassimilable fear of the past […] symbolised in terms of unholy aspiration after forbidden knowledge […] imaged by Lovecraft in a whole range of invented books'.[50] In a study of what she categorises as 'romances of the archive', Suzanne Keen observes that Lovecraft's protagonists are often academics who have discovered an unexpected, shocking truth after meticulous archival research, and they try to make sense of what they have learnt.[51] As Keen continues, the 'over-curious researchers' manifest an altered 'state of mind, from rationality and scepticism to horrified belief', implying that it is best to avoid stirring up the past. Indeed, Lovecraft's protagonists realise that terminating the transmission of knowledge about these entities prevents them from resurfacing.[52]

Lovecraft's novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1941), published posthumously, is a prominent example of the focus in his fiction on the dangers involved in digging up the past. 'A parable on the perils of research', as Marina describes it in *The Night Ocean*, the novella is a pastiche of different documentary sources such as newspaper advertisements, historical accounts, and letters.[53] *Charles Dexter Ward* is broken down into smaller sections, each with its own title, a style which La Farge adapts to both create a gothic frame story and pay homage to Lovecraft. Lovecraft's narrative is told in the third person by a psychiatrist called Dr Marinus Willet, who has become concerned with one of his patients, the eponymous Charles Dexter Ward, a young man from a respectable family.[54] Charles Ward has recently gained an unhealthy interest in one of his ancestors, Joseph Curwen, who practised black magic at the time of the American Revolution. When the townspeople realised what was going on, they executed Curwen and his fellow necromancers. Some of Curwen's papers survive, despite instructions to destroy all of them. After gaining access to these remaining documents, Charles begins to dabble in the dark arts and succeeds in resurrecting his evil ancestor. Unfortunately for Charles, he dies shortly after Curwen takes possession of his body. Dr Willet is ultimately

[50] David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: Volume 2: The Modern Gothic*, 2nd edn (Longman, 1996), p. 39.
[51] Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 64 and p. 78.
[52] Keen, *Romances of the Archive*, p. 26.
[53] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 24.
[54] The similarity between the names Marina and Marinus is very interesting, but the novel does not acknowledge it.

able to destroy Curwen and prevent his diabolical plans. Notwithstanding Willet's success, the novella ends without any note of elation or triumph. However, as elaborated on below, the final section that La Farge adds in his novel goes beyond postmodern preoccupations as it ends on a more hopeful note.

Charles Dexter Ward is only one of the fictional works that influenced La Farge's book, the other one being a short story that Lovecraft wrote with Barlow called 'The Night Ocean' (1936), from which La Farge's novel takes its title.[55] 'The Night Ocean' tells the story of a young man holidaying alone in a seaside town when he suddenly happens upon petrifying humanoid creatures who dwell in the sea and quite possibly consume human flesh. Marina believes the story's main theme is that the sea will outlive mankind as it is eternal. The main focus of 'The Night Ocean' is the protagonist's isolation and solitude, a depiction that can be understood as reflecting Lovecraft's own solitary life. Historically, Lovecraft was an eccentric homebody, perhaps what would be called 'anti-social' today. During his lifetime, he had two important attachments. One was with his wife of two years, a Ukrainian immigrant called Sonia Greene, who would later go on to pen one of his biographies, *The Private Life of H. P. Lovecraft*, published in 1985. The other consequential relationship Lovecraft had was with Barlow, who was sixteen years his junior. Despite the notable age gap, the two formed a long-term attachment, regularly corresponded with each other, and embarked on joint literary endeavours.

Many Lovecraft fans and scholars have debated the enigmatic and ambiguous nature of their relationship. Some opine that for the younger Barlow, Lovecraft was a paternal figure, rendering theirs a platonic friendship. Others strongly believe that the two were lovers and turn to their letters and stories to support this claim. Punter notes, perhaps with a touch of irony, that while Lovecraft's anxieties pertained to race and sexuality, '[t]here are almost no sexual references in Lovecraft's […] stories', and this may be due to Lovecraft's ambiguous sexuality.[56] La Farge, however, concedes that an intimate relationship between the two men was unlikely because the 'salient feature of his [Lovecraft's] sexuality [...] seems to be how indifferent he was to it'.[57] Nevertheless, his fondness for Barlow contradicts his 'absolute hatred of the world', a sentiment that Spinks echoes towards the end of *The Night Ocean*.[58]

[55] Ironically, as La Farge notes in 'The Complicated Friendship', while Barlow may have been the main author of the story, it is 'attributed primarily to Lovecraft now' (n. p.).
[56] Punter, *The Literature of Terror: Volume 2*, p. 43.
[57] La Farge, 'Complicated Friendship,' n. p.
[58] Machin, 'Lovecraft, Decadence, and Aestheticism', p. 1224.

'It's the Riddle of the Spinks'

> The video is unsettling. It's like watching a soul dissolve into dust before your eyes – like watching a mask drop and finding no face behind it. The only way to understand it is to think that Spinks didn't care anymore about how he was seen; he only wanted to be seen. But, in fact, the last known photograph of Spinks was taken in front of the CBS studio on Park Avenue, before the interview. He is wearing dark glasses and looking anxiously at something that's happening up the street. A stranger's arm obscures most of his torso. It adds to the impression he gave in the interview, that he was someone who had never really been.[59]

The various roles that Spinks plays throughout the story makes it difficult for Marina and the reader to understand his true self. Indeed, as Marina notes when Charlie and she first 'encounter' Spinks on a video, he appears, as she says in the above quotation. to be 'someone who had never really been'. However, his chilling revelation to Marina after they meet in person that he 'hated [...] [e]veryone in the world' alerts her early on to the fact that he is, in her words, a 'biographical vampire' who steals the lives of others to make himself look more interesting.[60] The possible reason behind this is complex as it seems he wants some form of revenge for his own perceived 'ordinariness'. To achieve his goals, Spinks researches the depths of history to tell credible 'autobiographies' that others will believe. Marina calls these stories 'roles' because for him, as his notes reveal, they are mere live performances and not the disclosure of facts. It is noteworthy that his surname rhymes with *sphinx*. The pun is not lost on Charlie, who jokes to Marina, 'It's the riddle of the Spinks'.[61] When we meet Spinks in the novel, he appears to be a solitary old man (much like Lovecraft) with no apparent significant relationships. He is relatively unknown, first having found some fame with the publication of the *Erotonomicon*, a proven forgery, and then with the help of Charlie, who interviews him about his relationship with Lovecraft, and subsequently Marina, who tracks him down to learn what happened to Charlie, unwittingly giving him the attention that he craves.

To garner this attention, Spinks exploits historical ambivalences for his own gain. The stories that he tells Charlie and then Marina are, in fact, just stories. His historical knowledge embellishes his performed 'autobiographies', the stories that he tells Charlie and Marina, into credible accounts, with which he manages to dupe them both. For example, when he speaks to Charlie, he purports to be the real Robert Barlow and claims to have faked his death in 1951. Following this staged suicide, Spinks tells them that, under the guise of Barlow, he emigrated to Canada to live under a false identity. He continues to weave in a variety of factual details of

[59] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 76.
[60] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 373 and p. 379.
[61] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 77.

Barlow's life, mingled with the products of his own imagination. For example, he casually refers to having known Alfred Kroeber, a renowned American anthropologist who the historical Barlow studied with, and Kroeber's daughter Ursula Le Guin, who would later go on to become a famous science-fiction and fantasy writer.[62] When he talks to Marina, Spinks concocts a more colourful version of his own life, painting himself as a Jewish child refugee landing on Canadian shores to escape anti-Semitic persecution in his native Hungary. While both accounts turn out to be false, ironically, it is through the character of Spinks that *The Night Ocean* dramatises its commitment to the methodology of historical realism, highlighting the importance of an ethical engagement with historical sources. There were indeed Jewish children who were sent to other countries so that they could escape persecution in their own, and this experience left a lifelong emotional scar on them. Spinks uses that trauma for entertainment purposes, an act that the novel condemns as it is disrespectful to both history and the emotional damage that real people suffer.

The reason it is so easy to believe what Spinks says is that he 'adorns' his stories with verifiable historical facts, both in the context of the novel and the real world. When he first claims to be Lovecraft's secret paramour, his account is filled with so many historical facts about both Barlow and Lovecraft and their relationship that it is difficult not to take him seriously. For example, he casually mentions that he (as Barlow) was on first-name terms with Lovecraft, and Lovecraft often signed off in letters as 'Old Gent', which can be seen in their published correspondence.[63] Spinks even inserts Lovecraft's idiosyncratic love language to depict a moment of emotional connection to authenticate his story:

> RHB: [...] Howard wrapped his pinky around mine, and said ...
> CW: Umph.
> RHB: Umph.[64]

As a unique gesture of affection, this 'umph' is recognisable to Lovecraft fans and historians in both the extratextual world and the world of the narrative. This detail also appears in the *Erotonomicon*, making the text look genuine: 'Then in jest I took hold on Bobby's pinky finger and said, "Umph"'.[65] This episode correlates with Sonia Greene's revelation in Lovecraft's biography, which La Farge paraphrases: apparently, 'Lovecraft never kissed Sonia, never said

[62] While Barlow and Kroeber did indeed know each other, it is unknown if Barlow ever interacted with Le Guin.
[63] H. P. Lovecraft, *O Fortunate Floridian: H. P. Lovecraft's Letters to R. H. Barlow*, ed. by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (University of Tampa Press, 2007).
[64] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 123.
[65] La Farge, p. 58.

he loved her. When he wanted to express affection, he wrapped his pinky-finger around hers and said, "Umph".'[66] Lovecraft's alleged non-heteronormative sexuality and its 'disclosure' in the *Erotonomicon* foreshadows scandal and chaos for both Spinks and other writers who were inspired by Lovecraft.

Spinks' narrative is also set in the recognisable context of mid-twentieth-century America. For instance, in the early 1950s, politicians such as Senators Joseph McCarthy and Clyde Hooey (to whom the novel refers by name) were involved in an anti-Communist witch hunt, which very nearly ruined the lives of many innocent people such as Charlie Chaplin, Langston Hughes, and Leonard Bernstein. The precursor of these actions is HUAC or the House Un-American Activities Committee (also mentioned in the novel), whose 'work served as a blueprint for the tactics employed by US Senator Joseph McCarthy'.[67] In *The Night Ocean*, HUAC turns its investigation on horror writers, accusing them of Communism and socialism because of their divergent political affiliations. Thus, the horror community becomes vulnerable; as the novel briefly explains, HUAC was 'roaming the nation, looking in ever less likely places for signs of Communist conspiracy. Homosexuality was, as everyone knew, a gateway to Communism.'[68] Such an inquisition of horror writers never took place.[69] In the novel, it is incited by the publication of Spinks' forgery, which alleges that Lovecraft was gay. Marina notes sardonically, 'history did not conclude that L. C. Spinks had done Lovecraft a favor by publishing the *Erotonomicon*'.[70] When horror writers are wrongly persecuted following the publication of the *Erotonomicon*, Spinks shows no true remorse for his false allegations, and instead defends his actions in the most absurd way on a televised interview with Edward Murrow:[71]

> Murrow: […] [Y]ou destroyed the reputation, the posthumous reputation, of a writer named H. P. Lovecraft. Now the question I think most Americans want answered is, why did you do it?
> Spinks: Why?
> Murrow: Yes, why?
> Spinks: I ... I guess I ...
> Murrow: Surely you must have had a reason.
> Spinks: Well, Mr Murrow, I'm from a small town in Canada. And all my life, I've dreamed of having an adventure. You know, like going on a safari, or climbing a

[66] La Farge, p. 22.
[67] 'HUAC', *HISTORY*, 7 March 2019 <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/huac> [accessed 10 February 2022].
[68] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 67.
[69] There were, however, notable writers like Ray Bradbury and Arthur Miller who were affected.
[70] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 66.
[71] Alongside Murrow, other real people like Horace Tudhope, Doris Baumgardt, and John Macfie make interesting appearances in the novel.

> mountain, or fighting in a war. And I guess this book was my adventure.
> Murrow: Do you mean to tell me that you ruined a man's reputation because you wanted an adventure? […]
> Spinks: Well, I don't know. I'm just telling you how it seemed to me at the time when I, uh, when I did it. I guess I just wanted to do something daring.
> Murrow: So you defamed an innocent person. A man who had never done anything to *you*.[72]

The historical Murrow, who passed away in 1965, was a renowned American journalist, known for his expository interviews.[73] In the context of the novel, the above transcript, which is presented as verbatim, is depicted as an indisputable record of the past. La Farge uses an iconic historical figure to reveal Spinks as a fraud who is well versed in making his lies credible, and who engages in such fraudulence for his own benefits. His actions imply a similarity between him and the typical postmodern historian, in that Spinks builds up an imaginary narrative around the remaining traces of the past and uses that to tell his version of events.[74] Of course, this is not to say that postmodern historians are dishonest or selfish, but postmodern historical theory, according to White, Keith Jenkins, and Alan Munslow, generally encouraged a wariness about believing history as the 'truth', since the past only remained through incomplete traces, and historians would have to imagine what the past was like. In addition, as mentioned earlier, according to White, incomplete traces of the past could lead to different narratives or interpretations of historical events.[75] Spinks' actions portray the 'historical imagination', as postmodern historians called it, in a negative light.[76] When Charlie goes missing, Marina suspects that her husband's disappearance has to do with Spinks because the latter had revealed extensive information about Barlow and Lovecraft's supposed love affair. When Marina finally meets with Spinks, his lack of concern for how his lies impact and damage others gradually becomes more evident. Spinks feels no remorse or obligation to tell the truth, even when he sees that Marina is distressed because Charlie is missing; Spinks even proposes an absurd hypothesis on the 'transmigration of souls' to justify his actions. Through false histories, *The Night Ocean* examines the question of historical honesty, implying the importance of historical objectivity as the trait of an ethical historian. As discussed in the next section, Charlie, as

[72] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 75.
[73] His reporting on the award-winning television program *See It Now* (1951-58) contributed significantly to the condemnation of McCarthyism.
[74] White, 'The Historical Artifact', pp. 83-84.
[75] Alan Muslow, *Deconstructing History* (Routledge, 2006), p. 47.
[76] White has discussed the historical imagination at length across his oeuvre. By the term 'historical imagination', he means the narrative constructions that historians use to imagine events in the past. The historian is the one who endows meaning on the records of the past, which have no inherent meaning in themselves.

someone who has been duped by the postmodern historian, is the victim. He also appears to have his blind spots, as becomes evident when he investigates the Lovecraft/Barlow connection, but the mental breakdown he suffers is portrayed as the direct result of Spinks' lies, underlining how deleterious false histories can be.

Charlie

> When I was a kid, I thought Necronomicon meant *the book of dead names*, but according to the article, it means *the image of the law of the dead*, or just *a book concerning the dead*. So the *Erotonomicon* would be the *image of the law of love*, which, you have to admit, is kind of intriguing.[77]

It is Charlie's naïve trust in Spinks' story that causes his mental breakdown and disappearance. Of course, he is not insane when *The Night Ocean* begins. But his obsessive quest to find the truth about Lovecraft's relationship with Barlow clouds his judgement several times. When he begins his (re)search, he tracks down the *Erotonomicon*, a book clearly based on the *Necronomicon*, a fictional text that Lovecraft would often quote from in his work. The *Erotonomicon*, similarly non-existent in the real world, purports to be Lovecraft's secret diary, recording his sexual escapades with men, many of whom are not white. The book was proven to be a forgery when it first came out, but that does not dissuade Charlie from tracking down its author, L. C. Spinks.

The reference to 'images' in the titles of both the *Necronomicon* and *Erotonomicon* provides an interesting connection to postmodern and gothic superficialities and surfaces. There are multiple pages in La Farge's novel that describe how Spinks was able to make the Erotonomicon *look* real. For example, in the diary, Lovecraftian creations are reduced to a nomenclature of various sex acts. As Phillip Mead notes about the credibility of literary hoaxes, '[t]he point is that readers want to believe and they will easily overlook discrepancies and even exposure. Authenticity *effects* are what is necessary.'[78] By 'authenticity effects', Mead refers to works that *look* real but are not, and La Farge is particularly critical of authenticity effects' potential to deceive, as they can have damaging outcomes. For instance, Charlie's insistence on believing that the *Erotonomicon* is a legitimate source ultimately destroys his marriage and his career. Charlie prefers to believe that *Erotonomicon*'s status as genuine was already once disproven, is actually a reliable documentary source.

[77] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 26, emphasis in original.
[78] Philip Mead, 'Hoax-Poetry and Inauthencity', in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (Routledge, 2012), pp. 338-54 (p. 344).

Charlie himself is not entirely blameless for his eventual downfall, for he imagines all sorts of absurdities even after finding proof that his speculations have no factual support.[79] One instance is when he toys with the idea that Robert Barlow might still be alive. Historically, Barlow was born in 1918 and took his own life in 1951 after a 'disgruntled student' blackmailed him, threatening to reveal Barlow's homosexuality.[80] Charlie notes to Marina that if Barlow were still alive, he might be almost a century old in the present time. Initially, Charlie concedes that the possibility is indeed absurd, but he continues to entertain it even when Marina and he watch the recording of a television interview where the journalist 'takes down' Spinks. In a way, Charlie is similar to Spinks because he, too, can be seen to be investigating (though not exploiting) historical lacunae to make a name for himself. Being African American, Charlie is already socially (and historically) marginalised. Moreover, he is initially portrayed as a little-known journalist who must often financially rely on his wife. For Charlie, concrete proof about the true nature of the Lovecraft/Barlow relationship will surely bring the stability and dignity that he feels are missing from his life.

In his determination to discover the truth, Charlie does indeed seem like a romancer of the archive because of his marginalised status and unique perspective, qualities that Keen posits belong to the protagonist of such a romance.[81] Like a responsible historian, he painstakingly cross-checks historical facts and voices his own doubts about the reliability of Spinks' sources for the *Erotonomicon*:

> 'Even though I know, I still can't believe it. Where did this freak get his information?' The *Erotonomicon* was published in 1952, and the first biography of Lovecraft didn't appear until 1975. When Spinks wrote his book, Lovecraft's letters to Barlow were still uncataloged and off-limits, in the vaults of the John Hay Library, at Brown. Even if Spinks had read the letters, they didn't have any sex in them.[82]

As Marina recalls the time she spent with Charlie in solitude, she mentions that one of the shows they would watch together was *The X-Files.* There is a strong parallel between the character of Agent Fox Mulder and Charlie because Charlie, like Mulder, becomes not only paranoid but also determined to uncover a truth that he hopes has remained hidden until now. And Mulder, like Charlie, is often obsessed with fantastic possibilities that appear to conceal shattering truths. As R. L. Rutksey comments, the show, which problematised the idea of truth long before Trump and the issue of post-truth, situates truth within the realm of the unknown

[79] Farwell, "An Interview with Paul La Farge," n. p.
[80] La Farge, "Complicated Friendship", n. p.
[81] Keen, *Romances of the Archive*, p. 3.
[82] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 65.

instead of the known: 'the obsession with finding the truth […] motivates the characters' actions'.[83] Thus, Charlie's fixation resonates with the novel's epigraph, a quotation from *Dexter Ward*: 'I say to you againe, doe not call up/Any that you can not put downe'.[84] However, this refusal to 'put down' his obsessive research becomes his hamartia. Like his namesake Charles Dexter Ward, Charlie becomes destroyed by his investigation of historical mysteries that are best left alone. As suggested above, he also disregards any contradictory evidence. For instance, when Charlie encounters Horace Tudhope, a resident of Parry Sound in Canada (where Spinks lives) who has known Spinks for decades, Tudhope produces a photograph of Spinks that casts doubt on Spinks' identity.[85] However, Charlie ignores this and continues to stick to the narrative that Spinks told him. La Farge's novel considers it an imperative to be truthful about the nature of the discovered resources and posits that an historian should be truthful and objective, with no ulterior motives. The narrative is therefore implicitly critical of Charlie for ignoring evidence and losing journalistic and historic objectivity in pursuit of his obsession, diverging from the path of an ideal historian.

It is Charlie's unhealthy obsession that engenders a kind of 'confirmation bias' in him. He even goes to Barlow's now-abandoned house where Lovecraft stayed during the summer of 1931. For Charlie, the house is a physical trace of the past as it may hold a secret that has hitherto remained undiscovered:

> The amber shelves were empty, but there were pencil marks on the door frame, charting Bobby's meager youthful growth. One mark was much higher than the others: H. P. L., 6/7/1935. Charlie shuddered. He imagined Lovecraft stooping beside Barlow in the small closet. The two of them so close, they could feel one another's breath ... .[86]

These height markings are more suggestive of a parent-child relationship than a sexual or intimate one. Charlie admits to himself that he 'would never know what happened for sure' and the two men's relationship might have been platonic, but he still does not let go of his speculation that Lovecraft and Barlow were romantically involved: 'Up until that point, Charlie

[83] R. L. Rutsky, 'The Scene of Truth in *The X-Files*', *Strategies: A Journal of Theory, Culture, and Politics*, 12.1 (1999), pp. 61-70 (p. 61).
[84] H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward', *Electronic Texts of H. P. Lovecraft's Works*, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cdw.aspx> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[85] The real Tudhope, who passed in 2009, was a war veteran in Parry Sound, just as he is in the novel. Murrow, who passed in 1965, was a renowned American journalist, known for his expository interviews. John Macfie was still alive when *The Night Ocean* was published but passed the following year. As portrayed in the novel, Macfie was the town historian of Parry Sound. The usage of these people/characters is metamodern in two distinct ways: firstly, the 'cameo appearances' of real people as characters in the novel provide a touch of realism; and secondly, these characters reveal a truth to oppose the false stories that Charlie and Marina unwittingly believed in.
[86] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 83.

had been rooting for sex to turn up at the heart of his story. He figured that Lovecraft needed it, and Barlow wanted it, and where was the harm?'[87] He even collects an unimportant matchbook from the room even though the item 'could not have been an authentic Barlovian artifact'.[88] It is possible to suggest that the reason he keeps holding on to these ambiguous pieces of evidence is that he hopes they might one day confirm his speculations.

Despite his careful research, Charlie is therefore not objective like an historian should be. His hopes and speculations drive him to readily believe in Spinks' bizarre 'confession' that *he* is Robert Barlow. When they finally speak, Charlie even goes as far as to ask a voyeuristic question: 'Did you? Make love, I mean.'[89] This question marks his suspension of disbelief. Instead of thinking critically about the plausibility of Spinks' 'autobiography', Charlie is fixated on wondering about whether Lovecraft and Barlow consummated their relationship. La Farge's metafictional critique of the postmodern historian's subjective approach, or indeed of the historical imagination more broadly, is very tongue-in-cheek here. He appears to be mocking scholars who argue that Lovecraft and Barlow were indeed lovers, extrapolating purely from reading between the lines in their fiction and correspondence. *The Night Ocean* seems to be saying the same thing: that if the historian is not sure, they should just say so, instead of trying to imagine and thus giving us an inaccurate view.

One way that Charlie differs from Spinks, however, is that he possesses more empathy. Brady observes that the novel is 'a timely mediation on the challenge of separating artist from art and the limits of human understanding'.[90] Charlie, Spinks, and even Marina are portrayed as having mixed feelings about Lovecraft, but attempt to love him and understand him, despite his shortcomings. Charlie also denunciates Lovecraft's bigotry but still focuses on Lovecraft as a person, and tries to humanise him, on one occasion sharing the following with a fan at a sci-fi convention:

> Lovecraft believed some things that I can't condone. But I wonder if in the end we maybe need our heroes to have feet of clay, or even of mud. Barlow was able to love Lovecraft, for all his flaws. And I want to tell you something he told me, when he was finished telling his story, which was, that although Barlow saw all the harm he'd done with the *Erotonomicon* hoax, he didn't regret it, because he'd made Lovecraft into a person who was capable of love.[91]

[87] La Farge, pp. 83-84.
[88] La Farge, p. 84.
[89] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 111.
[90] Brady, '*The Night Ocean* Brings Lovecraft', n.p.
[91] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 192.

Charlie's attempt to highlight Lovecraft's humanity is a significant divergence from postmodern practice. Postmodern fiction often took pleasure in tearing down admired historical figures from their pedestals. As Debbie Atkinson comments when describing our present time, there are 'attempts to move away from the weary cynicism and disconnectedness of late Postmodern discourse to find […] an alternative to postmodern alienation through interactivity and interpersonal connection'.[92]

However, Charlie's attempt to sympathise with Lovecraft does not come without unexpected consequences. When other Lovecraft scholars begin to point out historical discrepancies in his book *The Law of Love*, Charlie becomes paranoid. When the several townspeople from the Canadian small town of Parry Sound, where Spinks lives, attest that he was never anyone else, Charlie's paranoia increases as he starts to think they are plotting against him. He remains unconvinced by any of the documentary evidence that is presented to him, whether that is a transcript or a photograph. For example, he turns a blind eye to Horace Tudhope's photograph of Spinks, and this photograph clearly shows that Spinks is not who he claims to be. Unable to accept that he may have unwittingly perpetrated a hoax, Charlie goes back to talk to Spinks. The novel never reveals their second conversation, but shortly after, Charlie becomes withdrawn and engages in a variety of uncharacteristic behaviours, one example being that he strays from his marriage. Shortly after talking to Spinks for the second time, Charlie is admitted to a psychiatric institution, escapes, and allegedly drowns himself in a lake.

As I argue in the next section, Marina's attempt to find Charlie and her refusal to give up contrasts the nihilism apparent in Lovecraft's work. If Charlie's case serves as a warning against digging up the past, Marina's narrative seems to be saying that the past, with its unsolved mysteries, does not necessarily prevent one from having a meaningful existence.

Marina

> How close I came to being drawn into the same unreality![93]

Sigmund Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919) has led many scholars to see him as a 'gothic writer', which may be a reason psychoanalysis is a popular method of analysis for gothic

[92] Debbie Atkinson, 'Participation and Affect', *Notes on Metamodernism*, 2 July 2013 <https://www.metamodernism.com/2013/07/02/participation-and-affect/> [accessed 18 January 2024].
[93] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 238.

literature.[94] In *The Night Ocean*, Marina's profession as a psychotherapist allows for the exploration of significant similarities between psychoanalysis and history. These two disciplines are also linked with literary criticism as literary critics, when studying a text, often also consider historical contexts and characters' underlying motives to illuminate their understanding. Fred Weinstein and Gerard M. Platt observe that both historians and psychoanalysts are interested in the past, the causality of events, and the motivations that drive people to their actions.[95] Laura Saxton concurs that 'historians must also engage with aspects of the past that are not recorded and similarly speculate about an individual's intentions'.[96] It is the same with literary critics, who may consider historical contexts and psychological driving forces to illuminate their understanding of a text. This echoes a character's assertion in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) that '[l]iterary critics make natural detectives'.[97] Marina similarly states that '[b]eing a psychoanalyst is in some ways like a detective' as she tries to uncover and understand what happened to her husband.[98] Like an historian, Marina, as a psychotherapist, turns to the past to understand what happened to Charlie and the reasons behind Spinks' actions. In a desperate attempt to trace her husband's last steps after he goes missing, she travels to Parry Sound, meets with Spinks, and undertakes additional research to verify the details in his 'autobiographies'. An encounter with John Macfie, the town historian, reveals Spinks to be a compulsive liar. For example, in Spinks' second 'autobiography', he claims that 'he was discharged from the Algonquin Regiment for shooting at a German U-boat, in Newfoundland', probably to depict himself as a hero. However, it is Macfie who reveals the truth that Spinks 'was discharged because he was a homosexual [...] they caught him fooling around with a First Nations boy up in Thunder Bay'.[99] In Macfie's books about Parry Sound residents who fought in the Second World War, Marina finds Spinks' name absent, and she is shocked when a visit to his study reveals Google searches and countless books that show how Spinks tailored his life stories to entice her.

Marina undeniably has a personal stake in finding Charlie, but this personal stake does not make her lose her objectivity. In fact, it is her objectivity that makes her, in a sense, the

[94] Christine Berthin, *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 2.
[95] Fred Weinstein and Gerard M. Platt, 'History and Theory: The Question of Psychoanalysis', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2.4 (1972), pp. 419-34 (pp. 419-22).
[96] Laura Saxton, 'A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction**'**, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 24.2 (2020), pp. 127-44 (pp. 129-30), https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189.
[97] A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (Vintage, 1990), p. 237.
[98] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 234.
[99] La Farge, p. 370.

ideal historian. Unlike Charlie, she does not have any preconceived ideas about Lovecraft and Barlow, and she genuinely tries to understand the other characters. Instead of entertaining bizarre speculations about history, she admits, '[o]h, he'd told me a horror story, all right. The horror was that I had believed in it'.[100] In a way, Spinks' lies are more horrifying than any of the unknowable terrors of the past in Lovecraft's fiction. Shortly before the end of the novel, she ponders over Freud's idea of the 'navel of the dream',

> the place where all the lines of meaning the analyst has so carefully traced through the patient's life vanish into the unknown. But where the navel of the dream is an essentially harmless phenomenon, a point where the dream's meaning is sufficiently understood, and further interpretation would be pointless, evil is a mystery with power. It reaches up into the world and makes everything mysterious.[101]

Here, the 'navel of the dream' is a metaphor for research into the black holes of history, a threatening past emblematic of gothic fiction. Marina wonders what to do in the face of such despair and answers her own question: 'When faced with such a phenomenon, what can you do? For me, the answer is clear: You walk away. You get back to your life and make meaning where you can.'[102] She refuses to become overwhelmed by a mysterious and ambiguous past and does her best to hold onto her sanity. According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodern writers 'pick out from the scrapheap of history those elements that allow them to resignify the present and reimagine a future'.[103] We see this when Marina finally presents what she has been able to put together as the truth, and attempts to forget about Spinks and try to move on with her life, as the idea of 'the navel of the dream' advises her.

The final section of the novel, fittingly called 'The Navel of the Dream', goes beyond postmodern ideas of an unknowable past and focuses on recuperation. In other words, the mysteries of the past are of little importance here compared to what can be known for sure in one's present, immediate surroundings. We see a severely unhappy Marina trying to forget the past. This is oddly optimistic instead of pessimistic. Even if '[t]he entire world was a story told by L. C. Spinks', Marina is trying to find some stability on her own.[104] Just as metamodern oscillates between naivety and cynicism, Marina oscillates between accepting her husband's death and still not being ready to discard his possessions.[105] The final chapter of the book

[100] La Farge, p. 372.
[101] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 238.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s', p. 10.
[104] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 380.
[105] Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', pp. 5-6.

depicts Marina, whose name means 'of the sea', on vacation with her family in Miami Beach. Here, she is distinguished from the narrator of Lovecraft's 'The Night Ocean' because she is not alone. In trying not to dwell on Spinks, Marina attempts to put the past behind her. She is understandably depressed and distraught, but her family is there to support her. She particularly enjoys 'being near my grandmother. She held out the possibility that there was happiness, or at least contentment, on the far side of grief'.[106] This is particularly telling, even more so when Marina empathises with her grandmother's concern when the older woman implores her to start a new life and have children. Despite her sadness, she still understands her grandmother's worry. More broadly, she creates a metaphoric bridge between the present and the past, indicating a desire to understand the past, as frightening as it may be. Like the metamodern protagonist, she is aware that it may be impossible to completely know the past, but she still aspires for the possibility of authenticity, harbouring hope that she may be reunited with her husband.

Yvonne Liebermann observes that metamodernist fiction may acknowledge that the world is 'constructed', but it still makes it possible for the text to 'connect us to the real in one form or another'.[107] Marina is apprehensive that the world around her could very well be some kind of artefact, but she tries to heal by going into therapy herself and nursing the hope that Charlie may still be alive because his body was never recovered. Additionally, her family represents the 'real' for her because they act like safeguards. Over the course of the narrative, there are glimpses that her family is far from perfect, but it is evident at the end that they genuinely care about her. And in turn, Marina also cares about them, for she appreciates how her family, even a year after Charlie's disappearance, 'still treated me with more kindness than I wanted or could do anything with'.[108] Moreover, Marina's attachment to her family places her in stark contrast to the protagonist of 'Black Man with a Horn', where, despite his frequent visits to his family members, he apparently prefers to be alone and seems to be detached from his surroundings.

In the novel's last scene, Marina, in accordance with her name, floats in the water in solitude while thinking about everything that happened. We as readers are not told whether she is about to let herself go in the sea (maybe accidentally killing herself), or is on the brink of satisfying closure:

[106] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 382.
[107] Yvonne Liebermann, 'The Return of the "Real" in Ali Smith's *Artful* (2012) and *How to Be Both* (2014)', *European Journal of English Studies*, 23 (2019), pp. 136-51 (p. 137).
[108] Liebermann, 'The Return of the "Real"', p. 137.

> Still, it was peaceful in the ocean, a hundred yards or more past the breakers, and I might have floated there for a long time if two things hadn't happened more or less simultaneously: my leg brushed a jellyfish and lit up with pain; and I saw someone on the beach, waving his arms, shouting in a familiar voice, calling my name.[109]

In Lovecraft's fiction, the jellyfish invokes the image of the frightening Cthulhu and alludes to a dark past and a meaningless existence.[110] However, for Marina, the jellyfish's sting, like her family's company, anchors her to the knowable present. The use of the second-person 'his' and the adjective 'familiar' to describe the man's voice suggests a strong possibility that this is Charlie, and the two are finally united. Cliffhangers usually signify suspense and uncertainty, but in this case, the moment is hopeful and offers a chance of redemption and recuperation after an extraordinary trial.

Several contemporary scholars, among them being Irmtraud Huber and Nicoline Timmer, posit that, following postmodernism's deconstruction, there would be an 'increasing desire to escape from postmodernist subversion and rebellion'.[111] For Timmer, 'it is not unthinkable that after endless proposals for *de*constructions, a desire to *construct* will break through'.[112] In this vein, I have argued how a metamodern reading, as opposed to a postmodern one, is more suited to *The Night Ocean*. Through the structure of the essay, I have demonstrated the progression of a nihilist understanding of history (represented by Lovecraft), to a postmodern suspicion of a seemingly reliable history (represented by Spinks), showing its detrimental effects on Charlie, who Spinks deceives. Finally, Marina represents a reconstructive history that allows for renewal and optimism. La Farge thus also succeeds in developing the gothic genre away from its usual and expected constraints, and illustrates that through a metamodern incarnation, the genre simultaneously remains 'trapped' in the past but can still look forward to the future.

[109] La Farge, *The Night Ocean*, p. 385.
[110] Earlier in the novel, La Farge presents us with 'a snooty European nihilist' inspired by Lovecraft biographer Michel Houellebecq, who famously drew a likeness between jellyfish and the posthuman. See Keeley, 'The Depths', n. p.
[111] Irmtraud Huber, Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 4.
[112] Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Rodopi, 2010), p. 21, emphasis in original.

Finance, Fundamentalist, Frankenstein: Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* as Late-Capitalist Hyper-Gothic Adaptation

Amy Bride

Late-capitalist hyper-gothic is, in many ways, a Frankensteinian creation. It is the combination of the financial and the gothic in such a way that creates something new, extreme, and in many cases, monstrous. As outlined in my previous work, late-capitalist hyper-gothic is defined as a subgenre of American gothic literature in which the influence of finance acts as an accelerator to literary gothic conventions, leading to the creation of narrative hyper-reality.[1] This fusion of finance and the gothic may appear, at first glance, to be an unnatural combination. Finance is often presented to the general public as grounded in truth, as dealing with measurable and material forms of value, and as having a substantial impact on the real lives of those it effects, and thus in complete opposition to the openly fictitious and often frivolous nature of the gothic genre.

However, while it is certainly true that finance has a real effect on the real lives of real people, the idea that financial value itself is real or material is demonstrably incorrect. After all, finance deals with prospective capital, with value that will hopefully become real in the future through insurance payments, speculative lending, and futures trading, but that is not currently materially real in the present moment. This immateriality classifies financial value as inherently fictitious, a product of the imagination that is believed to be real but does not currently exist.[2] Moreover, the spectral nature of this value, as dually present and absent, colours finance as a specifically gothic phenomenon. Indeed, the bleeding of gothic vernacular into the financial realm by way of 'spectral debt', 'vampire corporations', and 'zombie banks' demonstrates an awareness of the gothicisation of finance from the perspective of the market

[1] See Amy Bride, 'Byronic Bateman: The Commodity Vampire, Surplus Value, and the Hyper-Gothic in *American Psycho* (1991)', *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 14 (2015), pp. 3-18; and Bride, 'Re/possessed: The Haunted House, Spectral Debt, and the Hyper-Gothic in *Lunar Park* (2005)', *Supernatural Studies*, 3.2 (2016), pp. 36-48.

[2] The notion of finance as fiction has been explored by a number of recent New Economic Critics, including Jens Beckert, 'Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations in the Economy', *Theory and Society*, 42.3 (2013), pp. 219-40, doi:10.1007/s11186-013-9191-2; Max Haiven, *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Peter Knight, *Reading the Market: Genres of Financial Capitalism in Gilded Age America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); and Nicky Marsh, *Money, Speculation, and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction* (Continuum, 2007).

itself.[3] While certainly not a commonly recognised connection, the relationship between finance and the gothic is therefore surprisingly natural, at the same time that the ghostly qualities of each realm designate this relationship as supernatural.

It is then in the product of the fusion of finance and the gothic that the Frankensteinian nature of late-capitalist hyper-gothic must be identified. Hyperreality is itself a monstrous narrative form, at once real, unreal, and more than real in an echo of the overlapping human, subhuman, and superhuman qualities of Mary Shelley's fictional Creature.[4] The hyperreal's simultaneous construction from and erasure of the real recalls the Creature's construction from body parts, which both reifies and overrides the original identities to which those parts belong. There is also a sense of uncontrollability about the hyperreal; as Jean Baudrillard identifies, once the hyperreal has been established, it will go on to recreate hyperreality in place of the real indefinitely, thereby enacting the fears of Victor Frankenstein regarding the potential for reproduction if the Creature were to be granted a mate.[5] In terms of late-capitalist hyper-gothic, the hyperreality created by the combination of finance and the gothic not only transforms the fictional realm of the gothic novel so that it is both conscious of its own fictionality and purporting to exist as part of the reader's real world, but also highlights the inherent fictionality of the finance that is treated as real by the reader, despite being entirely imaginary. Late-capitalist hyper-gothic thus not only reproduces the hyperreal in line with Baudrillard's argument, but actually allows the reader to recognise the presence of existing hyperrealities in their everyday life, and thus drags the financial realm into the realm of fiction at the same time that the gothic shifts out of the fictional realm and permeates our own reality.

Of course, Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, and the general concept of hyperness more widely, is rooted in late twentieth-century understandings of replication and simulation in capitalism and culture having reached a point of oversaturation, extremity, and mass-infiltration of everyday life. From our current, twenty-first-century perspective, this may now feel somewhat naïve, particularly in light of the contemporary pervasiveness of social media, the creation of Facebook's Meta, deepfakes, advancements in VR technology, fake news, the US Supreme Court's desire to create a 'domestic supply of infants' following the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, and governmental use of algorithms to determine medical provisions, educational

[3] See Paul Crosthwaite, 'Phantasmagoric Finance: Crisis and the Supernatural in Contemporary Finance Culture', in *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative: Textual Horizons in an Age of Global Risk*, ed. by Crosthwaite (Routledge, 2011), pp. 178-200.
[4] Jean Baudrillard defines hyperreality as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.' Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.
[5] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 2.

outcomes, and the suitability of American citizens for investment via Social Impact Bonds.[6] Likewise, the notion of late capitalism as paired with postmodernism by Fredric Jameson is perhaps no longer as relevant or revelatory as it was in the 1990s. At face value, Jameson's recognition of the digitalisation of money, rampant commodification, globalisation, and neoliberalism as changing the cultural and capitalist landscape beyond the former limits of modernism are, in essence, still applicable today. However, the emergence of new financial phenomena such as the introduction of contactless payments, cryptocurrency, non-fungible tokens, and *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) – which protects the rights of corporations to donate to political campaigns under the First Amendment – suggest that we have already outgrown Jameson's pre-millennial perspective. Indeed, if we are now to believe that we have moved beyond the confines of postmodernism into what critics are variously identifying as 'post-postmodernism', 'late postmodernism', 'trans-postmodernism', 'post-millennialism', and 'metamodernism', then it might also be productive to think of the current moment as one of 'post-late capitalism', and thereby locate ourselves a stage onwards from Jameson's theories.[7]

However, there remains something substantial to be gained by looking back at this previous stage in which the notions of hyperreality in relation to late capitalism came to the fore. While no longer experiencing the exact conditions identified by Baudrillard and Jameson, the current socio-political and economic environment of the West is undoubtedly a product of this earlier period. The immediate value of examining and re-examining the relationship between finance, culture, and hyperreality during the 1980s and 90s is thus in what it can reveal about our own current moment and the ways in which the contradictions, loopholes, and nuances of the contemporary financial market have been allowed to develop over the past forty years. Beyond this, there is something powerful, and perhaps even dangerous, in our contemporary habit of classifying the late-twentieth century as a period of hyperness that demands critical attention. If, as aforementioned, the current financial environment is more

[6] See Justice Samuel Alito, Opinion No. 19-1392, *Supreme Court of the United States*, 1st draft (leaked), 10 February 2022, p. 34, n. 46 <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21835435/scotus-initial-draft.pdf> [accessed: 14 September 2022]; and Zenia Kish and Justin Leroy, 'Bonded Life: Technologies of Racial Finance from Slave Insurance to Philanthrocapital', *Cultural Studies*, 29.5-6 (2015), pp. 630-51, doi:10.1080/09502386.2015.1017137.

[7] See Tom Turner, *The City as Landscape: A Post-Postmodern View of Design and Planning* (Taylor & Francis, 2014); Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (AIAA, 2005); Mikhail Epstein, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* (Berghahn Books, 2016); Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford University Press, 1993); and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture,* 2.1 (2010), pp. 5677-90, doi:10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677.

extreme than ever before, then our characterisation of the 1980s and 90s as an enclosed moment of hyperreality acts to disguise and belittle this extremity, thereby making it more insidious by way of its perceived normalcy. It is therefore imperative to examine the cultural presentation of late twentieth-century hyperrealities in order to dissect the existence and distortion of millennial hyperrealities that continue to contribute to financial and political disenfranchisement. This is in addition to what a recognition of late-capitalist hyper-gothic will contribute to the ongoing development of the Economic Humanities and New Economic Criticism, which reads literature and cultural productions as in diagnostic conversation with the market and capitalist concerns. The inclusion of genre fiction in New Economic Critical Studies is still a recent development, with few volumes dedicated to analysing the economic and financial influences of gothic fiction in particular.[8] Not only will any work on late-capitalist hyper-gothic expand this growing crossover between the Economic Humanities and Genre Studies, but it will also counter a number of positions within Gothic Studies that argue the gothic either wanes, loses impact, or else fizzles away sometime around the 1980s.[9]

My previous work on late-capitalist hyper-gothic focused on the work of Bret Easton Ellis – as this article does also – from different perspectives. My reading of *American Psycho* (1991) characterised Patrick Bateman as a commodity-vampire who is fuelled by late-capitalist commercialisation and surplus value, and whose consumption of goods, brands, and bodies sustains his own fragmented and commodified identity. In retrospect, this reading is primarily concerned with hyper-gothic bodies. Not only is Bateman himself a body constructed of empty signifiers and fetishised brand labels that fail to register any substantive meaning on the social scene of 1980s New York, but Bateman's destruction, disassembly, and dematerialisation of the bodies of his victims transforms the human corpse into a space whose passages and orifices recreate the castles and dungeons of classic gothic literature.[10] The intensity of Bateman's violence and the magnified view it provides of the human body, along with Bateman's recognition of his own immateriality, designate *American Psycho* as late-capitalist hyper-

[8] See Gail Turley Houston, *From Dickens to Dracula: Gothic, Economics, and Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires, and Global Capitalism* (BRILL, 2011); and Annalee Newitz, *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture* (Duke University Press, 2006). My own monograph, *Financial Gothic: Monsterized Capitalism in American Gothic Fiction* (University of Wales Press, 2023) addresses the lack of critical attention on the intersection between finance and the gothic.

[9] In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach claims that '[w]hen Ronald Reagan's powerful persona took control of the American imagination in the 1980s, vampires began to die'; in an early edition of *Gothic*, Fred Botting argues that the gothic has died by the end of the twentieth century. See Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.7; and Botting, *Gothic* (Routledge, 1996), p. 170.

[10] Bride, 'Byronic Bateman', pp. 8-11 and pp. 14-16.

gothic, with its characterisation of commodity consumption as vampiric enabling the reader to recognise the gothic nature of late-capitalist culture and finance in the real world. Conversely, my reading of *Lunar Park* (2005) as a late-capitalist hyper-gothic treatment of mortgage debt and the haunted house was primarily concerned with hyper-gothic spaces and the ways in which they both contain and embody the spectral nature of late-capitalist finance, with particular reference to the then-building subprime-mortgage scandal.[11] In this instance, late-capitalist hyper-gothic is evident in both the presence of Bret Easton Ellis as the main character of the novel itself, and in the literalisation of the haunting nature of debt as the haunted house, haunted bank vault, and the ghosts of labour that pursue Bret throughout the narrative. There are, of course, certain areas of crossover between the examination of hyper-gothic bodies and hyper-gothic spaces; indeed, for Bateman, the body is a space which can be explored as well as exploited, while the walls of Bret's house literally bleed, giving the impression that the house is composed of human parts. However, these previous studies also establish multiple other frameworks through which late-capitalist hyper-gothic can be examined and contextualised that are equally worthy of closer examination.

This article establishes a third framework in addition to hyper-gothic bodies and spaces: that of late-capitalist hyper-gothic adaptation. That Ellis's 1998 novel *Glamorama* takes substantial influence from Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein* will not be a surprise to readers familiar with this less-publicised instalment of the Ellis canon. The novel focuses on a group of image-obsessed fashion models who, upon being inducted into an underground terrorist organisation, become subject to bodily mutilation, artificial doubling, and eventually, replacement by doppelgängers. Yet the presence of financial themes and motifs in the novel serves to re-categorise *Glamorama* as not merely a novel inspired by *Frankenstein*, but as a hyper-gothic adaptation of Shelley's novel that specifically articulates the contradictions, grotesquery, and hyperreality of late-capitalist finance. The article first examines the legacy of capitalist readings of *Frankenstein* and the ways in which *Glamorama*'s (and, by extension, Ellis's) focus on whiteness contributes to the novel's perverse adaptation of Shelley's narrative. It then establishes *Glamorama* as a specifically late-capitalist *Frankenstein* adaptation, noting both how the novel's focus on commercialised bodies and photographed body parts is a direct reworking of the Frankensteinian creation story, and how the trajectory of protagonist Victor embodies critical readings of doubling in Shelley's novel by merging Frankenstein and the Creature into a single, emotionally fractured character. Finally, it analyses the financial aspects

[11] Bride, 'Re/possessed', pp. 41-45.

of *Glamorama* in order to demonstrate the ways in which these aspects accelerate the gothic effect of Ellis's text to the point of establishing hyperreality. As such, the article not only furthers my existing research on hyper-gothic bodies and spaces – both of which are integral to a reading of *Glamorama* – but also demonstrates how this late-capitalist context also affects narrative, canon, and genre itself, with the hyper-gothic adaptation of classic gothic texts complying with Baudrillard's theory regarding the indefinite replication of hyperreality.

Market Monsters: *Frankenstein* and Capitalism

While Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been read as variously signifying the dangers of scientific inquiry, the act of playing God, a morbid interest in the viscerally of the body, what it means to be human, the fragility of masculinity, and the potential pliability of death, a key element of the narrative is rooted in fundamental capitalist principles. Frankenstein's creation of the Creature from body parts sourced from 'among the unhallowed damps of the grave' and 'collected bones from charnel-houses' implicates Shelley's scientist in body-snatching, a common practice employed by early surgeons and medical practitioners to source subjects for dissection that were not otherwise legally available.[12] While the illegality of body snatching automatically designates the practice culturally as participating in a 'black market' or 'black economy', the phenomenon was also an actual functioning economy that mirrored a number of key aspects of the contemporary market. The very fact the surgical community required more corpses than were legally available immediately presents an issue of supply and demand, leading surgeons to consorting with body snatchers or becoming body snatchers themselves, work which had to be completed on a seasonal basis. As Daina Ramey Berry notes,

> Fall weather proved ideal for the domestic cadaver trade and for grave digging, before frozen ground revealed snow-tracked footsteps and such work became nearly impossible. Brisk fall nights offered suitable temperatures for preserving corpses; the summer months were challenging because hot weather sped up decomposition. Thus, most bodies were stolen, sold, and prepared for dissection during cooler months. Anatomy demonstrations that involved dissections often occurred during the winter and concluded at the onset of spring.[13]

The presence of a peak season of grave robbing meant that stolen cadavers were valued differently depending on what stage of the market cycle they are acquired in, with bodies that would last longer or were harder to get more expensive than those easily acquired with a shorter

[12] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 3rd edn (Wordsworth, 1831), p. 43.
[13] Diana Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Beacon Press, 2017), pp. 154-55.

lifespan. This principle still exists within modern capitalism on everything from train tickets to company shares; if you buy early when supply is high and demand is low, you get a much better deal than if the circumstances were reversed. This is in addition to the fact that different cadavers held different capital values in their own right. Bodies with particular conditions or deformities were deemed more valuable due to their rarity, and the bodies of the wealthy and upper classes were riskier to acquire, and were therefore more expensive to buy.[14]

There was also an element of insider trading in this market, outside of the pun that these surgeons were literally purchasing access to the insides of human bodies. Competition for corpses between different medical schools, and therefore different body-snatching gangs, was fierce, meaning that surgeons relied heavily on tips from grave diggers and cemetery guards regarding where and when fresh bodies would be available.[15] In Shelley's novel, Frankenstein's use of individual body parts from an unspecified number of corpses sees him disassemble otherwise highly valuable whole corpses and, we assume, disregard the 'surplus' pieces in the hope that the one body part he has taken will, eventually, prove far more valuable to him than if it had stayed part of the discarded body. This is, in essence, asset stripping, with an additional element of commodity fetishism evident through the selection of body parts based on aesthetic rather than function, clear in Frankenstein's selection of beautiful parts for the Creature.[16] As such, the underlying premise of Frankenstein's creation of the Creature – the fact that he is constructed from multiple, illegally sourced corpses – is grounded in capitalist practices, cycles, and value systems. Scholarly readings of the Creature as representing the proletariat labouring classes, unions, and corporate bodies further underline the conceptual and critical connections between *Frankenstein* and capitalism.[17]

This relationship becomes complicated and explicitly racialised when considered in light of the American reception to Shelley's novel. Utilised by white supremacists to 'justify' the continued enslavement of African Americans, the Creature's rebellion against his creator and 'master' was received in the US as a metaphoric warning against insurrection, with Nat Turner's Rebellion occurring in 1831, the same year that the third edition of *Frankenstein* was published. The racial coding of Frankenstein's Creature as African American quickly became a cultural shorthand for the supposed sub-humanity of Black peoples and, during the Jim Crow

[14] Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, p. 167.
[15] Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, p. 153.
[16] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 45.
[17] See Paul O'Flinn, 'Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*', in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. by Mark Jancovich (Routledge, 2001), pp. 194-213; and I. Maurice Wormser, *Frankenstein, Incorporated* (McGraw-Hill, 1931).

era, culminated in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) in which Boris Karloff's 'Monster' is dark-skinned, a victim of the racist pseudoscience phrenology, and ultimately subjected to a lynching marked by a burning cross atop a hillside populated by an angry white mob.[18] This is in addition to the fact that the US 'domestic cadaver trade' – to borrow Berry's term for the buying and selling of snatched bodies for medical anatomisation – was largely fulfilled by the stolen corpses of enslaved peoples, meaning that if Frankenstein had created his Creature on US soil, the body parts used would more than likely have come from Black cadavers.[19] In characterising the Creature as African American (and, by extension, African Americans as monstrous), the US interpretation of Shelley's narrative extends the original novel's links with capitalism to include the history and legacy of the slave trade, as well as the American precedent of using Black peoples (living and dead) as dissection subjects, involuntary tissue donors, and medical experiments.[20] The American 'Black Frankenstein' narrative is thus especially capitalistic, with its implicit references to real-life biocapitalist markets in body parts, as well as chattel markets in enslaved bodies, casting the Frankensteinian scientist as a symbol of white supremacy, racial abuse, and medical violence.[21]

Recognition of this overlap between race and capitalism in American recastings of Shelley's *Frankenstein* subsequently raises questions regarding the whiteness of Ellis's writing, and *Glamorama* in particular. As a figure in the public eye, Ellis is notoriously anti-diversity. *White*, his first non-fiction text covering the frustration of being a white man who is criticised for making public jokes about HIV, was published in 2016.[22] February 2019 saw him argue that *Black Panther* (2018) was wrongly nominated for an Oscar purely to meet diversity quotas.[23] In April 2019, he told Cathy Newman of Channel 4 News that he, as a white man, is more susceptible to Twitter abuse than Black women because he does not get a 'free pass' online.[24] As a writer, Ellis's novels, including *Glamorama,* are overwhelmingly biased towards white

[18] Elizabeth Young, *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Monster* (New York University Press, 2008), p. 177; *Frankenstein*, dir. by James Whale (Universal, 1931).
[19] Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, p. 3.
[20] See Dr James Marion Simm's gynaecological experiments (1845-49); the creation of the HeLa cell line using tissue stolen from Henrietta Lacks (1951); and 'The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male' (1932-72).
[21] Young, *Black Frankenstein*, p. 5.
[22] Bret Easton Ellis, *White* (Picador, 2016).
[23] *Black Panther*, dir. By Ryan Coogler (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018); Tim Molloy, 'Bret Easton Ellis Questions "Black Panther" Oscar Nomination for Best Picture: "Does It Really Deserve One?"', *The Wrap*, 1 February 2019 <https://www.thewrap.com/bret-easton-ellis-questions-black-panther-oscar-nomination-for-best-picture-does-it-really-deserve-one/> [accessed 14 September 2022].
[24] Cathy Newman, 'Bret Easton Ellis on Donald Trump: "I Don't Let Myself Get Trumped by His Existence"', *Channel 4 News*, 23 April 2019 <https://www.channel4.com/news/bret-easton-ellis-on-donald-trump-i-dont-let-myself-get-trumped-by-his-existence> [accessed 14 September 2022].

characters and experiences, with characters of colour only featuring as periphery victims of violence, as in *American Psycho*, if they are included at all.[25] While some might attempt to dismiss this as the product of a bigoted author working within a late twentieth-century literary marketplace in which diversity and representation were not priorities, *Glamorama*'s focus on whiteness becomes especially insidious in light of the novel's adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Ellis's white protagonist, Victor Ward – whose name merges those of two earlier literary mad scientists, Victor Frankenstein and Charles Dexter Ward – occupies the role of both Frankenstein and Creature throughout the novel.[26] Not only does he participate in the (conceptual) dismemberment and reconstruction of idealised bodies by way of his obsession with fashion photographs, image retouching, and plastic surgery, but Victor is also a fragmented, ostracised, and paternally neglected figure who is subjected to bodily experimentation and mutilation at the hands of the terrorist gang that he joins, and by whom he is later replicated.

In having Victor embody both characters, Ellis performs an act of literary whitewashing that sees the racialised violence of body snatching and medical experimentation that informs American revisions of *Frankenstein* dressed up and repackaged as the lucrative, fashionable, and voluntary modification of white bodies through plastic surgery and photographical editing. While there is, admittedly, a certain shared viscerality and crossover between surgical dissection and surgical modification – as evidenced in later Frankensteinian works such as *American Mary* (2012), whose underground body modification surgeries see her, in one instance, swapping the limbs and brain pieces of identical twins – Ellis's characterisation of Victor in the role of the Creature as well as the scientist creates a problematic pairing that is at best jarring, and at worst offensive.[27] The implication is that Victor, as a rich, white celebrity, has reason to believe that society does not see him as human, an extraordinary idea given his obvious position of privilege and influence, as well as his frequent dehumanisation of others. Victor's supposed victimhood through his performance of the role of the Creature is then

[25] See Patrick Bateman's murder of a transient African American man, and Bateman's screaming at a Chinese dry cleaner in chapters 'Dry Cleaners' and 'Tuesday' in Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (Picador, 1991).
[26] H. P. Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* was posthumously published in *Weird Tales* in 1941, and sees the eponymous protagonist experiment with alchemy and occultism in order to resurrect his doppelgänger ancestor from death. Over the course of *Glamorama*, Victor Ward (formerly Johnson) realises he has a doppelgänger, referred to as Victor Johnson, who eventually takes over his life and career. The novel's focus on Victor Ward as the protagonist implies that he is the original identity who has been duplicated since changing his name. However, given Victor Johnson's appearance in Ellis's earlier novel *The Rules of Attraction* (Simon & Schuster, 1987), it is possible to interpret Victor Ward as the unwitting doppelgänger of the original Victor Johnson.
[27] *American Mary*, dir. by Jen and Sylvia Soska (Universal, 2012).

awkwardly juxtaposed with his occupation of the Frankenstein role, which automatically places Victor in a position of power, and specifically one which is guilty of inflicting the kind of dehumanising harm that Victor complains about experiencing himself. This is also in contrast to the abused and enslaved African Americans signified by earlier American Frankensteinian texts, who were literally classified as chattel and treated as working animals in US law and culture.[28] The result of this implication is an outrageous proposed equivalence between the enforced suffering of disenfranchised African Americans and the commercialised vanity of Victor Ward, whose body modification actively increases his earning potential, and allows him greater opportunity to objectify and disenfranchise others.

It is also important to note that, unlike other iterations of the *Frankenstein* narrative, Victor, in the role of the Creature, is not a labouring body – as seen in readings of Shelley's Creature as representing the working class, Whale's Monster as reviving the bodies of enslaved African Americans, and even comedy remake *Frankenhooker* (1990), which places the animated bodies of dead sex workers in the Creature role.[29] Instead, Victor is a signifier of financial value whose image, rather than use value, generates profit through pure existence rather than applied utility. Indeed, Victor does not perform any physical or productive work or service at any point in the novel, and even struggles to secure jobs as a fashion model. His capital wealth and cultural influence are thus based on value that is intangible rather than material; he is simply deemed valuable because of who he is rather than anything he does. This coincides with the late-capitalist publication of *Glamorama* during a time when financialisation and commodity fetishism were rife. As such, the particular speculative form that Victor-as-Creature takes in *Glamorama* can be read as reflective of the increasing intangibility of the financial environment against which the action of the novel is set.

It might be possible for readers unfamiliar with Ellis as a public figure to read his offering of a white, affluent, vacuous, and financialised version of Frankenstein's Creature ironically as a critique of postmodern commercialisation and the prioritisation of wealth, status, and material goods over human welfare in the late twentieth century. From this (frankly, generous) perspective, one might understand *Glamorama* as a postmodern and self-depreciating treatise of the complicity of the American capitalist system in the ongoing abuses of African American peoples via incarcerated labour, employment biases, educational inequality, financial prejudice, and gentrification. However, given Ellis's politics, public

[28] Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, p. 12.
[29] *Frankenhooker*, dir. by Frank Henenlotter (Levins-Henenlotter/Shapiro-Glickenhaus Entertainment, 1990).

declarations, and literary record, it seems far more likely that the crisis imbedded within *Glamorama*'s whiteness is a dystopian vision of how bad things would be if white bodies were subject to physical and financial abuse *instead of* Black bodies. In this reading, Victor's wealth and status do not function to accentuate his already-privileged position, but rather act as signifiers pointing to the fact that Victor does not deserve to be mutilated; they therefore serve to emphasise the tragic nature of his demise as a rich white man. In a perverse pre-echo of 'All Lives Matter', *Glamorama* appears to highlight the horrific idea that wealthy white people can be dissected by mad scientists, too.

Why then bother with a racially prejudiced, socially un-critical novel from the late-1990s that is as little read as it is seldom studied? While it would be incredibly easy to dismiss *Glamorama* and Ellis more generally as a relic of a bygone and best-forgotten branch of American literature, the novel's specifically financial treatment of *Frankenstein*, and its subsequent creation of narrative hyperreality, does nonetheless offer something valuable to the contemporary reader. As previously mentioned, our current, perhaps ultra-hyper moment (in which pandemic vaccines are distributed according to national wealth, confectionary giant Nestlé is allowed to buy and siphon off residential water supplies, and some of the richest and most problematic corporate leaders on the planet are competing in a privatised space race) owes much to the preceding decades, yet is benevolently contextualised by the characterisation of the late-twentieth-century as 'hyper'. There is thus a significant advantage to be gained by examining this frightening trajectory from late capitalism to what would be post-late capitalism or similar. Moreover, contemporary social developments including the rise of the new Far Right, the Trump administration, the Black Lives Matter movement, and most recently, the death of Queen Elizabeth II – whose passing has been marked by a rise in voices condemning numerous colonial atrocities committed under her rule – have made the critique of whiteness, white supremacy, and whitewashing ever more vital.[30] As Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey outline in *Horrible White People* (2021) '*seeing* those structures [of white supremacy] is important'.[31] Nygaard and Lagerwey's volume, which critiques the prevalence of performatively liberal, white-focused romantic-comedy television series of the 2010s, argues that

[30] See Caroline Kimeu, '"A Brutal Legacy": Queen's Death Met with Anger as Well as Grief in Kenya', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/12/queen-death-kenya-colonial-rule-mau-mau-uprising> [accessed 14 September 2022]

[31] Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey, *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness* (New York University Press, 2021), p. 31, emphasis in original.

> Representational media, then, work to sustain cultural norms and maintain or even create the ideological structures in which we live. […] These cultural structures – repeated patterns of representation – run parallel to the economic structures (for just one example) that keep people of color with less access to home ownership and intergenerational wealth accumulation than is available to White Americans.[32]

Ellis's whitewashing of the American Frankenstein narrative, and subsequent erasure of Black suffering in favour of spotlighting the *speculative* suffering of rich white celebrities, similarly creates an ideological structure that does indeed run parallel with the economic (and financial) structures of the time, and as such demands critical attention lest we fail to recognise the ways in which these structures prevail by feeding off of each other. Just as the 'Horrible White People shows' examined by Nygaard and Lagerwey promise to reveal the left's complicity in the cultural maintenance of white supremacy, *Glamorama* offers a chance to examine how the American Frankenstein narrative can be used as a tool to critique dangerous social and financial structures at the same time that the novel itself appears to promote these same structures.[33]

Gothicising the Model Body: *Glamorama* as *Frankenstein*

While the remainder of this article is, fundamentally, concerned with hyper-gothic adaptation, the origins of its analysis of *Glamorama* as a Frankensteinian text are rooted in my earlier focus on hyper-gothic bodies. If, as previously mentioned, Patrick Bateman is understood as a vampire preying on commodified flesh, it then translates that Victor Ward, the fashion model protagonist of *Glamorama*, constitutes the kind of marketed body that Bateman feeds upon. Bateman does feature briefly in *Glamorama*, aptly described 'with weird stains on the lapel of his Armani suit', implying blood, semen, or even excrement.[34] Victor is also followed throughout the novel by someone he believes to be Christian Bale, who is, given his role in Mary Harron's 2000 adaptation of *American Psycho*, coincidentally the cinematic and public face of Bateman's vampirism: 'in a mirrored wall I immediately spot the Christian Bale-looking guy who followed me into Masako yesterday standing next to me'.[35] That Victor sees the Bale look-a-like in a mirror but is unable to determine his true identity again recalls the duality of Bateman's gothic identity and indicates that, in both public and monstrous forms, Victor and his model contemporaries are indeed stalked by Bateman as the commodity-vampire. This

[32] Nygaard and Lagerwey, *Horrible White People*, p. 31.
[33] Nygaard and Lagerwey give a number of examples of what they define as 'Horrible White People shows', including *Girls* (HBO, 2012-17), *Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce* (Bravo, 2014-18), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix, 2015-19), *Fleabag* (BBC Three; Amazon, 2016-19), *I Love Dick* (Amazon, 2016-17), *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-19), and *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2019 – present).
[34] Ellis, *Glamorama* (Picador, 1998), p. 38.
[35] *American Psycho*, dir. by Mary Harron (Lion Gate Films, 2000); Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 276.

already implies an element of hyperreality as the real world of the reader – in which Christian Bale really does exist – and the fictional world of *American Psycho*, emerge as one within the equally fictional world of *Glamorama*.

In this context, the model body in *Glamorama* becomes meat for consumption; this is evident in the novel's emphasis on the physical bodies – rather than personalities – of each character. Georgina Colby argues that the prolificacy and ubiquity of the fashion photograph in the novel, as a literally depthless representation of the human body or, more commonly, individual body parts, presents 'the model body as the fetishized image'.[36] The subsequent loss of personal subjectivity that results from the photograph's surface representation of otherwise anonymous body parts means that fashion photography 'becomes a medium of pure objectivity' by which the human body becomes a dismembered, commodified shell.[37] Furthermore, that the 'real' models are, in the public eye, preceded by their celebrity identities – constructed from the objectified body parts captured and circulated by the fashion photograph – means that, when met in person, they appear as reconstructions of already familiar but separate parts. The act of posing for the picture, read by Roland Bathes as 'reproducing oneself […] transform[ing] myself in advance into an image', then shows the model body as a temporarily reconstructed whole, before becoming re-commodified as separate items on magazine covers and adverts.[38] In this way, the model body is one continuously caught in a process of assembly and deconstruction.

This constant reformation of the human body not only designates the characters of *Glamorama* as marketed commodities but additionally recalls the plight of the Creature of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Just as the Creature is created from body parts severed from numerous anonymous corpses, so too are the identities of Victor and other celebrity models reconstructed from various images of individual parts of their anatomy. As Victor describes, the walls of his manager JD's office are covered with 'photos of pecs and tanned abs and thighs and bone-white butts', thrown together along with 'an occasional face' to make a whole body from separate, anonymous, and dismembered items.[39] That Victor is unable to recognise himself amongst the parts on the wall because the pictures are 'always replaced' underlines his loss of identification with his own body, and demonstrates the intense mutilation and reproduction of the human

[36] Georgina Colby, 'Repressive Desublimation and the Great Refusal in Bret Easton Ellis's Fiction', *Textual Practice*, 26.2 (2012), pp. 319-45 (p. 336), doi:10.1080/0950236X.2011.602550.
[37] Colby, 'Repressive Desublimation', p. 336.
[38] Roland Bathes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (Vintage, 2000), p. 10.
[39] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 63.

body made possible by late-capitalist image fetishism.[40] By repeatedly replacing the photographs on the wall, JD creates a recurring cycle of dismemberment that produces an endless supply of parts with which to replicate Dr Frankenstein's construction of the Creature's body from separate fragments, albeit through a process that is voluntarily undertaken and that simultaneously actively generates profit for the bodies involved in the process. Ellis's positioning of these beautiful, privileged, and ultimately consenting fictional bodies as victims of Frankensteinian mutilation via fashion photography is thus immediately problematic in its implied equivalence to the enforced dissection of actual African American bodies for the capital benefit of their abusers, while also presenting the beautiful and culturally valuable population of model bodies of *Glamorama* as an exclusively Caucasian community, evident in the specifically 'bone-white' body parts on display.

Crucially, the fact that 'all the guys [on JD's office wall] are so similar-looking it's getting tougher and tougher to tell them apart' translates as a gothic production line from which Frankenstein's Creature can be mass produced.[41] The fashion photograph, in reproducing parts of the model body, so commodified that all versions look the same, enables a Fordist revision of Shelley's text in which the gothic monster is created – and can be infinitely recreated – via photographical dismemberment. Not only does *Glamorama* exaggerate Frankenstein's construction of the Creature from body parts specifically selected for their beauty by reconstructing the monstrous body from literal fashion models; it also literalises Baudrillard's theory regarding the reproduction of hyperrealities by making the monster body indefinitely reproducible at the expense of anything subjective or 'real'. As Colby recognises, 'there is a parallel here between the acceleration of reproduction/replacement and the erasure of identity'.[42] The lack of confirmed identity experienced by Frankenstein's nameless Creature is heightened by the late-capitalist context of *Glamorama* in that the constructed body is so quickly replaced, and any potential for individuality is immediately lost. The reconstructed model body is, in Ellis's text, nothing more than one in a series of mass-produced commodities. JD's office is thus reminiscent of the 'dissecting room' and 'slaughter house' from which Shelley's Victor Frankenstein harvests his materials in order to create the Creature.[43]

This commodification and re-commodification of the model body in order to achieve the perfect image creates an iconicity so extreme that even the models themselves are unable

[40] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 63.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (Macmillan, 2011), p. 105.
[43] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 37.

to live up to their own image. Throughout *Glamorama*, celebrities are told that they look like themselves without being accepted as themselves, to the point where fellow model Chloe seeks confirmation from others that she looks like her own image: 'somebody came up to me and said, "Oh, you look just like Chloe Byrnes." […] And I said "Oh? Really?"'[44] The models of *Glamorama* are then gothic doppelgängers of their own photographed image, whose wellbeing is seemingly dependent upon their continued recognisability. Angela Woods argues that Victor's lack of coherent self-definition and fragmented identity make him fit the profile of the 'postmodern schizophrenic', supporting this reading of gothic doubling and split personas within the novel.[45] Unable to conceive himself as whole due to the pictorial fragmentation of his physical body through the fashion photograph, Victor is subsequently unable to relate to images of himself in a way that confirms his identity. Instead, he buys his own image as a consumer rather than possessor of his persona: 'passing a newsstand by the new Gap, I notice I'm still on the cover of the current issue of *YouthQuake*, looking pretty cool […] and I've just got to buy another copy'.[46] Victor covets the magazine as though it were showing someone else, demonstrating his disconnection from his commodified identity and therefore indicating an unresolved duality within his character. That Woods attributes this schizophrenic split in Victor to his overexposure to 'the sensory stimuli of postmodernity' further highlights the effect of late-capitalist image culture and the marketed body on the unity and stability of the self.[47] Victor is, like the other models of the novel, a gothic double specifically because of his position within the commodified culture of late capitalism, at the same time that he is only able to reconcile his fragmentation through engagement with late capitalism.

Victor is thus a *Frankenstein*-esque gothic monster reassembled from his own commodified body parts through the fashion photograph, while at the same time experiencing an uncanny alienation from this reconstructed self, and subsequently trapped in a cycle of commodification and consumption in which he must buy his own fragmented image in order to quell his feelings of fragmentation. Like the Creature, who is both a – literal – product of the human race and socially outcast from it, Victor's media-constructed personality is denied access to the 'Real World', the implied pun on the MTV programme of the same name – which is referenced throughout the novel and shown to be highly scripted–becoming true by the end

[44] Ellis, *Glamorama*, pp. 37-38.
[45] Angela Woods, '"I am the Fucking Reaper": *Glamorama*, Schizophrenia, Terrorism', *Colloquy*, 8.1-9 (2004), n. p., doi:10.4225/03/591c322899f1f <https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/journal_contribution/_I_am_the_fucking_reaper_Glamorama_Schizophrenia_Terrorism/4955303/1> [accessed 20 May 2024].
[46] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 19.
[47] Woods, '"I am the Fucking Reaper"'.

of the novel when he is outcast from his own life.[48] Victor also partakes in the commodification of the bodies of others through visual means; he therefore also performs the role of Victor Frankenstein – conveniently, given their shared first name – alongside that of the Creature as a constructed identity. His description of fellow model Lauren Hynde as 'thin with full breasts, long and shapely legs, short blond hair, everything else – eyes, teeth, lips, whatever – equally nice' reduces her to a catalogue of body parts.[49] Victor's deconstructive gaze, directed towards Lauren and others, subsequently undermines his own fears regarding bodily fragmentation, as he is revealed to be a perpetrator of the visual violence he himself detests. The hypocrisy at play here speaks back to Ellis's whitewashing of the American Frankenstein narrative and the novel's overall presentation of horror as derived from the possibility of specifically white bodily mutilation. Just as Victor is horrified at his own objectification and yet content to objectify others (and compelled to continue to objectify himself), *Glamorama* as a whole appears aghast at the idea that white bodies could become the subjects of dissection and experimentation, while saying nothing about the very real history of Black bodily abuse, and the continued capitalist profit derived from such atrocities.[50]

Furthermore, as a witness to the dissection of fellow model Sam Ho, Victor experiences and partakes in the mutilation of the model body prior to reconstruction from an objective point of view:

> a mannequin made from wax covered in either oil or Vaseline, slathered with it, lies twisted on its back in some kind of horrible position on a steel examination table […] Bruce nods grimly and moves his hand to a lever, pressing it, causing lights to flicker, and in a flash my eyes move from the wires connected to the box over to where they have actually been inserted into gashes and cuts on what I'm just realizing are the mannequin's nipples, fingers, testicles, ears.[51]

The scene acts as a reversal of Todd Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, in which a beautiful trapeze performer is forcibly transformed into a 'human-duck' complete with bill, reduced stature, unnaturally bent legs, webbed feet, and permanent feathers.[52] Whereas Browning's creation of body horror relies on turning beauty into grotesquery, Ellis's body horror sees the beautiful

[48] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 24.
[49] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 84.
[50] See, for example, Thermo Fisher Scientific, a biotech company who continue to profit from products derived from the cells stolen from Henrietta Lacks by Johns Hopkins University in 1951. See Jenna Greene, 'Henrietta Lacks' Heirs Sue for Cut of Medical Research Profits. Are They Too Late?', *Reuters*, 12 April 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/henrietta-lacks-heirs-sue-cut-medical-research-profits-are-they-too-late-2022-04-12/> [accessed 2 October 2022].
[51] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 283.
[52] *Freaks*, dir. by Tod Browning (Universal, 1932).

artificially recreated, underlining the self-referentiality inherent within both the novel's model community. As Colby argues, the use of medical language – such as 'scrotum' and 'anus' – to describe the mannequin later revealed to be Sam Ho underlines the corporeality of the body on the table, in contrast to the 'dehumanized body parts montaged on the walls of JD's office'.[53] From Victor's perspective, this scene literally shows the inanimate body brought to life; the mannequin is made human, a collection of disconnected 'legs', 'arms', 'fingers', and 'ears' brought together to make a recognisable identity in Sam Ho. This, along with the laboratory setting complete with chained table, ceiling hoists, and electrical equipment, mirrors the 'apparatuses, tubes, vials and wires of laboratory labor' that Fred Botting highlights as culturally associated with the creation of Frankenstein's Creature.[54] Although not specifically mentioned in Shelley's text, the use of a lever to send an electrical current through Sam Ho to bring him to life further recalls numerous Hollywood interpretations of *Frankenstein* in which the Monster is revived by electric shock or lightning bolt. Hidden from society in a below-ground, dimly lit, and brick-lined corridor reminiscent of the gothic castle, the soundproofed fitness room-turned-laboratory sees the dismemberment of the model body via the fashion photograph literalised. The 'violability of the human body' articulated by Shelley's text is thus made graphically clear for both Victor and the reader.[55]

Victor's subsequent fear of replacement and belief that he has a doppelgänger then becomes further evidence of the commodification of the model body and of the gothic in *Glamorama*. Aside from the more obvious references to doubling that surface throughout the novel – a bar called 'Doppelgangers', a band called 'The Impersonators', songs called 'We're the Same' and 'Substitute' – Victor is repeatedly 'seen' in places he does not remember going, in some instances being photographed at events he denies ever attending: 'there are eight photographs of me. Two were taken backstage at what looks like a Wallflowers concert […] I've never been to a Wallflowers concert.'[56] What thus becomes clear following the dissection of Sam Ho – or more specifically, what is revealed as the body of 'the actor playing Sam Ho' – is the ability to manipulate and rearrange the model body to such an extent that an additional body is created alongside the original.[57] That the nameless actor playing the part of Sam Ho is convincing enough to fool Victor and others indicates how successfully the model body is

[53] Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis*, p. 112; and Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 283.
[54] Botting, 'Metaphors and Monsters', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 7.4 (2003) pp. 339-65 (p.341), doi 10.1080/1479758032000165020.
[55] Botting, p. 341.
[56] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 6, p. 90, p. 104, p. 303, and pp. 224-25.
[57] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 333.

replicated and thus its susceptibility to being doubled. It is subsequently clear that Victor appears to be in two places at once because an identical doppelgänger has assumed his persona elsewhere. That Victor answers to both 'Victor Ward' and 'Victor Johnson' aligns him with Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, as well as Dr Frankenstein and the Creature, and exemplifies him as a classically gothic split identity.

The key factor in this particular allusion is that, rather than being doubled by a sinister, more hideous, and even animalistic alternative identity, as is explored in both Stevenson's 1886 novella and in the 1931 film adaptation (in which Mr Hyde's appearance is distinctly ape-like), *Glamorama* sees Victor doubled by an equally attractive and indeed more sociable version of himself that appears as an improvement on the original.[58] Reflecting his pet phrase, Victor is haunted by a literal 'spare me', an additional or surplus Victor that, in being photographed and recognised as Victor in magazines and social circles, designates the 'original' Victor as the '"spare" in the science fiction formula, the spare body of the cloned subject'.[59] That both the original and doppelgänger Victors operate as spares in this context distorts any legitimate claim made by either on the identity of Victor Ward, again signifying the gothic nature of this identity as it becomes spectrally illusive through the process of doubling.

This relationship between Victor and his other self also echoes the doubling inherent between Shelley's Frankenstein and the Creature. Whether Frankenstein is read as the Creature's father, master, nemesis, God-like creator, stifled lover, or alter ego, it is clear that each character functions as a foil for the other in Shelley's novel. The fact that the Creature is frequently misidentified as 'Frankenstein' in popular culture demonstrates a similar dissolution of identity as a result of doubling that Victor experiences in *Glamorama*. Moreover, the fact that the Creature is created from an unnatural combination of multiple individual bodies further implies that, in creating a dark double of himself, Frankenstein has not only erased the identities of the original owners of each body part but created a new identity that is, itself, a mere refraction of those combined identities, rather than constituting an individual subject in its own right. The Creature is, after all, more than the sum of his parts and therefore a separate entity beyond the former identities that were linked to his various body parts, and also a direct product of those former identities that perversely brings at least some elements of those former bodies back to life. The idea that doubling and doppelgängers, rather than increasing subjective power and influence through multiplication, actually dilute the subjective experience is thus a

[58] *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, dir. by Rouben Mamoulian (Paramount Pictures, 1931).
[59] Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis*, p. 115.

fundamental tenant of both *Frankenstein* and *Glamorama*, albeit modernised in the latter through the lens of popular media and celebrity culture, in which achieving uniformity through conformity is presented as desirable.

This is in addition to Victor's chasing of his own double, and the implied eventual demise of Victor Ward, which recall the cat-and-mouse chase that concludes Shelley's novel, and sees man and monster chase each other from South America to the Arctic and beyond. The crimes that Victor and his double commit during *Glamorama*'s re-enactment of this chase, including supporting suicide bombings in major cities across Europe, mirror the murders committed by the Creature and covered up by Frankenstein over the course of Shelley's novel. Moreover, the fact that multiple narrative perspectives in *Glamorama*, including both versions of Victor, the 'director' of the film crew that follows Victor around, the leader of the terrorist network, and the public viewership of Victor's actions and productions, mimic the multi-layered epistolary narration of *Frankenstein* in which the experiences of each character are contained within the narrative of someone else. As such, *Glamorama* operates as a twentieth-century reworking of *Frankenstein* in which the monstrous dismemberment, reconstruction, and fetishisation of bodies and body parts in order to create monstrous beings is translated as the postmodern obsession with celebrity culture and body modification, in which every body is its own double through the proliferation of fashion photography and reality TV, in addition to the artificial replication of models by identical actors who later turn out to be terrorists. The explicit whiteness of these models and doppelgängers, and the fact that the novel completely glosses over the devastating impact of their terrorist actions, serves to refocus the traditional parameters of the American Frankenstein narrative away from the commodified victims of violence and onto the experiences of those who have the power, means, and inclination to hurt others for profit. As such, Ellis's late-capitalist revision of *Frankenstein* operates along a dangerous trajectory in which the reader is invited to identify with, root for, and ultimately feel sorry over the white inflictors of violence, while simultaneously forgetting the real legacy of Black suffering.

Terror and the Derivative: *Glamorama* as Late-Capitalist Hyper-Gothic

While it is thus clear that *Glamorama* operates as a late-capitalist *Frankenstein* adaptation, the relevance of late capitalism to the novel extends beyond context, modernisation, and racial bias. Rather, as a specifically hyper-gothic adaptation, *Glamorama* stands as a *Frankenstein* revision in which late-capitalist finance performs a particular and central role in the characterisation of Victor as both Frankenstein and the Creature. This role becomes evident

through a closer examination of the existence of Victor's double who, as an identical copy of a persona that is itself unnaturally constructed from anonymous photographic body parts, personifies Plato's concept of the simulacrum that is, in Jameson's words, 'the identical copy for which no original has ever existed'.[60] Jameson argues that the simulacrum comes into effect in societies where 'the image has become the final form of commodity reification'.[61] This then further classifies the self-discontinuity felt by Victor as a direct result of the intense commodification of the model body through the fashion photograph in late-capitalist culture, as this undermines the subjectivity of even his 'original' identity, which is then further diluted once the doppelgänger comes in play.

Furthermore, that Jameson attributes the presence of the simulacrum to a generalisation of exchange value reflects the replicability of the model body within Ellis's novel.[62] Victor's newly constructed doppelgänger is accepted as being of an equivalent exchange value to the original Victor, despite the fact that, as people, each has a very different outlook on life and are thus not equivalents at all. This is evident in the difference between the Victor who narrates the opening of the novel compared with the replicate Victor who narrates the end. Having previously been immersed in celebrity culture and the superficiality of the fashion world, the Victor shown at the end of the novel goes to law school, sees a spiritual advisor, and has moved away from his former social scene in an attempt to recover a sense of personal depth. He is, under his own admission, 'a different person now'.[63] Perceived by society as an improvement of the original Victor's character, this new, artificially created replica reads as a male equivalent of the eponymous figures in Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972), a novel about humanoid replacements that are 'manufactured reproduction[s] of an imaginary/mythical referent […] achieved through murder and replication'.[64] Just as Levin's Joanna Eberhart cannot empathise with her old way of life post-transformation, the new Victor is completely unable to identify as Victor Johnson when speaking with his agent Bill: '"I am fielding offers for Victor Johnson", Bill says. […] "Bill … I don't think …" I stop, figure out a way to break the news. "I'm not … That's not me."'[65] This indicates that Victor does not just have a doppelgänger but that the doppelgänger has, in an echo of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956 and 1978), taken the

[60] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991), p. 18.
[61] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 18, quoting from Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Rebel Press, 1967).
[62] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 18.
[63] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 445.
[64] Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (Bloomsbury, 1972); Jessica Johnston and Cornelia Sears, '*The Stepford Wives* and the Technoscientific Imaginary', *Extrapolation*, 52.1 (2011) pp. 75-94 (p.75), doi:10.3828/extr.2011.52.1.5.
[65] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 455.

original Victor's place in his own life.[66] Despite the underlying differences between the old and new versions of Victor, they are, based on their superficial likeness, accepted as identical and thus exhibit an equivalent exchange value.

As seemingly equal replacements for the 'real' or 'original' commodified model body – in other words, Victor at the start of the novel – the clones in *Glamorama* parallel the financial derivative in their symbolic reference to an absent source of commodity value. As Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee note, 'the conventional definition of a derivative, as a financial instrument whose value derives from an underlying asset, actually says nothing about its basic character, content or contextualization'.[67] That Victor's doppelgänger is a completely different person but still accepted as the original due to their surface similarity mirrors the superficial quality of the derivative, its valuation based on an assumed equivalence without knowledge of its true character, and its purely symbolic reference to the commodity being traded. Just as Victor's doppelgänger is not really Victor but merely represents him in a context where the original Victor is absent, the derivative is symbolic of and therefore treated as the commodity without actually ever becoming or existing as the commodity itself. The value of the new Victor is thus in his reference to the old Victor – in other words, his representation of an existing identity that does not need to be present in order to be photographed and thus commodified.

This then implies that the derivative adheres to 'a perfect and transparent realisation of a mathematically defined type' that can then be traded in the same way regardless of the commodity it represents.[68] This type, both superficially perfect and insubstantial due to its transparency, mirrors the mass production of model doubles in *Glamorama*. The doppelgängers fit the generic definition of beauty perpetuated by the fashion world – and, additionally, look so much like each other that they cannot be told apart – while also being so unrepresentative of the characters they aim to replace that anyone who truly knew the original person would effectively see right through them. The notion that the assumed equivalency of the derivative to all possible commodities is 'so powerful that it absorbs the reality to which it refers' is articulated in Ellis's novel in the apparent dissolution of the original Victor, as the doppelgänger becomes further established as the new Victor.[69] Following a phone call to his sister during which Victor is confronted by his doppelgänger who states 'This is Victor Johnson' down the receiver, the original Victor states 'I'm disconnected' and later describes himself as 'faded away

[66] *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, dir. by Don Siegel (Allied Artists Pictures, 1956).
[67] Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (Duke University Press, 2004), p. 111.
[68] LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives*, pp. 107-08.
[69] LiPuma and Lee, p. 108.

and my image overlapped and dissolved into an image of myself'.[70] The doppelgänger, accepted as the original Victor by both the media and Victor's family, effectively sucks the life out of the 'real' Victor until he feels himself fading away, dissolving into a new, different, yet superficially identical image of himself. The lived reality of the original Victor Ward has, by the end of the novel, been absorbed and adopted by the doppelgänger Victor who refers to Victor's absent commodified model body as the derivative refers to the material commodity.

Once constructed then, the clones in *Glamorama* circulate amongst the marketed culture of late capitalism as terrorists. This horrific juxtaposition of extreme violence with extreme beauty has carried over into the new millennium, with Nicolas Winding Refn's 2016 film *The Neon Demon* showing high-end fashion models who stalk, attack, and eat each other in competition for the best modelling gigs.[71] While *The Neon Demon*'s characterisation of the cut-throat nature of the fashion industry as out-and-out cannibalism, paired with a number of hallucinatory scenes throughout the narrative, highlight the film as perhaps a post-millennial example of late-capitalist hyper-gothic, the violence presented is confined to the modelling community and therefore not globalised, as it is in Ellis's novel. In the context of *Glamorama*, the predetermined expiration date of the derivative contract translates as either the scheduled death of the model during a terrorist act, or the point at which the current version of that model identity is due to be replaced by an identical, constructed replicate. Read alongside Baudrillard's interpretation of death as the subject's loss of value, the death of the model-turned-terrorist doppelgängers of Ellis's novel, deriving their value from their reference to absent commodified bodies, is then an erasure of trading value.[72]

Furthermore, the timed self-destruction of the model terrorists as circulating commodities recalls Paul Crosthwaite's discussion of the Freudian 'death drive' in relation to market crises.[73] The death drive is, according to Sigmund Freud, a psychological compulsion that works against an individual's self-preservation or survival instinct, causing 'animate organisms to revert to an inanimate state'.[74] This is then a compulsion towards death – and therefore objectivity as a lifeless body – through self-destruction, itself a gothic concept reminiscent of *The Exorcist* (1971) in its implication of a threatening force encapsulated within

[70] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 476 and p. 481.
[71] *The Neon Demon*, dir. by Nicolas Winding Refn (Amazon Studios, 2016).
[72] Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (Sage Publications, 1993), p. 5.
[73] Paul Crosthwaite, 'Blood on the Trading Floor: Waste, Sacrifice, and Death in Financial Crises', *Angelaki*, 15.2 (2010), pp. 3-18 (p. 7), doi:10.1080/0969725X.2010.521380.
[74] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. by John Reddik (Penguin, 2003) <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LQcUz3FVkNQC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 20 May 2024].

the human body.[75] Crosthwaite applies this self-destructive drive to commodity trading, defining the death drive in specifically financial contexts as the market's apparent self-destruction, resulting in significant loss of value, which is then utilised in order to create equilibrium across exchanges.[76] For Crosthwaite, this economic death drive is part of the proposed self-correction of the efficient-market hypothesis, and is 'not simply a desire for the immediate destruction of life, but for the correct, appropriate, or fitting death, at the appointed time'.[77]

Crosthwaite's reading subsequently reinforces the definition of *Glamorama*'s models as dually commodified identities and contracts with planned expiry dates. The model terrorists of the novel, upon reaching their optimum value as derivative identities, execute the death drive that, in taking over rational self-preservation, causes them to kill themselves as part of a terrorist act. Their physical expiration through death translates as a simultaneously financial expiration through the loss of subjective value that sees the individual become an inanimate corpse. In turn, this loss creates a need to continuously reproduce *Frankenstein*-esque clones in order to maintain the supply of derivative doubles to the media market. The recreation of Frankenstein's Creature as a gothic double for an existing model thus becomes accelerated in line with supply and demand, the elevation of this process into something endlessly renewable and therefore without limits subsequently designating the doubling motif of *Glamorama* as hyper-gothic. The 'abstract symbolic violence' that results from derivative trading – the engendering of conditions that trigger social violence such as impoverishment as a result of speculation – is thus literalised in *Glamorama* as the threat of terrorism.[78] Baudrillard reads the ubiquity of terrorism in the postmodern age as turning modern cities into 'ghost towns, cities of death' that expand and replace the cemetery as a site of haunting.[79] If this is the case, the replacement of the traditionally gothic setting of the graveyard by the city as a whole, haunted by a constant yet invisible threat of terrorism performed by derivative model bodies, further demonstrates the exaggeration of the gothic within the novel. Just as the model doppelgänger can be endlessly reproduced to meet the demand of the market for terrorist-derivative identities, the expansion of the gothic onto a global scale indicates that, in the context of *Glamorama*, it can no longer be contained and has thus become extreme.

[75] *The Exorcist*, dir. by William Friedkin (Warner Bros., 1973).
[76] Crosthwaite, 'Blood on the Trading Floor', p. 7.
[77] Ibid.
[78] LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives*, p. 26.
[79] Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, p. 127.

Furthermore, that these expanded gothic settings and the people who populate them are literally deconstructed by bombs disguised as branded items again demonstrates the loss of subjectivity and commodification of the human body as a result of the fashion industry and, by extension, late-capitalist image culture. The bomb that explodes in a Prada backpack outside Café Flore quickly transforms Brad from a 'he' into an 'it' upon his reduction from human whole to a series of anonymous body parts: 'the force of the first explosion propels Brad into the air. A leg is blown off from the thigh down and a ten-inch hole is ripped open in his abdomen and his mangled body ends up lying in the curb on Boulevard Saint-Germain, splashing around in its own blood.'[80] Brad and other victims are physically torn apart, their itemised body parts distributed across the street by the power of the Prada-branded bomb, in a distorted echo of the circulation of magazine adverts that only show part of the model body. In James Annesley's words, in 'bloodying up the Calvin Klein poster with Brad's splintered corpse, the bomb literalises consumption's reification of the human body'.[81]

However, the process of reification, of the abstract becoming concrete, is itself complicated by the novel's late-capitalist adaptation of *Frankenstein*. The deconstruction of the human body by both the fashion photograph and the terrorist actions of derivative models is, in one instance, reifying in the sense that the human body, in losing subjectivity, becomes objectified and thus a series of concrete items rather than a figurative identity. Conversely, this is also a transition from being a 'real' or complete person into a series of parts that signify without ever becoming the whole body, and are thus abstracted from that previously 'real' identity. The confusion here between subjective and abstract versions of the body again signifies the extreme commodification and ambiguous derivativeness of the constructed model clones. The point at which the body is classified as an original or 'real' as opposed to an 'unreal' derivative identity repeatedly evolves, depending on the perception of that body as a media- and/or physically constructed entity. This further demonstrates an overload in sources of the gothic uncanny that materialise in Victor's descriptions of the violence performed on Sam Ho. Before realising that the 'mannequin' on the examination table is actually human, Victor is 'shocked at how gruesome and inauthentic the waxwork looks'.[82] That, for Victor, the human body in front of him is unrealistic, compared to the staged and airbrushed photographs that he

[80] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 305.
[81] James Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization: Consumption, the Market, and the Contemporary American Novel* (Continuum, 2006), p. 31.
[82] Ellis, *Glamorama*, p. 283.

interprets as reality, highlights the complete disillusion of the individual from the human body as a result of the intense circulation of fetishised images.

As Colby argues, 'the uncanny, in this instance, assumes the form of a mannequin turning human as opposed to the human becoming mannequin that is witnessed throughout *Glamorama* in the dehumanization of the characters'.[83] LiPuma and Lee's reading of derivative trading as refiguring relations between individuals into relations between things or items is thus literalised by Ellis, as Victor dually encounters what he believes to be mannequins animated to life and real people whom he treats as commodified objects.[84] This confusion between living and object bodies is also present in *The Neon Demon* and *American Mary*, with the former showing scene after scene of corpse-like models juxtaposed against actual corpses who are sexualised by one central protagonist as if they were alive. The latter shows medical student Mary perform illicit and illegal body modification surgeries on willing and non-willing clients alike, with many customers actively paying to be transformed into 'living dolls'. An ongoing concern with late-capitalist hyper-gothic may thus be an indeterminate, shifting, or completely broken boundary between living bodies – be they human or doll – and their dead equivalents, a further example of how the exploration of hyper-gothic adaptation is intimately entangled with the hyper-gothic body, as well with as the spaces in which those bodies operate (and are operated upon).

The hyper-gothic thus emerges through the continuously deconstructed and reassembled model body, made inanimate through photography and perpetually 'real' through an endless chain of replicates. In the late-capitalist culture of *Glamorama*, it is no longer possible to discern the difference between real-but-objectified individuals and abject-yet-animated mannequins. Furthermore, it is not only dead bodies that are brought back to life through Frankenstein-esque reconstruction; fake bodies are similarly revived, taking the place of formerly subjective identities in such a way that every character within *Glamorama* has the potential to be a gothic monster-doppelgänger. The source of horror within the novel is thus untraceable, unstoppable, and entirely ubiquitous as a result of the market for derivative identities, the endless potential for reproduction of the model clone, and the intense commodification of the human body to the point where it is no longer interpreted as real or authentic.

[83] Colby, 'Repressive Desublimation', p. 122.
[84] LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives*, p. 107.

This sequence of reproduction is also extended to the Frankensteinian narrative itself through its adaptation in the form of *Glamorama*. As a text, Ellis's novel extends the dehumanisation of the Creature beyond all conceivable limits, and colours elements of the reader's own world, including magazine images, as fragments of the gothic body, thereby merging the 'real' with the 'fictional' to the point of hyperreality. As a narrative, *Glamorama* creates a repeating Frankensteinian cycle in which Victor, as the Creature, later emulates Victor Frankenstein in order to create an additional monster, who will then, presumably, also later create further monsters in an unending chain of replicated, hyperreal bodies with no original. Equally, the release of the fashion-comedy franchise *Zoolander* (2001 and 2016) sees the emergence of Derek Zoolander as a potentially hyperreal adaptation of Victor Ward, indicating that *Glamorama*, as a hyperreal, hyper-gothic adaptation, will indeed go on to produce further hyperreal adaptations to the point where their reference to the original – in this instance, *Frankenstein* – becomes all but irrelevant.[85] As a result, *Glamorama* indicates the power of late-capitalist hyper-gothic, not only in terms of the extreme gothicisation of bodies, such as the Victors, and spaces, such as the underground laboratory and JD's office, but also in terms of gothic texts and narratives which, when combined with the referentiality of late-capitalist finance, become increasingly more extreme.

The subsequent recognition of *Glamorama* as late-capitalist hyper-gothic not only expands existing understandings of both financial fiction and the gothic, but also highlights the social and political biases inherent within the novel, which are themselves expressed through the gothic logic of *Frankenstein* and late-capitalist conceptualisations of value. In particular, in presenting the inclusion of white bodies into the biocapitalist system as extreme (in terms of both capitalism and the gothic), the novel ultimately implies that the previous (and ongoing) inclusion of Black bodies in the same system is, by comparison, normal. In the current age of increasing racial tension and fundamentalist revivalism, this is clearly a dangerous precedent to set, particularly given that much of Ellis's fictional work (along with that of his Generation-X contemporaries) is subject to a growing nostalgia movement currently focused on cultural productions of the 1980s and 90s.[86] As such, we are in danger of looking back at texts such as *Glamorama* with sentimental rather than critical eyes, and subsequently at risk of replicating

[85] *Zoolander*, dir. by Ben Stiller (Paramount Pictures, 2001); *Zoolander 2*, dir. by Ben Stiller (Paramount Pictures, 2016).

[86] See television, cinematic, and merchandise relaunches of Troll Dolls, My Little Pony, and Polly Pocket; renewed interest in Kate Bush and the wider *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-present) metaverse; the use of Transformers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and He-Man characters on Direct Line insurance adverts; and the continued success of 'Friendsfest', based on the American sitcom *Friends* (1995-2004).

the same harmful biases, unless these structures of systemic prejudice are brought out into the open and examined as the monsters that they are.

Bobby Socks and Broomsticks: Marion L. Starkey and the Invention of the Teen Witch[1]

Miranda Corcoran

Introduction: 'A Pack of Bobby-Soxers'

In 1949, historian and journalist Marion L. Starkey published *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials*. Still viewed as the defining post-war interpretation of the 1692 Salem witch trials, Starkey's book was a phenomenal success, tapping into the zeitgeist of a cultural moment when 'psychoanalytic notions were becoming well known in popular form'.[2] *The Devil in Massachusetts* emerged as a canonical study of America's most notorious witchcraft panic for a number of reasons: its highly literary and imaginative style, its use of psychoanalytic theory, and its attempt to locate in the Salem trials the same mentality that enabled the rise of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. However, one of the book's most intriguing features is its often-anachronistic representation of the young girls at the heart of the Salem witch trials as quintessentially modern American teenagers. In one emblematic passage, Starkey identifies the source of the witchcraft accusations in the emotional instability, pubertal tensions, and mischievous deeds of teen girls:

> The tragedy which was once enacted in this pleasant neighbourhood originated in the childish fantasies of some very little girls and was carried to its deadly climax by what one might now call a pack of 'bobby-soxers' were not the term pictorially incongruous. It was largely the older girls, who inflamed by the terrors of Calvinism as their immature minds understood it, depressed by the lack of any legitimate outlet for their natural high spirits, found relief for their tensions in an emotional orgy which eventually engulfed not only their village but the Massachusetts Bay Colony.[3]

The language Starkey uses here is laden with meaning, as her words explicitly connect the young women of Salem to the then-novel phenomenon of the teenage girl. Her description of the scene of the events as a 'neighbourhood' immediately evokes images of idyllic mid-century suburbs. Likewise, Starkey's use of the term 'bobby-soxers' is crucial here. Although now

[1] This article was written prior to the publication of my book *Witchcraft and Adolescence in American Popular Culture: Teen Witches* (University of Wales Press, 2022) and, as such, formed the basis for many of the ideas explored in that study. I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers and the editors of *IJGHS*, who helped me to develop the arguments and theories that would become central not only to this article, but to the book that grew out of it.

[2] Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (Routledge, 2007), Kindle edition, loc. 2084.

[3] Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (Anchor Books, 1989) p. 14.

vanished from colloquial English, it is a term that would have been intimately familiar to readers in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Historian Grace Palladino explains that during the 1940s, female 'high school students gained national fame as "bobby soxers", the popular nickname bestowed on swing-crazed fans who were developing a new teenage style. In their saddle shoes, skirts, and sweaters, they became identified with music, fads, and fun.'[4] Moreover, teen girls during the period of their first emergence as a cultural phenomenon were simultaneously fascinating and alienating to adults, at once embodying the hopes of a newly invigorated nation and upending its entrenched values.[5] Starkey, too, captures this essential ambivalence, describing both the girls' 'high spirits' and the (implicitly pubertal) tensions that threatened to undermine the coherence of their ordered, patriarchal communities.

Commencing with an analysis of *The Devil in Massachusetts*, this article argues that Starkey's soldering of modern conceptions of adolescence to her retelling of the Salem witch trials represents an important moment in US popular culture. By integrating images of witchcraft with current discourses surrounding the newly emergent figure of the teen girl, Starkey creates a novel cultural trope: the teenage witch. Although diverse figurations of mystical girlhood – from medieval saints to spiritualist mediums – long predate Starkey's work, her book was the first to explicitly connect the teenager (a new demographic in the post-war period) to the witch. Thus, while teen witches abound in contemporary culture – the past decade alone has given us *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013-14), *The VVitch* (2015), and a newly revitalised Sabrina Spellman in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-20) – the archetype of the teenage girl who is also a witch, or a witch who displays traits typical of the teen girl, owes its origins to Starkey's productively anachronistic study.

In this article, I maintain that Starkey's use of the term 'bobby-soxers' to describe the girls embroiled in the Salem witch trials was a generative moment in the formation of the now-ubiquitous teen-witch archetype. Building on this decisive lexical choice and Starkey's characterisation of the Salem girls as restless, disaffected teens, I follow the coalescence of the teen-witch archetype over the following decade and a half, as she solidifies into one of the twentieth century's most iconic renditions of feminine adolescence. Here, I draw not only on social histories of adolescence, but also on the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed, and Elizabeth Grosz in order to analyse how Starkey establishes parallels between witchcraft and the embodied experience of adolescence. Tracing Starkey's influence through

[4] Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (Basic Books, 1996), p. 51.
[5] Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 120.

influential works of historical fiction such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), Elizabeth George Speare's *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1958), and Ann Petry's *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964), I demonstrate that her characterisation of the Salem 'girls' as modern-day 'bobby-soxers' established an enduring trope, a connection between female adolescence and the mystical that not only reflected contemporary anxieties about the 'new' American teenager, but also became instrumental in shaping adolescent identity itself over the subsequent decades.[6]

In this way, while I concur with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's thesis that the monster is a cultural being, I also maintain that the teen-witch archetype is central to the delineation of teenage identity in modern Western culture. In his influential seven theses on monstrosity, Cohen observes that '[t]he monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals", "that which warns", a glyph that seeks a hierophant.'[7] Yet, inasmuch as the monster reveals the anxieties and the yearnings of their cultures, so too do they shape those cultures: taboos and fears surrounding monsters can influence religious practices, delineate cultural rituals, and codify social norms. Teen witches are cultural bodies, and they reveal much about how their social milieu understands adolescent identity. At the same time, the teenage sorceress does not merely act as a mirror of social anxieties; she is crucial to the constitution of pubescent girlhood. Her spectre roves across the social plain, subtly influencing our cultural construction of the teen girl as ethereal, mischievous, and metamorphic, as well as unleashing new identificatory possibilities for teen girls themselves.

My contention, then, is that the teen witch has always existed alongside the teen girl: she is her shadowy double. Thus, while Catherine Driscoll argues that, as a social category, 'girls have functioned an index of broad cultural changes and continuities', the teenage witch similarly serves as an index of both change and continuity; she is an archetype who both informs and reflects cultural values and concerns.[8] In the following pages, I provide an overview of the teenager's emergence as a unique socio-cultural phenomenon in the years following the Second World War, charting its emergence out of a distinct confluence of

[6] I am intentionally limiting my focus to works of historical fiction centred on witchcraft in colonial New England. While Starkey's legacy undoubtedly informed later incarnations of the teen witch, such as Archie Comics' Sabrina Spellman (created in 1962) and the short-lived *Bewitched* spin-off *Tabitha* (1977-78), the relationship between these texts and post-war pop culture, consumerism, and comedy is beyond the scope of this article. However, some of these texts are explored in my book *Witchcraft and Adolescence in American Popular Culture: Teen Witches*.

[7] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Cohen (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25 (p. 4).

[8] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 3.

economic, cultural, and commercial factors. Situating Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* within this context, I adumbrate how the book engages with contemporary concerns about adolescent embodiment and sexual desire. I then extend this treatment of female adolescence as both physically and socially disruptive into an analysis of Arthur Miller's representation of the bewitched girls in *The Crucible*, emphasising in particular his conflation of puberty and hysteria. From here, I move on to discuss the portrayal of adolescent corporeal excess in young adult novels that followed in the wake of *both The Devil in Massachusetts* and *The Crucible*, elaborating on how they employ images of adolescent physicality in order to interrogate themes of gender, racial, and class inequality. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how literary figurations of teen witches, rather than simply articulating cultural anxieties about feminine adolescence, open up new identificatory possibilities for teenage readers themselves.

The Birth of the Teenager

Starkey's book is a self-consciously and overtly modern account of the Salem witch trials. *The Devil in Massachusetts* employs mid-century approaches to psychology in its attempt to unravel the tangled web of accusations that suffocated Essex County in the final decade of the seventeenth century. Describing the diverse victims of the Salem witch trials – an honest farmer, a pipe-smoking beggar woman, a decent grandmother – the dust-jacket blurb on the first edition informs us that '[b]ecause of the fantasies and hysterical antics of *unbalanced teen-agers*, decent men and women were sent to the gallows'.[9] As Marion Gibson observes in her astute reading of Starkey's book, the author's language, and that of her publisher, clearly reflects contemporary concerns about post-war American youth and, in particular, the new and somewhat puzzling phenomenon of the teenager.[10]

To fully comprehend the significance of Starkey's description of the Salem 'afflicted' – the central group of individuals whose denouncements and claims of spectral assault propelled the witch trials into the annals of history – as 'unbalanced *teen-agers*' and 'bobby-soxers', it is essential to first understand the strangeness of teenagers in the mid-twentieth century. Although the term 'adolescence' had gained some degree of currency by the turn of the century, following the publication of the psychologist G. Stanley Hall's comprehensive analysis of the demographic in *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (1904), its use was largely

[9] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), n. p., emphasis added.
[10] Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths*, loc. 2084.

confined to the social and psychological sciences.[11] Indeed, as Ilana Nash demonstrates, the 'general consensus of teen identity manifested very sparsely before the 1930s'.[12] Palladino describes, for instance, how up until the 1930s, most adolescents worked – either in factories, on farms, or in the home – and, as such, lacked the capacity to develop a distinct demographic identity.[13]

It was not until the scarcity that characterised the Great Depression that the first rumblings of a cohesive teenage identity could be heard. With fewer jobs available for adults, teenagers who may have previously worked in industry or agriculture were herded *en masse* into the classroom. This large-scale movement into second-level education proved pivotal, as it enabled teens to convene as a peer group and to carve out their own unique cultural space. The concept of adolescence was no longer reserved for the wealthy. Palladino notes that, in the rush to the classroom,

> adolescents had become an age group and not just a wealthy social class, a shift that helped to create the idea of a separate teenage generation. When a teenage majority spent the better part of their day in high school, they learned to look to one another and not to adults for advice, information and approval.[14]

At the same time, it is important not to underestimate the importance of advertising and the influence of post-war affluence on the construction of the teenager as a distinct social demographic. As Jon Savage observes, '[f]rom the very start, [teenager] was a marketing term used by advertisers and manufacturers that reflected the newly visible spending power of adolescents'.[15] It was this consolidation of a visible market demographic that led to the construction of the teenage years as a 'discrete age group with its own rituals, rights, and demands'.[16] Published in the midst of this demographic and cultural turmoil, *The Devil in Massachusetts* addresses itself directly to the cultural concerns of the era. Although Starkey draws numerous parallels between the Salem witch trials and both the totalitarianism that led to World War II and the paranoia of post-war American culture, she nevertheless lays the blame for the panic squarely with a group of female adolescents, who she describes as 'crazed little girls'.[17] While numerous studies of the Salem trials had already been published by the mid-twentieth century, Starkey's unique contribution to scholarly and cultural discourses on the

[11] Nash, *American Sweethearts*, p. 17.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Palladino, *Teenagers*, p. 5.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (Chatto and Windus, 2007), p. xiii.
[16] Savage, *Teenage*, p. xiii.
[17] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 13.

trials resides in her explicit conflation of the Salem girls and contemporary teenagers, a transhistorical amalgamation that she renders in the new language of teen fads, which had grown up in the post-war period.[18]

'All Manner of Cravings and Urges': The Disruptive Power of the Pubertal Body in *The Devil in Massachusetts*

At once embodying youthful promise and rebellious dissent, teenage girls were regularly understood as strange, disruptive in their sexuality, and fanatical in their devotion to boys and movie stars. Starkey's characterisation of Salem's seventeenth-century bobby soxers certainly echoes these concerns about adolescents. In discussing the girls' claims of bewitchment, Starkey contends that '[t]he girls were no more seriously possessed than a pack of bobby-soxers on the loose'.[19] Here, Starkey compares the hysterical behaviour of the afflicted to the excesses that were seen to permeate other intense moments of emotive sociality: a religious revival, a fascist rally, and, significantly, the elaborate performances of grief staged by teen girls mourning a dead movie star. In this analogy, Starkey is most likely thinking of the extravagant grieving of young women in the wake of silent-movie star Rudolph Valentino's untimely death in 1926. However, similar displays of spectacular sorrow would also take place six years after the publication of Starkey's book, in the wake of teen icon James Dean's sudden death. Starkey observes in this passage that a comparable performance of hysteria can be seen in the image of adolescent girls' intense adoration for contemporary crooners.[20] Here, Starkey demonises the passions and collective fantasies of teenage girls by comparing music fans and mourners of popular icons to attendees at religious revivals and, even more disturbingly, fascist rallies.

Starkey's portrayal of the Salem afflicted as a threat to the social order thus echoes, in decidedly modern language, the anxieties about teenage girls that were crackling like electricity in the air of 1940s America. Teenage girls in the post-war period were often seen as uniquely threatening because of their boundless energies, not the least of which was their seemingly infinite capacity for sexual transgression. After all, caught in the midst of pubescent chaos, teenage girls were hormonal and apparently 'boy crazy'; without the regulatory institutions of marriage and motherhood to contain them, it seemed that their sexual energies had the potential for untold destruction. Parlaying this widespread societal concern with adolescent sexuality

[18] Most notably Charles W. Upham's *Salem Witchcraft* (1897).
[19] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 46.
[20] Ibid.

and emotion into her interrogation of the origins of Salem's witchcraft panic, Starkey describes, again in quintessentially modern terms, how

> There was in Salem Village in the winter of 1691-2 quite a store of young girls, unattached teenagers. The Puritans, sober in all things, quite properly looked on marriage as a serious business and did not favour it for the very young. Thus there were several girls about who had reached the age of sixteen, seventeen, and even twenty still manless and unprovided for, and those girls were instinct with repressed vitality, with all manner of cravings and urges for which village life afforded no outlet.[21]

For Starkey, Salem's afflicted were motivated by typical adolescent boredom, by the tedium of chores and the isolation of long winters devoid of company. Like teen girls confined to their bedrooms, the young women of Salem were straining against the rules of adult society and the directionless monotony of adolescence. Moreover, in Starkey's rendering of history, they were 'manless', single girls with no outlet for their burgeoning sexuality, and it was this repressed sexual energy that would eventually cause them to see witches perched on the beams of the Salem meeting house, and feel spectral pins pricking their delicate skin. Starkey's preoccupation with the unfulfilled cravings and urges of the Salem girls is especially significant in that it is less reflective of Puritan discourses on girlhood, which were grounded in the idea of preparation for one's wifely duty, than it is of mid-twentieth century ideas about puberty and the female body.[22]

Starkey's formulation of unproductive, directionless female sexuality transforming into destructive violence is evocative of constructions of femininity inaugurated in the wake of the nineteenth-century 'discovery' of sex hormones.[23] Although many scholars have since dismissed the notion that radically different hormonal compositions can fully account for sex differences between men and women, ideas about hormones as the primary source of sexual divergence persist in popular culture.[24] Even more ubiquitous, however, is the image of fluctuating, volatile hormones exerting an irresistible force over both the female mind and body, which remained pervasive throughout the twentieth century. Discussing pubertal differences between boys and girls, Elizabeth Grosz notes that while boys and girls reach

[21] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 32.
[22] See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (Vintage, 1991).
[23] Jane M. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (Routledge, 2006), p. 15.
[24] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, p. 15.

puberty at around the same time, boys' maturation is viewed in far more rational terms, conceived of as the onset of mature sexuality.[25] She states that

> Puberty for girls marks the development of the breasts and the beginnings of menstruation as an entry into the reproductive reality that is presumed to be women's prime domain. Puberty is not figured as the coming of a self-chosen sexual maturity but as the signal of immanent reproductive capacities.[26]

Here, Grosz articulates perhaps the key division between cultural constructions of male and female adolescence. While male adolescence is grounded in notions of maturity and increased agency ('self-chosen sexual maturity'), female adolescence is defined by a lack of control, an irrational capitulation to the forces of biology and the inevitability of fecundity. The teenage girl is thus figured as a biocultural agent whose social marginality is the product of her excessive corporeality.

This rhetoric of uncontrollable female biology was a key component of post-World War II conversations about puberty and menarche. For much of this period, sex-education materials aimed at adolescent girls stressed, rather explicitly, the unruly nature of the pubertal body, and outlined steps that could be taken to control its seepages and disturbances. In her study of twentieth-century puberty pamphlets for girls, Michelle H. Martin discusses the ubiquity of references to containment in these texts, remarking that

> A consistent theme throughout the puberty pamphlets from Kimberly Clark (makers of Kotex products), Personal Products (makers of Always brand sanitary products and, earlier, Modess), and Tambrands (makers of Tampax) is that although menstruation is 'perfectly natural', women must pay special attention to their body odor, particularly while menstruating.[27]

The discourse surrounding menstruation and embodied femininity was, for much of the twentieth century, explicitly preoccupied with a vision of the female body as home to disruptive, unstable, and dangerous forces that perennially threatened to break free. Throughout *The Devil in Massachusetts*, Starkey's description of Salem's bewitched girls pivots around such notions of barely contained feminine excess and out-of-control bodies. Although not specifically referencing menstruation or hormonal fluctuation, the subtext underpinning her multitude of allusions to the girls' 'high spirits', 'tensions', and 'repressed vitality' is clearly

[25] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 204.
[26] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 205.
[27] Michelle H. Martin, '"No One Will Ever Know Your Secret!" Commercial Puberty Pamphlets for Girls from the 1940s to the 1990s', in *Sexual Pedagogies: Sex Education in Britain, Australia, and America, 1879–2000*, ed. by Claudia Nelson and Michelle H. Martin (Palgrave, 2004), pp. 135-54 (p. 142).

intended to signify pubertal upheaval and frustrated sexual impulses. The Salem afflicted, this store of restive, unmarried adolescents, serve to embody the complex status of the teenage girl in the post-war public imagination.

On the one hand, the adolescent girl is a cultural agent, a specific demographic within the broader social arena. Yet, on the other, she is visibly a part of the biological realm, defined by her metamorphic corporeality and the physical symptoms of puberty. She appears as a somewhat threatening figure, her 'feminine excess' (signified by hair growth, dermatological eruptions, and seeping fluids) an uncanny reminder of nature's capacity to reclaim culture. Starkey's teenage girls inhabit this interstitial borderland, their disruption of the community arising from the irrepressible tide of biological tumult surging within. Describing twelve year-old Ann Putnam, Jr, one of the central accusers, Starkey writes that 'Ann was now on the verge of adolescence, already subject to the preliminary strains of that difficult period, to unexplained pains and heaviness in the limbs, to dizziness and flashes of imagination so vivid that they sometime resemble hallucinations'.[28] Ann's propensity towards fantasy and intense flashes of imagination is here explicitly connected to the physical metamorphosis of adolescence, the girl's dizziness and heavy limbs apparently drawing her into soporific flights of fancy. In Starkey's figuration of events, Ann's role as an afflicted girl, her spectral visions and susceptibility to supernatural harassment, is intimately connected to her adolescent biology. The supernatural is therefore explicitly linked to the biological upheavals and hormonal fluctuations of puberty.

'Some Reddish Work Done at Night': Puberty, Sexuality and Hysteria in *The Devil in Massachusetts* and *The Crucible*

Considering the vast influence that Starkey's work exerted in the post-World War II period, the migration of her anachronistically modern Salem girls from historical discourse to the more fanciful territory of fiction seems like an organic evolution of the nascent teen-witch trope. In her study of American witchcraft myths, Gibson describes the influence of Starkey's book on Arthur Miller's seminal dramatisation of the Salem witch trials, *The Crucible* (1953).[29] Moreover, Miller himself cites the influence of Starkey in his essay 'The Crucible in History'. Describing the moment in which the connection between post-war American anti-communism and seventeenth-century witchcraft hysteria crystallised in his mind, Miller writes that the germ

[28] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 38.
[29] Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths*, loc. 2095.

of the idea took root when, on a 'lucky afternoon', he came across a copy of *The Devil in Massachusetts.*[30] Although intended as an allegory of the McCarthy-era's anti-communist persecutions, *The Crucible* is notable in that it locates the source of Salem's witchcraft panic not so much in oppressive Puritan power structures nor in populist prejudice – a clear departure from earlier works that advanced a view of the trials as a historical indictment of either the 'democratic mob' or a scheming elite – but rather in the chaos of hormonal adolescence. [31]

A recurring linguistic motif that runs throughout Miller's play is the regularity with which the words 'girls' or 'children' are used to describe the Salem afflicted. Although historical records show that these terms were sometimes applied to accusers, in reality the Salem bewitched included both men and women, old and young. Nevertheless, the afflicted girls in *The Crucible* are portrayed as just that: a gang of teenage girls inflamed by desire, intense adolescent crushes, peer pressure, and petty jealousy. Margo Burns notes that, despite Miller's characterisation of the young women at the centre of the Salem trials as a homogenous group of teenage girls, the core group at the nexus of the panic was in fact far more diverse:

> The alleged 'afflicted' comprised not just a group of a dozen teenage girls – there were men and adult women who also claimed 'affliction', including John Indian, Ann Putnam, Sr, and Sarah Bibber – and there were more in Andover, where the total number of people accused was greater than any other town, including Salem Village.[32]

Miller's play essentially erases these older afflicted, reducing the core group to a gaggle of teenage girls, who, in the pettiness of their motivations and the intense, cultish elements of their relationships, mirror popular 1950s representations of high-school girls.

In one of her humorous domestic essays, Shirley Jackson identifies a quasi-tribal mentality amongst the phalanx of teenage girls of which her own thirteen-year-old daughter is a part:

> It is the participation in group thought that is the pattern of the thirteen-year-old life, not the group thought of manufacturers of charm bracelets, or even the makers of 45-rpm records, but the group thinking of her own crew, the Lindas and the Caroles and the Cheryls and the Barbaras, who decide by a kind of spontaneous flare that one disc jockey is preferable to another, or one television program is, as of this moment, dull and another exciting. […] her life

[30] Arthur Miller, 'The Crucible in History', in *The Collected Essays of Arthur Miller* (Bloomsbury Metheun Drama, 2015), pp. 465-83 (p. 476).
[31] Gibson, *Witchcraft Myths*, loc. 763.
[32] Margo Burns, 'Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*: Fact and Fiction (or Picky, Picky, Picky ...)', *Seventeenth-Century Colonial New England*, 30 October 2015 <http://www.17thc.us/docs/fact-fiction.shtml> [accessed 1 April 2019].

> is controlled, possessed, by a shifting set of laws that make your garden-variety savage initiation rite look like milk time in the nursery school.[33]

In this short piece, Jackson attributes an almost supernatural power to the teen girls, who appear to almost psychically manipulate the behaviours and attitudes of their peers. In *The Crucible,* the leader of the afflicted girls is Abigail Williams, her age raised for the purposes of drama from eleven – as she was in reality – to seventeen. Recalling Jackson's pubertal 'savages', Abigail seems possessed of an uncanny power to control her adolescent peers. Indeed, Abigail also fits perfectly with Starkey's description of Salem's primary troublemakers as 'bobby-soxers', older teenage girls whose minds were nevertheless immature.[34]

Although there is no concrete evidence for this in the historical record, Miller's older Abigail is also explicitly associated with the occult, having been observed by her uncle, Reverend Parris, 'dancing like [a] heathen in the forest'.[35] In *The Crucible*, we are told that the adolescent Abigail has engaged in magical practices that would certainly have been denounced as witchcraft by her community, and her uncle accuses her of having 'trafficked with spirits in the forest'.[36] Leaving behind the rigid strictures of her suffocating community, Abigail flees to the liberating space of the forest to take part in occult rituals. Moreover, Abigail, we are told, is not simply content to transgress Puritan prohibitions against dancing. Her young cousin Betty reminds her early in the play that she went to the forest and 'drank a charm to kill John Proctor's wife', accusing the older girl: 'You drank blood, Abby!'[37] In this way, Abigail, like the teen girls addressed in mid-century puberty pamphlets, is closely linked to images of blood and seepage. Attempting to silence the frightened Betty and dissuade her from informing the reverend about their dalliances with the occult, Abigail warns the child that if she speaks of their woodland rituals,

> I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you. And you know I can do it; I saw Indians smash my dear parents' heads on the pillow next to mine, and I have seen some reddish work done at night, and I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down! [38]

[33] Shirley Jackson, 'On Girls of Thirteen', in *Let Me Tell You: New Stories, Essays, and Other Writings*, ed. by Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman Dewitt (Random House, 2016), pp. 359-64 (p. 363).
[34] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 14.
[35] Miller, *The Crucible* (Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 8.
[36] Miller, *The Crucible*, p. 9.
[37] Miller, *The Crucible*, p.15.
[38] Miller, *The Crucible*, pp. 14-15.

Although its proximity to Abigail's description of her parents' murder by 'Indians' suggests that her knowledge of violence stems from her experiences of conflict on the Maine frontier, the term 'reddish work' evokes imagery of blood magic such as that used on Goody Proctor.[39] Abigail thus becomes associated with blood and consequently with feminine excess that threatens to spill over and infect the social order. Recalling post-war figurations of female adolescence as defined by the omnipresent threat of seepage – odours and fluids that must be contained – and the imperative that teen girls learn how to properly control their bodies, Abigail's connection to blood and 'reddish work' gestures towards a subversive femininity in which the corporeal is not repressed for the sake of the social order. Such embedded references to effluvia also recall early-modern conceptions of the witch as essentially Protean, capable of 'unfixing' the 'limits of her own body by shifting her shape'.[40] In contrast to the contemporary emphasis on the need for corporeal control and the importance of the teen girl imbibing strategies to enact this control, Abigail's association with all things sanguine suggests an abject erosion of bodily boundaries and a disregard for the separation of the social and the biological. In this way, Abigail reflects not only Starkey's description of the Salem girls as restless, frustrated teens, but through her engagement with occult rituals, she also gestures forward to the more cohesive pop-culture archetype of the teen witch who would follow in her wake.

Like Starkey, Miller also conflates bewitchment and excessive feminine biology. Echoing Starkey's description of Ann Putnam, Jr as a metamorphic creature on the verge of adolescence, prone to the lethargy and physical discomfort of the teenage years, Miller has his fictional Ann, Sr complain that her daughter has become a strange, remote creature: 'A secret child she has become this year, and shrivels like a sucking mouth were pullin' on her life too.'[41] Starkey's work similarly locates the strangeness of the Salem accusers in their excessive female biology and, in doing so, she attempts to diagnose the girls through contemporary psychoanalytic paradigms. Early in her book, Starkey describes how the quasi-Edenic space of early-modern Massachusetts was brought to the brink of ruin by 'the prophecies of crazed little girls'.[42] In her diagnosis of the girls, Starkey observes that the force of their delusions (spectres balanced on courthouse beams, malevolent birds, the dark presence of a sinister 'black man'),

[39] See Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (Vintage, 2002) for a detailed discussion of the relationship between the Salem witchcraft panic and the influx of refugees from the Indian Wars on the Maine frontier.
[40] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (Routledge, 1996), p. 125.
[41] Miller, *The Crucible*, p. 12. Note that in Miller's play Ann Putnam, Jr has been renamed Ruth, possibly to avoid confusion with her mother, Ann Putnam, Sr.
[42] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 13.

combined with their spectacular displays of physical affliction (fits, fainting, the sensation of spectral pin pricks) suggests that the girls are suffering from that most indefinite and all-encompassing female malady: hysteria. With the surety of the modern observer, Starkey confidently claims that despite the strangeness of the girls' demonical behaviour, 'the general pattern of their conduct is clear enough; in modern terms they all of them, in one degree or another, had hysteria'.[43]

For Starkey, this diagnosis of hysteria is in keeping with 'the findings of modern psychology, particularly the Freudian school'.[44] Although hysteria was becoming outmoded by the end of the 1940s – it is absent from the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-1) (1952)[45] – the diagnosis nevertheless retained a great deal of rhetorical power as a means of defining feminine excess, both biological and psychological. Jane M. Ussher contends that it is for this reason that ordinary femininity, the everyday processes of womanhood, are often discursively and imaginatively merged with hysteria: simply being a woman is to invite hysteria.[46] The premenstrual woman, for example, is frequently constructed as 'mad, bad or dangerous – driven to violence or criminality because of corporeality out of control, with the abject body blamed for a host of aberrations, from murder, to moodiness, and everything in-between'.[47] Tellingly, Ussher suggests, this 'hysterisization' of the fecund body begins at menarche.[48] Starkey's diagnosis of the Salem girls as suffering from hysteria is therefore significant in its lexical and categorical slipperiness. It suggests psychological and biological tumult, but it also functions as shorthand for unruly feminine excess in a more general sense.

Taking its cue from Starkey's history, Miller's *The Crucible* also portrays the Salem girls as consumed by an analogous hysteria; here, the condition is envisioned as a spectacular retreat into visionary supernaturalism and elaborate physical performance that serves to release them from the constraints of a rigid Puritan social order. Hysteria and hysterical behaviour are mentioned numerous times throughout the play. Notably, references to the pathology are confined to the stage directions, so that they appear to be a contemporary diagnosis that informs the actors' movements and expressions, without ever intruding upon the dialogue of the play's seventeenth-century characters. Thus, Miller's representation of the girls' behaviour frames

[43] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 45.
[44] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 17.
[45] Patricia Gherovici, 'Where Have the Hysterics Gone? Lacan's Reinvention of Hysteria', *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 40.1 (2014), pp. 47-70 (p. 47), doi:10.1353/esc.2014.0000.
[46] Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, p. 24.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

them as occupying a nebulous space between bewitchment and hysteria. In the initial stages of her enchantment, Betty Parris, the first of the girls to display symptoms of supernatural affliction, is portrayed as suffering from a sort of hysterical paralysis, an immobility that has been recorded in cases of hysteria stretching from the early-modern period through to Freud's treatment of 'Anna O'.[49] In the stage directions for Act One of Miller's play, we are told that 'BETTY PARRIS, aged ten, is lying on the bed, inert'.[50] In her soporific state, Betty enacts a retreat inwards, away from society and into the body. Upon waking, her behaviour is erratic and unstable; her pathology has transmuted into the kind of liberating excess that the theorists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément view as characteristic of the hysteric: Betty 'darts off the bed' and 'flattens herself against the wall', crying out for her deceased mother.[51] Asserting that she will 'fly to Mama', Betty 'raises her arm as though to fly, and streaks for the window, gets one leg out'.[52] Her dramatic acts of abnormal defiance transform her into a 'stylized [channel] into which *excess* demonically flows – excess desire, excess rage, excess creative energy – only to be annihilated by the society that drove it in such directions'.[53]

Moreover, in *The Crucible*, the girls' hysteria often manifests as a group phenomenon, recalling the quasi-anthropological studies of mid-century teen girls that appeared in the media around this time. Just as these portrayals often foregrounded the symbiotic nature of friendships between teen girls, as well the rigidity and homogeneity of their social groupings, so too does Miller present the Salem bewitched as embroiled in a form of group thought that enables each girl's hysteric excess to transcend her own corporeality and affect those around her. When Mary Warren, the Proctor's servant girl, attempts to extricate herself from the accusing circle, Abigail Williams and the other girls respond as if bewitched, imitating Mary's words and actions in unison:

> MARY WARREN [pleading]: Abby, you mustn't!
> ABIGAIL AND ALL THE GIRLS [all transfixed]: Abby, you mustn't!
> MARY WARREN [to all the girls]: I'm here, I'm here!
> GIRLS: I'm here, I'm here!
> […]
> MARY WARREN [screaming at the top of her lungs, and raising her fists]: Stop it!!
> GIRLS [raising their fists]: Stop it!!

[49] Andrew Scull, *Madness in Civilisation: A Cultural History of Insanity, from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine* (Thames and Hudson, 2016), p. 2 and p. 135.
[50] Miller, *The Crucible*, p. 4.
[51] Miller, *The Crucible*, p. 14.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Introduction: A Tarentella of Theory', in *The Newly Born Woman*, ed. by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. ix-xviii (p. xii).

> [MARY WARREN, utterly confounded, and becoming overwhelmed by ABIGAIL's – and the girls' – utter conviction, starts to whimper, hands half raised, powerless, and all the girls start whimpering exactly as she does.][54]

Miller's afflicted girls are therefore emblematic of a series of potent post-war concerns about adolescence as a new cultural demographic, designated at least in part by intense peer relations. Indeed, the behaviour of the Salem girls – their unthinking adherence to the cruel demands of their ostensible leader Abigail, the viciousness with which they ostracise those who fail to conform to group norms – suggests that Miller has imbibed, at least to a degree, the era's widescale contempt for teenage girls. His portrayal of the afflicted merges with popular mid-century images of adolescent femininity as spiteful, impulsive, conformist, and mean-spirited. Yet, following Starkey, Miller merges this vision of the teenage girl with the iconography of possession and the supernatural. In doing so, both authors generate dynamic new ways of thinking through female adolescence. This mode of conceptualising adolescent girlhood employs images of bewitchment, hysterical violence, and uncanny corporeal seepage as means to articulate and understand the novel phenomenon of the liminal, disruptive, and potentially destructive teenage girl.

The Teen Witch in Young-Adult Historical Fiction

Beyond the direct influence exerted on Miller by Starkey, other works of mid-twentieth century historical fiction also owe a debt to her figuration of the Salem accusers as defined by psychic and corporeal excess, while also echoing Starkey's anachronistic construction of the afflicted as modern teenagers. In 1964, the author and civil-rights advocate Ann Petry produced a young-adult novel centred around the experiences of the slave Tituba and her interactions with the Salem girls. Petry's book begins with a brief glimpse of Tituba's life in Barbados, an island described as lying 'like a jewel sparkling in the sea. Its yellow-white coral-encrusted coast line [blazing] in the brilliant light.'[55] When her mistress, desperate for money, sells both Tituba and her husband, John Indian, to a Boston minister, the pair are forced to leave their bright, colourful Caribbean home for the cold winters and grey skies of Boston. In contrast to *The Crucible* and other fictional retellings of the Salem witch trials, Petry moves Tituba – historically, the first person accused of witchcraft – from the periphery of the story to the centre. Thus, *Tituba of Salem* fulfils what Jerome De Groot considers to be one of the paradigmatic

[54] Miller, *The Crucible*, p. 73.
[55] Ann Petry, *Tituba of Salem Village* (Open Road Media Teen & Tween, 2015), Kindle edition, n. p.

functions of historical fiction, its capacity to be 'a disruptive genre, a series of interventions which have sought to destabilise cultural hegemonies and challenge normalities'.[56]

The novel details Tituba's loneliness in her new home, but also shows her developing deep, meaningful relationships with her master's family and the neighbouring servant girls. The novel also attempts to upend existing historical and literary stereotypes that frame Tituba as a sorceress or voodoo practitioner; it does so by explaining that the slave was taught to read fortunes at the behest of her superstitious mistress: 'She liked to play card games. She liked to have her fortune told. She'd had a gypsy women teach Tituba how to tell fortunes with cards.'[57] As the narrative unfolds and the village of Salem is gripped by fears of witchcraft, Petry delineates how Tituba, an enslaved woman of colour, therefore became a convenient scapegoat for her community. In this way, Petry uses Tituba's story to recover the silenced voices of Black slaves and serving girls, those figures relegated to the margins of history. Like Miller, Petry uses the story of Salem to explore contemporary social issues. However, while Miller constructs the events of seventeenth-century Massachusetts as an analogue for McCarthyism, Petry establishes a parallel with the 'political movements in Black America since the sixties'.[58]

Where Petry's novel coincides with Miller's play is in its portrayal of the destabilising power of adolescent, or occasionally pre-teen, energy. As Lloyd W. Brown observes, Petry renders Abigail Williams as a rebellious figure, desirous of love and attention from those around her.[59] However, Abigail is not the only destructive force present in Petry's Salem. Echoing Starkey's description of a 'store' of bored, directionless Salem girls provoked by the tedium of long winters, Petry likewise depicts the restlessness of the Parris children and other local girls, mostly servants, as the catalyst for the Salem panic.[60] It is their fascination with fortune telling and their desire to know what the future holds that sparks Salem's hysteria. Tempting Mary Warren to have her tarot read by Tituba, Abigail goads her friend to enter the realm of the supernatural by asking: 'Wouldn't you like to know who you're going to marry? And if you're going to have a farm or live in a fine house in Boston? Wouldn't you like to know if you'll have servants so you can box their ears and beat them with brooms? Wouldn't you like to find out?'[61] For the young girls of Petry's Salem – children charged with silence and obedience, or indentured servants desperate for a better future – Tituba's occult practices

[56] Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Routledge, 2010), p. 139.
[57] Petry, *Tituba*.
[58] Lloyd W. Brown, 'Tituba of Barbados and the American Conscience: Historical Perspectives in Arthur Miller and Ann Petry', *Caribbean Studies*, 13 (1974), pp. 118-26 (p. 118).
[59] Brown, p. 125.
[60] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 32.
[61] Petry, *Tituba*.

provide a means for them to transgress the tedious rigidity of their lives and escape to a fantasy world of wondrous future possibilities. Echoing Starkey's portrait of eager teen girls lured to the Parris kitchen by what she calls 'Tituba's fascination', Petry sees much of Salem's misfortune as originating in the frustrations, hopes, and aspirations of disenfranchised young girls.[62]

Grosz notes that such fantasising or daydreaming is essential to the embodied experience of adolescent femininity. For Grosz, because the 'adolescent body is commonly experienced as awkward, alienating, an undesired biological imposition', teenagers are regularly tormented by the 'discord between the body image and the lived body'.[63] She goes on to note that 'the philosophical desire to transcend corporeality and its urges may be dated' from adolescence.[64] Yet, while this analysis may suggest a flight into asceticism and spirituality, it is more often the case, in both fiction and reality, that teenagers escape the pains and bodily eruptions of adolescence by giving themselves over to fantasies in which the self is whole and unified, attractive and in control of its functions. The opportunity to disappear into a fantasy of elegance and wealth enables the Salem girls to transcend their awkward physicality and marginal social position in order to lose themselves in a world of opulence and power.

Later when their interest in fortune telling is discovered by the adults of the village, the girls concoct elaborate tales of bewitchment to account for their behaviour. The 'bound girl', Mercy Lewis, even goes so far as to claim assault by demonic forces in an attempt to disguise her failed elopement with another young servant. The girls' fantasies are wildly disruptive. They upend the social order and invert the rigidly hierarchical structure of Puritan Salem. Again, the excess associated with feminine adolescence, whether corporeal, psychic, or fantastic, poses a danger once it is unleashed. Nevertheless, despite the chaos they engender, the girls themselves, by virtue of their elaborate tales and accusations, come to occupy a privileged position within their community. No longer relegated to silence and invisibility, they are the bright nucleus around which village life orbits. Now, they are treasured and are consequently moved from the margins to the centre of village life. Moreover, many of the girls find that their social category has changed. As adolescents, occupying a nebulous space between girl and woman, their social designation is fluid: before their assault by spiritual forces, they are seen as adults, occupying the role of servants, but once in the grip of supernatural forces, they become children, delicate and in need of care. As Mercy Lewis

[62] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 31.
[63] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 75.
[64] Ibid.

observes: 'Sixteen years old I am and up until now I have been the serving wench. That's what they've always called me and now, now, I am child to be treated tenderly.'[65] The status of the Salem girls is malleable, plastic, and capable of change. In ordinary circumstances, they are viewed as servants, grown women, or 'wenches' occupying a marginal social role. Once their fantasies cast them as supernaturally afflicted and capable of mystical insights, they are treasured and coddled.

Significantly, the girls – all of whom are white – are praised for their daydreaming, all the while using Tituba – a woman of colour – as a blank canvas onto which they project their fantasies of divination and occultism. Mirroring the relationship with her mistress, who had Tituba learn fortune telling for her amusement, the slave woman becomes a means for the white adolescents of Salem to transgress the mundanity of their daily lives. Because of her visible Otherness, she becomes emblematic of an exotic mysticism through which the girls seek to flee the constraints of their strict Puritan community. While the adolescent girls of the village escape into fantasies of witchcraft and are ultimately praised by their elders for their ability to divine the presence of malefactors, Tituba is punished for her fantasising. A slave sold away from her Caribbean home to the unforgiving cold of New England, Tituba frequently dreams of being in Barbados. However, unlike the girls – whose visions of demons and wicked hags result in their being embraced as seers – Tituba is condemned for her fantasies of home, and her imagined returns to the Caribbean are mistaken for the nocturnal flights of witches. When she tells her master that '"I go to Barbados, to the island, in my dreams"', he assumes that sinister magic is at play: '"Then you admit you can be in two places at once."'[66] As a woman of colour, fantasy is dangerous for Tituba. Her dreams do not lead to sympathy from the townspeople, nor to the coddling relished by Mercy Lewis. Certainly, Tituba's status as an adult woman plays a role in her persecution, but more than that, it is her status as a racial Other that leads to her demonisation by the community.

Palladino argues that the vision of teenage girls as mischievous bobby soxers, vacillating between fresh-faced innocence and threatening, precocious sexuality, was never applied to minority adolescents. Rather, in her discussion of the Mexican-American teens who would have been contemporaries of the era's bobby soxers, Palladino describes how Mexican girls, or *Pachuquitas*, whose fashions consisted of short skirts, sheer blouses, red lipstick, and dark makeup, were described by critics as 'little tornados of sexualised stimuli'.[67] In this way,

[65] Petry, *Tituba*.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Palladino, *Teenagers*, p. 159.

while white teenage girls were approached with a great deal of ambivalence, ethnic-minority teenagers were viewed as wholly, unequivocally destructive. Petry's novel captures this double standard. Tituba's fantasies are viewed as diabolically inspired, and therefore carry with them the penalty of hanging. The daydreams of the white teenage girls who keep Tituba company on the margins of their Puritan community are undeniably excessive, seeping out of the girl's fantasies and releasing a persecutory spirit into the town. Yet, as much as the girls are framed as destructive figures within the novel, the response of community elders is one of ambivalence: the Salem afflicted are marginal, often disobedient creatures, yet at the same time, they are embraced for their visionary qualities. *Tituba of Salem Village* is one of the few teen-witch texts to emerge at this time that explicitly addressed the racialised nature of the post-war phenomenon of the teenager. While Tituba is here figured as a grown woman in her 30s, she nevertheless serves as a contrast to the Salem girls, whose destructive daydreams are always tinged by perceptions of innocence. By presenting adolescent and pre-teen girls as possessed of the capability to unleash disruptive fantasies while simultaneously being held aloft as paragons of youthful innocence, Petry's novel suggests that the conflicted image of the bobby soxer that defined post-war America was facilitated by the whiteness of these teenagers. No such ambivalence accrues around women of colour, whether teenagers or adults, and Tituba's dreams arouse neither sympathy nor curiosity. She is demonised by the community and narrowly escapes death by bolstering the girls' tales of diabolical pacts and woodland sabbaths.

In *The Crucible* and *Tituba of Salem Village*, as in Starkey's generative work of historical scholarship, teenage girls are figured as dangerously unstable entities. They exist on the border between adulthood and childhood, while through their corporeal and psychic excesses, they draw attention to the fragile boundary between inside and outside, body and society. In all of these works, the Salem girls – through their preoccupation with the occult and propensity for mediumistic divination – occupy a nebulous space somewhere between witch and bewitched. Thus, these teenage mystics invariably recall Kristeva's formulation of the abject. A phenomenon intimately connected to the dissolution of boundaries, Kristeva's description of the abject conjures up notions of the uncanny, while at the same time remaining 'essentially different from "uncanniness", more violent, too'.[68] For Kristeva, the abject is that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'[69] Manifest in blood, excrement, and bodily fluids, as well as in the ultimate

[68] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 5.
[69] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

cataclysm of the corpse, the abject reminds us that those categories and distinctions by which we live and construct our reality are as fragile as gossamer: the law can be violated, taboos broken, and the corporeal body penetrated. According to Barbara Creed, in her discussion of the abject, 'Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection works within human societies, as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject'.[70] The Salem seeresses of Starkey's history and the occult-obsessed teens of post-war fiction unequivocally embody such notions of the abject. As a new cultural phenomenon, the teen girl demolished the border between child and woman, causing a profound uncertainty as to her identificatory status.

At the same time, it is equally difficult to determine if she is a fully constituted subject or only partially formed, still in the midst of her constitution. Nash writes that '[s]tanding at the crossroads between childhood and womanhood, the teen girl faces Janus-like in both directions, a liminal figure who combines two identities that incite pleasure and anxiety in the adult male'.[71] In this way, the liminality of the teen girl reflects the equally indeterminate nature of the witch. According to Malcolm Gaskill, witches are unique precisely because of their interstitial nature and their confusion of categories: 'witches are human. Unlike monsters, they belong to society – a disguised enemy. They are "other" and yet they are also "us".'[72] Creed also draws attention to this abject, transgressive feature of the sorceress. For Creed, '[t]he witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and the irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her powers are seen as part of her "feminine" nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms.'[73] This motif of womanhood as supernatural due to its connection to nature or the primitive is a recurrent motif in Starkey's historical work on Salem, where she explicitly connects the girls with the irrational: 'During the witchcraft, and to some extent through the witchcraft, thinking people in Massachusetts passed over the watershed that divides the mystery and magic of late medieval thinking from the more rational climate of opinion referred to as "the Enlightenment".'[74] For Starkey, the quasi-supernatural girls of Salem are connected to the medieval, to the 'Dark Ages', while the sceptics and public figures, mostly adult men, who saw the trials brought to their denouement, are associated with progress and enlightenment. Thus, while the Salem girls were viewed as quasi-divine messengers during the early stages of the trials, later histories treat them as

[70] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993), p. 8.
[71] Nash, *American Sweethearts*, p. 3.
[72] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1.
[73] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 76.
[74] Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, p. 15.

fanatical, irrational girls who become the conduit through which men experience enlightenment and craft civilisation.

Yet, despite the adolescent witch's connection with anxiety-inducing figurations of darkness, transgression, and the abject, there is also a sense in which the teen sorceress can unveil new possibilities for adolescent identity. The heroine of Elizabeth George Speare's young-adult novel *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1958) earns her status as a teen witch not by engaging in fortune telling or mediumship, but rather because she is seen as a witch by her small New England community. The novel follows a sixteen-year-old girl named Kit Tyler who, in the spring of 1687, leaves Barbados where she had been raised by her doting grandfather to live with austere Puritan relatives in New England. Kit is spoiled and decadent in her ways, arriving in the devout colony with trunks full of silk dresses and delicate kid gloves. She arouses both envy and fascination in her teenage cousins Judith and Mercy, but in particular she raises the ire of her deeply religious uncle Matthew, as well as that of the small, insular community. Before even setting foot in the town, Kit is suspected of witchcraft because she demonstrates the ability to swim and 'a true witch will always float'.[75] Kit, however, is not literally a teenage witch. She does not practice witchcraft and she does not possess magical powers. Yet, the identity of an adolescent witch is projected onto her by the townspeople. Significantly, though, unlike Starkey's bobby soxers, Kit does not reflect fears about the newly emergent teen demographic, but instead serves as a model for responsibility and kindness. According to Ramona Caponegro, 'the allegations of witchcraft against sixteen-year-old Kit, the story's protagonist, are an allegory for the public's panic about juvenile delinquency'.[76] Unlike the directionless adolescents of Starkey's Salem, Kit does not embody the uncontainable power of youthful energy or repressed sexual drive. Instead, she is merely an outsider, coming from Barbados with her 'Royalist loyalties, Anglican faith, and proslavery beliefs'.[77] She is strange by the standards of her new home: she can read, she dives into the river to rescue a little girl's lost doll, and her friendship with an old Quaker woman leads to her being further ostracised and persecuted by the narrow-minded Puritan community. She arouses disdain and suspicion amongst the townspeople primarily because she displays traits typical of a mid-twentieth-century American teenager: she has a love of fashionable clothing and a distaste for chores.

[75] Elizabeth George Speare, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Houghton Mifflin, 2011), p. 13.
[76] Ramona Caponegro, 'Where the "Bad" Girls Are (Contained): Representations of the 1950s Female Juvenile Delinquent in Children's Literature and *Ladies' Home Journal*', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 34 (2009), pp. 312-29 (p. 323), doi:10.1353/chq.0.1941.
[77] Caponegro, 'Where the "Bad" Girls Are', p. 324.

However, Speare does not conflate witchcraft with conventional signifiers of adolescence in order to reflect pervasive post-war concerns about juvenile delinquents, nor to depict teens as disruptive. Instead, Speare links adolescence with the seventeenth-century witchcraft trials in order to condemn contemporary social panics about teens as dangerous, ignorant, and destructive. Kit Tyler emerges from *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* as a capable and self-reliant heroine. She triumphs through her wit, intelligence, and determination. Anticipating late twentieth-century figurations of the teenage witch as role model – Willow Rosenberg from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) might be one of the most enduring examples – Kit is brave and resourceful; she is not hemmed in by the expectations of the era, and she defies social convention for the sake of authenticity. In her Introduction to the 2011 edition of the book, author Karen Cushman writes that through the character of Kit Tyler, young girls may learn important lessons such as 'the value of being yourself, fighting for what you believe in, taking care of those who need care, seeing beauty in things that might ordinarily seem plain, building friendships and community, and the importance of hard work'.[78] From Cushman's perspective, the image of the teen witch typified by Kit Tyler is not reflective but generative; she opens up new horizons and possibilities for adolescent self-actualisation.

Consequently, the teen-witch archetype that emerges from Starkey's study is not simply an empty vessel into which an anxious adult population can pour its anxieties about the uncanny strangeness of adolescent girl. She also serves as a model, a template for the construction of a new, more expansive vision of adolescence, one defined by the values of mid-century liberalism. In their study of identity construction and young-adult fiction, Jessica Kokesh and Miglena Sternadori conducted interviews with a large sample of teenage girls in the early 2000s.[79] Their findings concluded that the majority of these girls use young-adult novels 'as a guide to life'.[80] Focusing on the process of identification – how readers receive and understand texts as if they were part of them – Kokesh and Sternadori note that '[i]dentification is one of the main mechanisms through which people develop their social attitudes and construct their identities'.[81] In particular, their research demonstrates that adolescents' identifications with female protagonists in young-adult novels 'may be one of the factors contributing to their gender identity construction, actions, or performance, perhaps occasionally beyond their

[78] Karen Cushman, 'Introduction', in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, by Elizabeth George Speare (Houghton Mifflin, 2011), pp. v-ix (p. vi).
[79] Jessica Kokesh and Miglena Sternadori, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: A Qualitative Study of How Young Adult Fiction Affects Identity', *Atlantic Communication*, 23.3 (2015), pp. 139-58 (p. 139), doi:10.1080/15456870.2015.1013104.
[80] Kokesh and Sternadori, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly', p. 139.
[81] Kokesh and Sternadori, p. 142.

awareness'.[82] Works such as *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* frame witchcraft not only as an allegory for contemporary public panics about juvenile delinquency, but as a metaphor for difference and intolerance, as well as a moral lesson on the necessity of generosity and acceptance.

Significantly, Kit's Quaker friend, Hannah, is also accused of witchcraft. Unlike Miller's and Petry's texts, there is no fortune telling or transgressive fantasy in Speare's novel. Indeed, there is no trace of the occult at all. The figure of the witch, or rather accused witch, does not embody corporeal excess or subversive desire. Instead, the accused witch becomes an avatar of independence, selflessness, and compassion. As the novel progresses, Kit matures from a spoiled, selfish girl into a tolerant and compassionate young woman, risking execution and the stigma of a witchcraft accusation to protect her friends. She even renounces her previous materialism, embracing the status of outsider bestowed on her by the accusation of witchcraft because it allows her to be true to herself. Breaking off her engagement with a wealthy but dull young man whose fortune had once enticed her, Kit stresses the value of self-reliance: 'I'd like to live in a fine house. But not if it means I have to be an example. Not if it means I can't choose my own friends.'[83] In this way, Speare's work represents a move away from the figuration of witchcraft as a mode of historical horror and towards the model of aspirational witchcraft that would characterise later iterations of trope. In particular, both the ABC sitcom *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003) and the darker *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* present their heroines as admirable characters who grow and mature in a manner that allows viewers to construct them as role models or identificatory templates. The witch is an outsider, but she powerful, admirable, and strong. Through identifying with 'witches' like Kit Tyler, adolescent girls can construct a gender identity, an understanding of womanhood, defined by self-reliance and intellect.

Conclusion

In contemporary film and television, teenage witches abound. They are, following Kit's example, formidable and subversive figures. Often their narrative trajectory sees them strive to dismantle or escape from patriarchal social structures that marginalise and silence them. In recent years, in the wake of movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp, teen witches such as the reimagined 2018 Sabrina Spellman and *The VVitch*'s Thomasin have served as a powerful

[82] Kokesh and Sternadori, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly', p. 142.
[83] Speare, *The Witch*, p. 230.

means of engaging with issues of autonomy, consent, and identity. However, as I have demonstrated, the teen witch is not a new phenomenon. She has existed for as long as the teenager has been a visible demographic or a subject of public discourse. In her earliest incarnations, she was produced out of a pervasive adult concern with teen behaviour and juvenile delinquency, a trope crystallised by writers such as Starkey, who saw in the fanatical girls of Salem an analogue for their own fears about modern adolescence. However, in as much as teen girls and their connection with the occult mirrored adult concerns about transgression and rebellion, the teenage witch also proved instrumental in shaping modern formulations of adolescence.

Works such as Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* were not only reacting to post-war anxieties about the strange new phenomenon of the teenager; they were also integral in constituting adolescent girls as mischievous, transgressive, and perhaps even dangerous. Yet, Starkey's conflation of witchcraft and adolescence also allowed for the emergence of powerful, independent models of femininity that would ultimately enable young women to imagine new possibilities for themselves as independent subjects. In the decades that followed Starkey's reconceptualisation of the Salem afflicted as uncontrollable, hormonal teens, popular cultural constructions of the witch underwent unprecedented transformations. The rise of occultism and alternative spiritualities in the 1960s, as well as the reappropriation of the witch as a feminist icon, enabled associations with witchcraft to accrue a plethora of unprecedented, positive connotations. In works like Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1972), witches came to represent, not always in a historically accurate manner, the persecution of wilful women by patriarchal structures, and (proto)feminist resistance against those structures. Incorporating this more affirming vision of the witch, contemporary teenage sorceresses are enabled to move beyond Starkey's (and Miller's) construction of adolescent witches as beholden to uncontrollable pubescent bodies that bleed, leak, and seep. *The VVitch* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* present teen witches who exert agency over their bodies, determining for themselves how to use their powers and for whose benefit. Thus, in *The VVitch*, Thomasin is viewed as a threat to social and family stability because she has recently experienced menarche. However, while her corporeality is initially framed as uncontainable and dangerous, a source of anxiety for her family, at the end of the film, she makes the decision to become a witch. She chooses to 'live deliciously', determining

to procure for herself a life of pleasure, controlling both her body and her destiny.[84] Likewise, in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the title character refuses to choose between becoming a full-fledged witch or aligning herself with her mortal (human) friends, instead inhabiting a decidedly liminal and contingent identity over the course of the series.

Thomasin and Sabrina are the descendants of Starkey's unstable gaggle of bobby soxers. While the evolutionary strains that carried the teen witch from the hysterical girls of Salem to the powerful pubescent sorceresses of modern popular culture cannot be fully traced in this brief article, it is clear that their lineage stretches back to that moment in the mid-twentieth century when the teen girl seemed so new, so threatening, that she appeared almost supernatural.

[84] *The VVitch*, dir. by Robert Eggers (A24, 2015).

'Godlike Knowledge:' Light as Power in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*

Sarah Cullen

> But it was fortunate for us, on that wintry eve of our untried life, to enjoy the warm and radiant luxury of a somewhat too abundant fire. If it served no other purpose, it made the men look so full of youth, warm blood, and hope, and the women – such of them, at least, as were anywise convertible by its magic – so very beautiful, that I would cheerfully have spent my last dollar to prolong the blaze.[1]

Narrator-protagonist Miles Coverdale spends the majority of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) hiding from the gothic darkness and immersing himself in the light. Joining the newly established farming community in Blithedale in the countryside of New England, Coverdale sets out with the aims of establishing Blithedale as a prosperous utopia and becoming a successful poet. The narrative ends in confusion and disappointment after the dissolution of the commune, with Coverdale looking back on events several decades later, realising that 'I lack a purpose. How strange!' (p. 223). Coverdale's poetic aspirations have never been fulfilled – he is purposeless – yet even with the benefit of hindsight, he is unable to explain why he lacks a purpose; it is 'strange' to him. *The Blithedale Romance* is therefore the narrative of a man who missed all his opportunities to mature as a human and a poet.

Fire is one of the dominant images throughout the book, particularly in the first half.[2] Coverdale spends a considerable amount of time extolling the virtues of the fire at Blithedale: it is the centre of his focus for four of the first five chapters. The fire appears to give Coverdale much hope and happiness, but it does so at the cost of encouraging him to ignore the realities of the dark and cold surrounding the new recruits. As Hyatt Waggoner notes, the cheer that the fire provides in contrast to the cold outside strengthens the resolve of Coverdale and his companions. However, we can see Coverdale's constant and inexhaustible allusions to the fire as an act of desperation. It is not a confirmation of the group members' abilities as pioneers; it is his reaction to a group of inexperienced and ignorant dilettantes who are attempting to place their own stamp on the surrounding earth while dismissing the realities of the wilderness. Waggoner claims that the fire 'is very cheery, but it is not such as any real farmer would build: it is too large to be perfectly natural even in such a fireplace, and, as Silas Foster sardonically

[1] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Modern Library, 2001), pp. 24-25. All subsequent references to this text will be cited using page numbers in parentheses in the body of the essay.
[2] Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 191.

points out, it is built of brushwood, which burns very brightly but will not last'.[3] If the fire will not last, then it is purely for show, as demonstrated by the opening quotation above. Fire is therefore one of the key light-related motifs that Coverdale force feeds the reader to create an image of serenity and goodness that may at first seem genuine, but is revealed to be a result of Coverdale's falsifying of reality. He is using his authorial influence to control his medium – that is, writing – to a perverse extent, and in doing so blinds himself to any true awareness of his own surroundings. This culminates in his failure to arrive in time at the climax of his own romance, and in his inability to care for a friend before it is too late, as a consequence of which she dies by suicide.

This article argues, then, argues that Miles Coverdale fails as a poet as he ignores the darker, gothic aspects of existence that are required to create successful poetry. I begin by outlining the plot of *The Blithedale Romance*, and contextualise it in terms of mid-nineteenth-century American writing, positioning Coverdale as an antithesis to the hegemonically masculine, ostensibly all-knowing American Romantic poet of that moment, who welcomes the challenges of the natural world. Following this, I argue that Hawthorne illustrates the problems of American Romanticism through his representation of light. Light is used figuratively by many of his characters not to illuminate or clarify their situation, but instead to construct alternative and often self-serving narratives. Through these examples, the article establishes that what I term 'light' is the familiar – the comfortable, everyday reality that conforms to the beliefs of the aspiring masculine Romantic poets such as Coverdale. The gothic or the 'dark', in comparison, is the unknown – the often-unspoken and ignored problems that undermine those same beliefs. From here, the article moves on to discuss Coverdale's actions in *The Blithedale Romance*, demonstrating the ways in which he manipulates the medium of light to bend the narrative to his own ends. Finally, the article considers how in the romance's climax Coverdale, by avoiding the darkness and promoting the light for too long, has lost his way. I suggest that a confluence of the known light and the unknown darkness is Hawthorne's answer to this problem, an answer Coverdale himself never finds.

Coverdale as American Romantic Poet-Author

The Blithedale Romance, then, is an account of Coverdale's time spent with several members of the newly established Blithedale farm commune, its breakdown, and subsequent betrayals among the commune members. Before setting off on his journey to Blithedale, Coverdale is

[3] Waggoner, *Hawthorne*, p. 195.

told the story of the Veiled Lady, a mysterious clairvoyant much in demand in New England society, by a man known as Old Moodie. On arriving at Blithedale farm, Coverdale meets with its inhabitants, a company of reformers who have all gathered together with the aim of establishing a prosperous utopia. The recruits have brought with them differing agendas, leading to a clash of ideals, which eventually leads to a breaking up of the community. Coverdale spends much of his time observing a small number of the company who pique his interest, all but ignoring the other members. He is obsessed with the outspoken feminist Zenobia, and the forceful philanthropist Hollingsworth. He also spends time talking about the quiet, waif-like Priscilla, who follows Zenobia around and is eventually revealed as the enigmatic Veiled Lady; Professor Westervelt, an outsider with ties to Zenobia and Priscilla; and the practically minded farmer, Silas Foster.

Coverdale initially enjoys his time in Blithedale; however, once he discovers that Hollingsworth is more interested in his ideology than in their friendship, and as Zenobia and Hollingsworth become close, his attitude towards the Blithedale project cools considerably and he leaves the farm for the city. Despite his move, Coverdale nevertheless continues to concern himself with the actions of his Blithedale companions, many of whom have also moved to the city. Observing them from afar and intruding upon their affairs whenever he deems it necessary, Coverdale watches the breakdown of the Blithedale community and the relationships therein, culminating in the death of Zenobia. Due at least in part to Coverdale's inability to recognise Zenobia's distress, he does not arrive in time to prevent her suicide after she is betrayed by those closest to her. In the text's epilogue, Coverdale reflects on the years that have elapsed since the Blithedale experiment, claiming that he was in love with Priscilla all along.

Much mid-nineteenth-century American literature is concerned with human encounters with the unknown and unconquered spaces beyond the reach of civilisation. Some of this literature addresses the dark, untameable sea, such as Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1850). Others, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), explore the wilder, unoccupied landscapes of the United States. In this context, *The Blithedale Romance* can be read as Hawthorne's attempt, like these contemporaries, to address the spaces that have remained unconquered by men; the gothic expanses that surround humanity's flickering civilisation. This can be seen in the wilderness that disturbs the dilettantes at Blithedale farm, the forests that hide those rejected by society, and the black river that becomes Zenobia's deathbed. For Hawthorne, the wilderness spaces he focuses on tend to have a dark edge to them, perhaps because, in an America that was becoming

increasingly industrialised, nighttime was one of the final refuges for its artists, a cleansing arena removed from the stifling conventions of society. As Thoreau writes in *Walden*:

> Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.[4]

Darkness here is seen as a restorative; a state which it is necessary for all humans to experience in order to begin to rediscover their place in the world. Being spatially disoriented is equated with having an open mind, with being able to re-orientate oneself with a clarity of vision not available to those who have never strayed from society. Hawthorne himself, in 'The Haunted Mind' (1835), writes about midnight as 'an intermediate space, where the business of life does not intrude; where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the present'.[5] While Hawthorne clearly recognised that a confluence or meeting of light and dark is required to reach any sort of knowledge, his narrator-protagonist Coverdale does not, demonstrating his naiveté as both a writer and a man, as the rest of this article illustrates.

The importance of light and darkness in Hawthorne's work – particularly his focus on their intersection – has been well demonstrated. Wendy Barker suggests that Hawthorne prefers 'the shadowy times of late afternoon, and early morning, when subtle differentiations and gradations of shadings are more visible', while Harry Levin notes that 'though we naturally think of Hawthorne's work in visual terms, we speak more appropriately of delicate shading than of rich coloring'.[6] Newton Arvin, meanwhile, writes that Hawthorne's favourite adjectives include '*dusky*, *dim*, and *shadowy*'.[7] In this vein, I argue that Hawthorne participates in what Eugenia DeLamotte claims 'the Gothic had always known: the way the perils of the soul in its darkest night reflect, in magnified and revealing forms, the quotidian realities of life in the daylit world of money, work, and social rank'.[8] Hawthorne recognised and stressed the importance of gothic darkness in magnifying and highlighting, though contrast, the strange and

[4] Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden', in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. by Joseph Wood Kruch (Bantam Dell, 2004), pp. 111-366 (p. 243).
[5] Hawthorne, 'The Haunted Mind', in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tales and Sketches* (Library of America, 1982), pp. 200-04 (pp. 200-01).
[6] Wendy Barker, 'Emily Dickinson and Poetic Strategy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Wendy Martin (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 77-90 (p. 88); and Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (Knopf, 1958), p. 38.
[7] Newton Arvin, 'Introduction', in *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, ed. by Arvin (Knopf, 1950), pp. vii-xviii (p. xv), emphasis in original.
[8] Eugenia DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. vii.

grotesque nature of events that appear unremarkable in daylight. This aspect of his writing did not go unnoticed in his own time; indeed, Melville famously admired Hawthorne's ability to show America's 'blackness, ten times black', writing that 'this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world'.[9] Melville here seems to be suggesting that Hawthorne utilises dark shades in order to better illustrate the brightness of a light. Similar to a chiaroscuro or the then-recently invented daguerreotype, Hawthorne uses the contrast of strong light and darkness to produce forceful effects in his writing. Take, for example, this passage from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in which Reverend Dimmesdale feels compelled to write by night:

> Thus the night fled away, as if it were a winged steed, and he careering on it; morning came, and peeped, blushing, through the curtains; and at last sunrise threw a golden beam into the study, and laid it right across the minister's bedazzled eyes. There he was, with the pen still between his fingers, and a vast, immeasurable tract of written space behind him![10]

Here we can see the interplay of dark and light. On a purely visual level, the stark contrast provides the reader with fantastic imagery; but beyond that, we can see the interplay on a symbolic level. The darkness of night gives Dimmesdale the zeal to write as he rides the night 'as if it were a winged steed', while it is the light of day that reveals the results of his labour as an 'immeasurable tract of written space behind him!' Dimmesdale, who in this scene is figured as a writer, can be read as a stand-in for Hawthorne. Thus, Hawthorne seems to be suggesting that in order to write, it is important to embrace both darkness and light: the darkness in order to be inspired, and the light to create coherence.

Hawthorne, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, was observing America at a critical time in its history of industrialisation. 'No previous time in Western history', as A. Roger Ekirch claims, 'experienced such a sustained assault upon the nocturnal realm as did the period 1730 to 1830. [...] Even the term "night season", denoting the distinctiveness of nocturnal hours, gradually faded from everyday speech.'[11] With world-changing discoveries such as the recent creation of the incandescent light bulb, human dominance over the primordial darkness was fast becoming easier to attain. However, in Hawthorne's work, the ability to produce light at will is something that should be done with caution. Light, in Hawthorne's writing, can be seen as power itself, a power that can be used to distort and bend the truth for one's own benefit.

[9] Herman Melville, 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', in *Melville: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Watson G. Branch (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 237-47 (p. 240).
[10] Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance* (Wordsworth, 1999), p. 169.
[11] A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: A History of Nighttime* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 324.

As I have argued elsewhere, we see this in Hawthorne's short stories, including 'The Birthmark' (1843).[12] Aylmer, the obsessive scientist who wishes to remove all traces of a birthmark from his beloved's face in an attempt to make her perfect, utilises light that he has created himself in an attempt to remove the blemish. This light, we are told, creates scenery and figures that 'were perfectly represented, but with that bewitching, yet indescribable difference which always makes a picture, an image, or a shadow so much more attractive than the original'.[13] These light projections are much more attractive than reality, but they are *not* reality.

Here we see the procurement of artificial light as the preserve of those who are interested in progress purely for personal gain.[14] If both light and darkness are required to make sense of the world, it becomes dangerous when light is utilised by the powerful for their own selfish ends, as Coverdale does to paint himself as an innocent and likeable protagonist. This problem of a dictator-like control over viewpoint in Hawthorne's work is highlighted by Patricia Ann Carlson. Observing the importance of the lamp in Hawthorne's 'The Wives of the Dead' (1832), she notes that 'it is a visual projection of the conscious state of the widows – anxiously expectant and unable to accept the reality of death. Thus, the lamp signifies a psychic condition very susceptible to illusions, and it is within the light of this lamp that all the action of the tale takes place.'[15] Here we can see that the light does not illuminate the world as it is, but instead projects an image of what the widows wish to see: the return of their husbands. Because they are unable to accept that their husbands are dead, they use the lamplight to construct alternative narratives, in which they do not have to realise the 'reality' of their situation.[16] Dependence on light to the detriment of darkness can lead to a distortion or even destruction of reality.

American Romanticism and Emerson

Furthering this notion, as Waggoner writes:

> The assumption of Godlike knowledge could destroy the artist and man equally. Knowledge brings with it the possibility of control, and the artist must achieve control of his subject by controlling his medium; but he will falsify reality if he omits the

[12] Sarah Cullen, '"A Stern, a Sad, a Darkly Meditative, a Distrustful, if Not a Desperate Man, Did He Become, from the Night of that Fearful Dream": Nathaniel Hawthorne's Nocturnal Gothic', *Gothic Nature*, 1 (2019), pp. 103-26 (pp. 114) <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Cullen_103-126_Gothic-Nature-1_2019.pdf> [accessed 23 May 2024].
[13] Hawthorne, 'The Birthmark', in *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, pp. 177-93 (p. 184).
[14] Arvin, 'Introduction', p. xvii.
[15] Patricia Ann Carlson, 'The Function of the Lamp in Hawthorne's "The Wives of the Dead"', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 40.2 (1975), pp. 62-64 (p. 63), doi:10.2307/3199189.
[16] Cullen, 'Nathaniel Hawthorne's Nocturnal Gothic', p. 115.

> element of mystery and assumes that he knows the unknowable. One error, then, to which the artist is peculiarly liable, threatens both artist and man.[17]

This is exactly what happens to Coverdale. Setting out to write Romantic poetry that will be as 'true, strong, natural, and sweet, as is the life which [he is] going to lead', Coverdale, as Hawthorne's representative of the Romantic movement, ultimately fails as he tries to ignore the gothic elements he encounters – the shadow and mystery of his time in Blithedale (p. 16). This can be seen in his desperate focus on the 'somewhat too abundant fire' at the commune. Hawthorne, this article argues, was concerned with the fact that American Romanticism, unlike Hawthorne's own strain of dark Romanticism, did not allow for any consideration for the darker aspects of literature. Moreover, Hawthorne represents this failure through the utilisation of light imagery throughout *The Blithedale Romance*. For, as Leslie A. Fiedler observes, 'the desire to be one with the forbidding fire is merely another version of the Faustian temptation, to be as a god'.[18] Overusing his artist's 'Godlike knowledge' by banishing the darkness and coldness to the corners of his narrative, Coverdale is at a loss as to what to do when the darkness overcomes the boundaries he constructs and subsumes his writing. Ultimately, *The Blithedale Romance* shows how dangerous it is to ignore the dark Romantic or gothic side of existence, as Coverdale is left an embittered and directionless man who cannot find his way back into the light.

These elements of darkness feature figuratively in the plot of *The Blithedale Romance* in the form of radical agendas, clashes of opinion, and misunderstandings. Many of the characters – Coverdale, as this article argues, being the most guilty – are unable to look beyond their own prejudices and assumptions to try and identify with the plight of another. They look instead for examples that confirm their own bias in the same way; and this, Hawthorne seems to be suggesting, is how American Romanticism operates in his time. Commenting on the lack of darkness in American literature, Hawthorne writes in the preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860) that

> No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. [...] Romance and poetry, like ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need Ruin to make them grow.[19]

[17] Waggoner, *Hawthorne*, p. 33.
[18] Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Stein and Day, 1966), p. 387.
[19] Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun: Or, The Romance of Monte Beni*, ed. by William Charvat and others (Ohio State University Press, 1971), p. 3.

Hawthorne was writing in era in which it was not fashionable to acknowledge the darker aspects of the United States. The current generation, perhaps angered by the enduring cultural influences of their former European masters, and embarrassed by the ethical murkiness caused by the slave trade, Indian removals, and lack of women's rights, were unwilling to confront their problems, looking instead to the future with a blinding patriotism.[20] American darkness was something that should be overcome rather than ruminated upon. As Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted in 'Plato, or The Philosopher' (1850),

> There is a moment, in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness, and have not yet become microscopic: so that man, at that instant, extends across the entire scale; and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of night, converses, by his eyes and brain, with solar and stellar creation. That is the moment of adult health, the culmination of power.[21]

Here the literary night is the battleground in the narrative of the nation, but, Emerson implies, it needs to be overcome. The moment of daybreak is made synonymous with maturity into manhood, with America standing as a conqueror over the 'forces of night'. In comparison to Hawthorne in 'The Haunted Mind', where night is 'an intermediate space [...] where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the present', Emerson sees the night as a time of barbaric struggles from which America must emerge victorious along the way to civilisation; for Hawthorne, by contrast, it is a time of reflection.

Mid-nineteenth-century American Romantic writing, as David Morse observes, typically engages in an exaltation of nature – an explosive celebration of the American landscape. American Romanticism was a conventionally masculine and male-dominated movement, exemplified by those with the ability to move beyond the bounds of society, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.[22] Comparing the male American Romantics to female counterparts such as Emily Dickinson, Barker argues that while the male poets are able to move in and out of sunlight as they choose, female poets are often harmed by the rays of the sun, and thus relegated to shaded and night times.[23] Male writers were not only meant to capture

[20] Fiedler, *Love and Death*, p. 144.
[21] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Plato, or The Philosopher', in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson – Representative Men: Seven Lectures*, 12 vols (Houghton Mifflin, 1979), IV, pp. 40-79 (pp. 46-47) <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/emerson/4957107.0004.001/1:6?rgn=div1;view=fulltext#W11-00000060> [accessed 23 May 2024].
[22] David Morse, *American Romanticism: From Cooper to Hawthorne – Excessive America*, 2 vols (Macmillan, 1987), II, p. 119-68.
[23] Barker, *Lunacy of Light: Emily Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 7-13.

the American Romantic landscape through their writing, but were expected to embody their subject matter. Morse quotes Whitman as an example of what was expected of an American Romantic poet: 'The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. [...] His spirit responds to his country's spirit [...] he incarnates its geography, and natural life and rivers and lakes.'[24] The American Romantic, then, was defined in terms of his inexhaustible potential. As Morse writes, through men such as Whitman, 'the poet assumes a new importance as the figure who can truly articulate the dimensions of an unprecedented American largeness'.[25]

Hawthorne, in comparison, has often been ranked among the dark Romantics. Unlike the American Romantics, who, according to Charles L. Crow, 'shared a vision of natural facts as symbols of spiritual facts, so that the world could be read as a text unfolding secrets about ultimate truths', the dark Romantics found

> 'the power of blackness' (Melville's words in 'Hawthorne and His Mosses'), [...] a profound reality, and in the woods, as Hawthorne demonstrated in 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835), faith could still be lost. [...] While Emerson's world was sunlit and morally clear, that of the dark Romantics was fractured, multilayered, and ambiguous.[26]

This essay argues that through his poet-author Coverdale, Hawthorne is challenging the accepted view of the American Romantic: in *Blithedale*, Coverdale approaches a dark Romantic world with the literary tools of an American Romantic and finds himself lacking, as he chooses to write in a mode that attempts to ignore the gothic. To even approach the darkness, Hawthorne appears to be arguing, a gothic or dark Romantic writer must first accept that it does not provide any clear or simple symbols that can be easily interpreted.

Alongside fire, Coverdale also uses other light imagery to divert both his and our attention away from his reality in order to construct his own narrative. Coverdale's control is highlighted when he remonstrates with Priscilla for simply seeing the world in a different light to himself:

> Her simple, careless, childish flow of spirits often made me sad. She seemed to me like a butterfly at play in a flickering bit of sunshine, and mistaking it for a broad and eternal summer. [...] 'What is the use or sense of being so very gay?' I said to Priscilla, while she was taking breath, after a great frolic. 'I love to see a sufficient cause for everything, and I can see none for this. Pray tell me, now, what kind of a world you imagine this to be, which you are so merry in?' (p. 70)

[24] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Ixia Press, 2020), p. v.
[25] Morse, *American Romanticism*, p. 6.
[26] Charles L. Crow, 'American Gothic', in *Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 15-22 (p. 17).

Coverdale's description of Priscilla (and, as we will see later, Zenobia) brings to mind Emerson's veneration of woman three years later in his lecture 'Woman' (1855). Women may, Emerson claims, 'emit from their pores a colored atmosphere, one would say, wave upon wave of rosy light, in which they walk evermore, and see all objects through this warm-tinted mist that envelops them'.[27] Both Emerson and Coverdale see women as ethereal, and this enables Coverdale to dismiss Priscilla's worldview as an 'imagined', all-but-literally rose-tinted one. Because he is not the centre of attention in Priscilla's narrative, he feels the need to invalidate it and to attempt to impose his own.[28]

The Scholar and the Yeoman and Other Rigid Categories

As illustrated in the aforementioned scene from *The Scarlet Letter*, in Hawthorne's writing, light represents insight, and darkness represents information. The irony in his interactions with Priscilla is that Coverdale berates her for doing exactly what he himself does in mistaking a 'flickering bit of sunshine' for a 'broad and eternal summer'. A confluence or meeting of light and dark is required to reach any sort of knowledge. This meeting is exactly what Coverdale fails to achieve. His own measure of his artistry reveals a reliance on popular notions of beauty to the detriment of innovation. He desires to create poetry that is 'true, strong, natural, and sweet, as is the life which we are going to lead – something that shall have the notes of wild-birds twittering through it, or a strain like the wind-anthems in the woods, as the case may be!' (p. 16). 'If this remark does nothing else', James H. Justus observes, 'it establishes Coverdale as a thoroughly undistinguished talent of Mainstream Romantic'.[29] Certainly, if this statement is representative of his art, it does not seek to throw light on new territory. Coverdale is instead content to capitalise on the already tried-and-tested notions of mainstream Romanticism, while stressing aesthetic aspects ('the wild-birds twittering') and placid beauty ('true, strong, natural, and sweet') over any issues of substance. Coverdale's position within the narrative, then, is further complicated by his supposed role as an American Romantic poet. The Romantic poets were expected to transcend culture; to remain impartial observers to the world around them. Yet, Coverdale's position at Blithedale influences characters and events. Indeed, at one point,

[27] Emerson, 'Woman', in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson – Miscellanies*, 12 vols (Houghton Mifflin, 1979), XI, pp. 406-26 (p. 412).
[28] See Taylor Stoehr, 'Art vs. Utopia: The Case of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Brook Farm', *The Antioch Review*, 36.1 (1978), pp.89-102, doi:10.2307/4638010.
[29] James H. Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale: Character and Art in *The Blithedale Romance*', *American Literature* 47.1 (March 1975), pp. 21-36 (p. 30), doi:10.2307/2925031.

Coverdale claims that his current role 'resembled that of the Chorus in a classic play, which seems to be set aloof from the possibility of personal concernment' (p. 90). Coverdale is too preoccupied with his own view, believing his observances to be impartial, to consider that he may be mistaken. We see this when he spies on Westervelt from his hermitage.[30] Coverdale muses,

> As for Westervelt, he was not a whit more warmed by Zenobia's passion, than a salamander by the heat of its native furnace. He would have been absolutely statuesque, save for a look of slight perplexity tinctured strongly with derision. It was a crisis in which his intellectual perceptions could not altogether help him out. He failed to comprehend, and cared but little for comprehending, why Zenobia should put herself into a fume; but satisfied his mind that it was all folly, and only another shape of a woman's manifold absurdity, which men can never understand. (p. 95)

Throughout this passage, Coverdale makes the error of mistaking outward appearance for inner reality.[31] Westervelt may indeed appear – in Coverdale's mind – to have a 'look of slight perplexity tinctured strongly with derision' on his face, but to claim that this means that Westervelt is 'not warmed by Zenobia's passion' is an interpretative leap that, while perhaps correct, cannot be considered anything more than an educated guess. However, he then makes the claim that Westervelt fails to comprehend Zenobia because 'men can never understand' a 'woman's manifold absurdity'. This is a significant breach of Coverdale's artistic licence. Unable to comprehend the thinking behind Westervelt's actions, Coverdale has gone beyond educated guesses and has substituted his own belief that 'men can never understand' a woman's 'absurdity'. This is no longer artistry; this is falsifying reality. It is, moreover, a significant disavowal of Hawthorne's own belief in the importance of shadow or mystery required to make Romance grow. As DeLamotte points out,

> Gothic terror has its primary source in an anxiety about boundaries and [...] Gothic romance offers a symbolic language congenial to the expression of psychological, epistemological, religious, and social anxieties that resolve themselves most fundamentally into a concern about the boundaries of the self.[32]

Unlike a gothic writer, Coverdale's view of himself rests comfortably on the belief that there is an incommunicable boundary between women and himself (and indeed women and other men) that can never be breached. Claiming such a boundary exists is useful for Coverdale, for

[30] Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 130.
[31] Michael Borgstrom, 'Hating Miles Coverdale', *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 56.4 (2010), pp. 363-90 (p. 375), doi:10.1353/esq.2011.0007.
[32] DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night*, pp. 13-14.

in hindsight, he can attempt to absolve himself for failing to save Zenobia. This is why Coverdale projects his own thoughts regarding the 'absurdity' of women onto Westervelt, externalising his own unflattering traits onto another man, because he requires Zenobia to be absurd in order to avoid self-examination. While observing her, Coverdale claims that women 'are not natural reformers, but become such by the pressure of exceptional misfortune. I could measure Zenobia's inward trouble, by the animosity with which she now took up the general quarrel of woman against man' (p. 111). What problematises this issue further is that Coverdale is unaware of what he is doing; he believes that he is qualified to 'measure' exactly what Zenobia is thinking. Just like the widows in 'The Wives of the Dead', Coverdale is susceptible to illusions and is projecting his own beliefs subconsciously.

Turning away from the darker aspects of existence is, by extension, the real reason that Coverdale leaves the Blithedale project. His talk with Hollingsworth on the future of Blithedale shows us that he is there only for glory, but is not really prepared to put in the work required to achieve it. He instead indulges in futuristic fantasies. 'When we come to be old men', he tells Hollingsworth, 'they will call us Uncles, or Fathers [...]. In a century or two, we shall every one of us be mythical personages, or exceedingly picturesque and poetical ones, at all events' (p. 119). Blithedale is not even a year old, yet Coverdale is already looking far into the future, to the style in which he believes they will be remembered. In doing so, he looks past the years of work that such an endeavour would require. In particular, he expects to reap the benefits of a life of intense labour without putting that strain on his body, as he imagines himself 'painted in my shirt-sleeves, and with the sleeves rolled up, to show my muscular development' (p. 119). Coverdale's decision to ultimately leave Blithedale is built upon his belief that the yeoman and the scholar 'are two distinct individuals, and can never be melted or welded into one substance' (p. 62). His claim serves to highlight his subconscious fear that the 'boundaries' that he has desperately constructed around himself may not hold against the gothic darkness, represented by the winter nights surrounding Blithedale's 'somewhat too abundant fire'. After all, under its sunny exterior, Blithedale represents the need not only for hard work, but for political and economic machinations that could disrupt Coverdale's utopian ideal. As long as Coverdale desires to create poetry based on only the sunny aspects of life, the heavy, considerably more substantial work of the yeoman will remain a threat.

We also see the boundary lines that Coverdale erects to distinguish those around him from one another. Peter B. Murray notes that Coverdale's favoured companions, Zenobia and Hollingsworth, are characterised through images suggesting that they are sources of heat and

light, while Priscilla and Westervelt are described as cold and dull.[33] In order to make sense of those around him, Coverdale sorts them into neat little categories.[34] Those who radiate light and heat deserve his attention, while those who are cold and dull are disliked and mistrusted. What problematises Coverdale's view of his friends and acquaintances, however, is that they refuse to remain within rigid categories, thus challenging the trust he has in his own worldview. Take Hollingsworth, for example. When Coverdale falls ill with a fever, Hollingsworth remains faithfully by his bedside, nursing him back to health. During this time, Coverdale has nothing but praise for Hollingsworth, saying '[t]here never was any blaze of a fireside that warmed and cheered me [...] so effectually as did the light out of those eyes'. He also tells Hollingsworth that '"your own vocation is evidently to be a priest, and to spend your days and nights in helping your fellow-creatures to draw peaceful dying breaths"' (pp. 41-42). During his convalescence, Coverdale is temporarily relieved of the duties of day-to-day living. He is therefore able to turn Hollingsworth into the kind of Romantic figure that populates his writing. In this scenario, Coverdale can put himself at the centre of Hollingsworth's world as the 'fellow-creature' to whom Hollingsworth devotes his days and nights. However, once Hollingsworth begins to discuss his real vocation, to engage in a philanthropic project on the site of Blithedale, Coverdale begins to mistrust him:

> But by-and-by, you missed the tenderness of yesterday, and grew drearily conscious that Hollingsworth had a closer friend than ever you could be. And this friend was the cold, spectral monster which he had himself conjured up, and of which, at last – as these men of a mighty purpose so invariably do – he had grown to be the bond-slave. It was his philanthropic theory! (p. 52)

Now that Coverdale is no longer the object of Hollingsworth's affections, he is jealous of the 'closer friend' with whom Hollingsworth has become preoccupied, describing him in gothic terms as a 'spectral monster'. Coverdale again attacks a conflicting worldview as being less legitimate than his own. This philanthropic theory has simply been 'conjured up' and is holding Hollingsworth captive as a 'bond-slave'. This disturbingly suggests that Coverdale, in comparison, considers himself to be in control and an impartial observer of what he sees. It is a series of incidents similar to this that causes Coverdale to turn his back on Hollingsworth and eventually Zenobia. When their actions serve to legitimise Coverdale's worldview, they are praised for their heat and light, but when they threaten his version of reality, they are ridiculed

[33] Peter B. Murray, 'Mythopoesis in the *Blithedale Romance*', *PMLA*, 75.5 (1960), pp.591-96 (p. 595), doi:10.2307/460670.
[34] Borgstrom, 'Hating Miles Coverdale', p. 373.

and gothicised for their reformative zeal.[35] This may be because Coverdale feels legitimised by Hollingsworth's and Zenobia's cruel fates. He can believe that if he too were to be consumed by a cause, he might similarly suffer. Coverdale would rather admire his friends for their style – Zenobia for her beauty, Hollingsworth for his friendliness – than allow them to turn their efforts towards matters of substance such as reform. This threatens Coverdale, as it forces him to recognise that, unlike his fellow emigrants at Blithedale, he has no substantial goals to drive him. However, it is not until his confession at the end of the narrative that he is able to admit 'I lack a purpose. How strange!' (p. 223).

Blithedale's Fallout: 'The Shadow of a Passing Figure'

After falling out with his friends, Coverdale feels that Blithedale 'was no longer what it had been': 'Everything was suddenly faded' (p. 127). There is no longer enough summer sunlight within the farming community for Coverdale's taste. His return to the city, Justus notes, is almost inevitable: 'Psychologically, Coverdale is never far away from his urban quarters, which he alludes to several times, and the society which shapes his tastes and values.'[36] Coverdale cannot be the embodiment of American Romanticism, because he will never be able to 'incarnate' wild America, as Whitman would insist. He will always fall back on the society that 'shapes his tastes and values'. Indeed, after establishing himself in a 'respectable hotel', he has already begun to distance himself from his uncomfortable experiences at Blithedale: it becomes 'so shadowy, that a question might be raised whether the whole affair had been anything more than the thoughts of a speculative man' (pp. 133-34). His inconvenient memory of Blithedale lasts for only a moment before it is relegated to the distance.

Coverdale's new vantage point from his hotel room provides him with exactly the 'broad and simple' cheerfulness that he requires. Looking out at the back view of affluent dwellings and their gardens, he claims that there is 'more truth' in the back view of a residence than the front (p. 136), hinting at the Romantic belief, as identified by Crow, that the world could be read as a text unfolding secrets.[37] What he would like to believe is his omniscient observance is arrested suddenly when he realises that Zenobia occupies one of these dwellings. When she spots him spying from his room, she replies with what Coverdale believes to be 'one of those pitiless rebukes which a woman always has at hand', pulling down the curtain to the drawing room, thus denying him access to the world within (p. 145). We can now see why

[35] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 22.
[36] Justus, p. 24.
[37] Crow, 'American Gothic', p. 17.

Coverdale is so insulted by this act: he believes that he alone should be in charge of the story's narrative. Cutting off his access to the events beyond the curtain challenges the validity of Coverdale's narrative. Zenobia has thus reintroduced the element of mystery and shadow that he has tried to ignore. As Dana Brand has observed, 'the goal of Zenobia's feminism is to permit women to enjoy Miles Coverdale's freedom to stand outside of fixed roles, moving between them freely. As Coverdale's response makes clear, this is precisely what she cannot be permitted to enjoy.'[38] Like Hollingsworth's philanthropy, Zenobia's feminism becomes a gothic spectral monster because it places her outside Coverdale's fixed boundaries. This is illustrated when, attempting to spy on Zenobia through the offending window, all he can see is '[t]he shadow of a passing figure' with 'too vague an outline for even my adventurous conjectures to read the hieroglyphic that is presented' (p. 147). An image that remains a mysterious shadow is too disturbing for Coverdale. This is clear in the warning he gives her:

> It is really impossible to hide anything, in this world, to say nothing of the next. All that we ought to ask, therefore, is, that the witnesses of our conduct, and the speculators on our motives, should be capable of taking the highest view which the circumstances of the case may admit. So much being secured, I, for one, would be most happy in feeling myself followed, everywhere, by an indefatigable human sympathy. (pp. 148-49)

Despite claiming that he has been tormenting himself with 'crazy hypotheses' as to what might be going on in the drawing room, Coverdale does little to discover the reason behind Zenobia's presence there (p. 148). Rather than find out what her secret is, he chooses instead to chastise her for attempting to keep secrets at all. It is clear that he believes himself to be the Romantic witness capable of taking the 'highest view' of the circumstance. If his view of the world is 'indefatigable', then any mystery left to be solved would undermine his role. The dark is terrifying to Coverdale in the same way it is to the eponymous character in Hawthorne's gothic short story 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835). The presence of darkness means the possibility of concealment, duplicity, even rebellion from secondary characters who should, Goodman Brown and Coverdale believe, be there simply to support their narrative as the protagonist. As a result, in order to establish control over his universe, Coverdale must insist that everything be out in the open. He thus goes to visit Zenobia not to discover new knowledge, but to insist on his omniscient role.

It is because of his belief that the yeoman and the scholar 'can never be melted or welded into one substance' (p. 62) that Coverdale is late for the climax of his own story. As

[38] Brand, *The Spectator and the City*, p. 152.

outlined above, the yeoman here represents the difficult, unknown aspects of life from which Coverdale shies away, such as the difficult labour at Blithedale. The scholar represents the familiar, cigar-smoking dilettante side of life upon which Coverdale focuses. As has been argued above, Coverdale has proven himself unable to identify with the suffering of others. Rather than empathising, he projects his own assumptions onto those around him. Unable to identify with someone else's pain, he is unprepared for what happens once it unveils itself. His failing comes to a head once he returns to Blithedale in search of Zenobia. Entering the nearby woods, he encounters a carnivalesque scene that is terrifying to his eyes: a 'concourse of strange figures' with 'streaks of sunlight glimmering down upon them' between overshadowing branches (p. 190). Timothy Jones has observed the presence of carnivalesque gothic in Hawthorne's work. In 'Young Goodman Brown', for instance, the midnight sabbat 'provides a carnival space where the everyday boundaries of the colony are erased'.[39] Not dissimilarly, here the boundaries of Blithedale are dissolving. The intersection of light and dark indicates that we should be about to discover something new, namely, the reason for the breakdown of Blithedale as a community. However, through Coverdale's eyes, the encounter is too chaotic to make any semblance of sense. He is so overcome from the gothic confusion that he is not fully aware of the macabre entertainment.

The gathering is composed of characters real and fictional, magical and practical, including an Indian chief, the goddess Diana, a Kentucky woodsman, and allegoric figures from Edmund Spencer's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96). Coverdale is not presented with the single explanation he was expecting, but a multiplicity of possibilities, each symbolised by a diverse character. Coverdale, who has spent so long ignoring the mysteries of Blithedale, is now overwhelmed by gothic possibilities. He no longer knows how to process new information and is left even more confused by this discovery. This is illustrated by the dance performed by the group, in which they spin so fast that 'their separate incongruities were blended all together', becoming an 'entanglement that went nigh to turn one's brain, with merely looking at it' (p. 191). Thus, the chaos of light and darkness continues, and Coverdale remains unable to make sense of the scene in front of him. Indeed, he himself claims that '[m]y sensations were as if I had come upon a battle-field, before the smoke was as yet cleared away' (p. 196). The grey smoke – the mixing of black and white – has obscured Coverdale's vision. He is

[39] Timothy Jones, *The Gothic and the Carnivalesque in American Culture* (University of Wales Press, 2015), p. 66.

completely out of his depth. He is so used to viewing the world through his own transparent lens that anything opaque or mysterious is completely foreign to him.

Coverdale is so far out of his depth that he fails to recognise trouble before it is too late. 'If there is tragedy attendant upon Zenobia's fate', Justus argues, 'it takes shape, outside and beyond the range of Coverdale's perceptions'.[40] Coverdale is completely uninterested and perhaps unable to parse the reason behind Zenobia's actions. Zenobia is devastated for a very understandable reason; Hollingsworth, who she believes loved her, has revealed that he was considering marrying her only for her money. Once he discovered that she is no longer rich, he chose instead to run off with Priscilla. However, Coverdale does not attempt to imagine what she may be going through. Instead, he focuses on her beauty, to the detriment of her feelings: 'How magnificently Zenobia looked, as she said this! The effect of her beauty was even heightened by the over-consciousness and self-recognition of it, into which, I suppose, Hollingsworth's scorn had driven her' (p. 206). Even as Zenobia is crying out in pain, Coverdale focuses on how she talks, rather than what she says. It is therefore no wonder that he leaves at the crucial moment before Zenobia takes her own life. Coverdale has always been fixated on Zenobia's sense of style, enchanted by the way she presents herself to the world, from the ever-changing flower she wears in her hair to the way in which she holds herself.[41] Even when he is furious with her, he cannot help admiring just how attractive she can make herself. When he is confronting her for closing the curtain to her drawing room, he observes: 'I saw how fit it was that she should make herself as gorgeous as she pleased, and should do a thousand things that would have been ridiculous to the poor, thin, weakly characters of other women' (p. 150). As a man of inaction, it does not cross his mind until after the fact that Zenobia may be about to commit suicide: like Emerson, Coverdale does not recognise that it is he who is seeing 'all objects through this warm-tinted mist' rather than Zenobia.[42] Instead of trying to understand her grief, he emphasises his own role as a benevolent overseer, congratulating himself on his ability to sympathise. 'Was it wrong', Coverdale asks rhetorically, 'if I felt consecrated to the priesthood, by sympathy like this, and called upon to minister to this woman's affliction, so far as mortal could?' (pp. 202-03).

When Coverdale finally realises what he has missed and calls upon Hollingsworth and Silas Foster to look for her body, they are faced with a nightmarish darkness, with no light to

[40] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 30.
[41] John N. Miller, 'Eros and Ideology: At the Heart of Hawthorne's Blithedale', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 55.1 (2000), pp. 1-12 (p. 6), doi:10.2307/2903055.
[42] Emerson, 'Woman', p. 412.

help them. In this chapter, appropriately titled 'Midnight', Coverdale is forced to face the gothic darkness that he has shied away from for so long. The river in which they fear Zenobia has drowned herself is almost impossibly black: 'Not a ray appeared to fall on the river itself. It lapsed imperceptibly away, a broad, black, inscrutable depth, keeping its own secrets from the eye of man, as impenetrably as mid-ocean could' (p. 211). Coverdale is forced to live out his nightmare. He is no longer in control, instead groping around in the darkness, terrified of the mysteries that could be at any depth below him. The darkness, however, is also Coverdale's chance at redemption. If he is able to accept that he is not the centre of the world, and can come to understand Zenobia's reasons for suicide, then he will not have failed completely as an artist or a man. This, however, does not happen. Upon reclaiming her body, Coverdale focuses only on the ugliness of her corpse:

> [C]ould Zenobia have seen all these ugly circumstances of death, how ill it would become her, the altogether unseemly aspect which she must put on, and, especially, old Silas Foster's efforts to improve the matter, she would no more have committed the dreadful act, than have exhibited herself to a public assembly in a badly-fitting garment! (p. 214)

Instead of trying to understand her, he once again clings to what he already believes, instead of searching for new information that might allow him to grow as a man and an artist. In doing so he commits his most outrageous act thus far. He has transformed another person's whole life and death into an object for his own consumption. Claiming that Zenobia would not have killed herself if she had known how 'ill it would become her', he dismisses any personal motives she might have had.[43] Coverdale thus reveals just how far he has fallen from any ability to understand the world around him, believing that Zenobia's only reason to live was to perform for him.

In the book's epilogue, Coverdale's confession reveals that he has learned from hindsight somewhat. He now understands that he lacks 'a purpose' (p. 223). He recognises he has failed as a man due to his inability to stand for anything, something that is highlighted by his claim that he would be prepared to die for a cause, provided 'the effort did not involve an unreasonable amount of trouble' (p. 223). He has also recognised his failure as an artist and has given up poetry, perhaps recognising that although his writing was 'pretty', it lacked substance. His final admission, that he loved Priscilla all along, however, only compounds his failure. It does not throw a 'gleam of light' over his behaviour throughout the story as he would like it to

[43] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 28.

(p. 224). Coverdale, ignoring the mysteries around him for so long, has forfeited the ability to reveal the truth. Instead, the narrative's ending highlights his regret, which has come far too late, that he did not embrace the darkness.

Throughout most of the story, Coverdale ignores or rejects Priscilla.[44] She is too cold, too plain, and too unfashionable for his liking. Where Hollingsworth and Zenobia radiated light, light seems to pass through Priscilla, not even reflecting off her (p. 170). Indeed, at one point he claims that she is 'like a flower-shrub that had done its best to blossom in too scanty light' (p. 27). Crucially, Coverdale's period of admiration for Priscilla coincides with the time of significant adoration for Priscilla within the Blithedale community in which 'everybody was kind to Priscilla' (p. 70). Once again, Coverdale's cannot help but follow a popular trend rather than forging his own path like an American pioneer. Thus, his confession is an admission, however unconscious, that he has failed as both an artist and a man, because he attempted to silence all narratives concerning darkness and gloom, and ended up following the well-trodden path of social conformity. Perhaps he eventually decides that Priscilla should be his object of desire because her role as the Veiled Lady brings with it an air of mystery. As the unnamed and perpetually shrouded clairvoyant who performs in town halls, the Veiled Lady is an enigma of great interest to the high society in New England. However, by claiming to love Priscilla, Coverdale shows that he has not really learned from his mistakes.

The question of who is under the veil is also one of the only straightforward mysteries of the romance. In comparison to the other questions that have far more complex and incomplete answers, such as why Zenobia killed herself or how Hollingsworth could rationalise sacrificing love for money, the mystery of the Veiled Lady is dramatically revealed near the end of the story. Coverdale may claim to love Priscilla as the ending of her story is the most convenient and satisfying, with no mystery or darkness left to ponder – that, at least, he can discern. Perhaps, conversely, he claims to love Priscilla because she is the character who he found most difficult to analyse. As Brand argues, Priscilla, even more than the other characters, remains beyond Coverdale's understanding.[45] In this way, Priscilla's existence remains like a remnant of the gothic carnivalesque, a reminder to Coverdale of the narratives going on beyond his perception. Coverdale is once again attracted to the aesthetic of mystery, without any interest in actually understanding it. As has been explained above, neither darkness nor light alone is enough to create meaning. Knowledge is gleaned and art is created only at the

[44] Justus, 'Hawthorne's Coverdale', p. 25.
[45] Brand, *The Spectator and the City*, p. 149.

intersection of the two. His conflicting emotions – the desire to return to the blindingly sunny days of Blithedale and his shame in losing the ability to utilise the darkness – suggest that he will never find the intersection of the two that is required to make up for his past failures. The world he nostalgically remembers never really existed, and the world of subtle shadings is forever lost to him.

‘I Was Sure You’d Notice This Game and Play It’: *P. T.* as Haunted Text[1]

Madelon Hoedt

The television screen turns to black. Then, text appears:

> Watch out. The gap in the door …
> it’s a separate reality.
>
> The only me is me.
> Are you sure the only you is you?[2]

Is it a fact, a description, or a warning? When the words disappear, you are inside a bare room; judging from the perspective, you are on the floor, laying on your left side. You watch impassively as a cockroach scuttles away from your prone body. The door in front of you clicks open. You push yourself up and look around the room, a grey concrete box. In a dark corner, you can just make out a table, and the next thing you notice are the marks carved into the wall. How long have you been here? You have no idea. With no other option left, you go through the door.

[1] This paper constitutes a reworking and expansion of ideas presented at the *Temporal Discombobulations* conference (University of Surrey, 2016) and in the publication associated with the conference. See Madelon Hoedt, ‘The Only Me is Me. Are You Sure the Only You is You?’, in *Temporal Discombobulations: Time and the Experience of the Gothic*, ed. by Rachel Marsh (University of Surrey, 2016), pp. 71-77.
[2] All primary quotations included throughout this article are taken from *P. T.* (7780s Studios, 2014).

0: Introduction

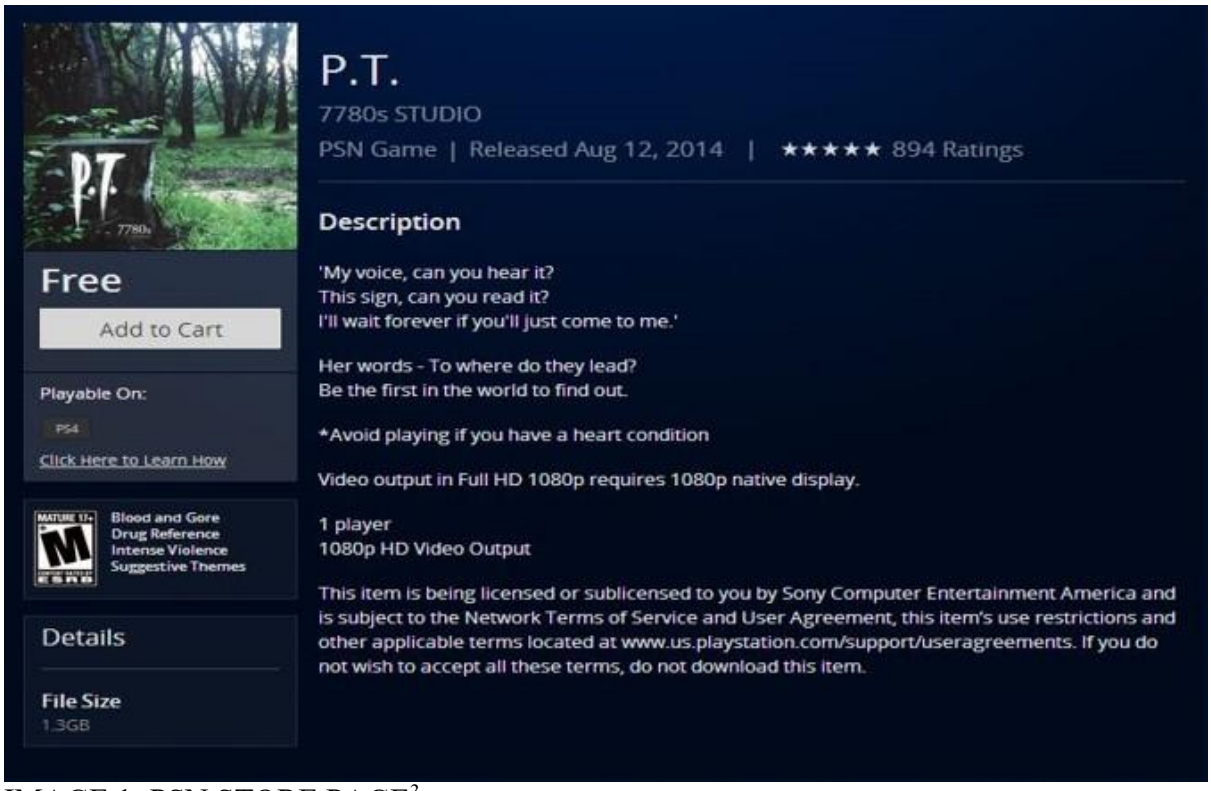


IMAGE 1: PSN STORE PAGE[3]

Created for the PlayStation 4, the file known only as *P. T.* (*Playable Teaser*) appeared on the PlayStation Network in August 2014. It was designed by the unknown 7780s Studio, a demo file that could be downloaded for free and runs to about half an hour in length. No other information was available, but those capable enough to solve *P. T.*'s puzzles were treated to the trailer for *Silent Hills*, intended to be the next entry in the critically acclaimed *Silent Hill* horror-game franchise (1999 to present). Some eight months after its initial release, disputes between the creative team behind *P. T.* and studio Konami resulted in the cancellation of *Silent Hills* and the subsequent removal of *P. T.* from all distribution channels. Unless installed on a PlayStation 4 console, there is no way to access the experience except for second-hand accounts through YouTube videos, still images, and fan discussions. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, its brevity and short life, *P. T.* has remained a talking point, offering a particular interpretation of the (survival) horror genre of videogames. Moreover, its multifaceted nature allows for an approach that breaks down its perspectives on horror (gaming) into separate arguments, which I explore here. In the first section, a narrative summary of the experience of playing *P. T.* is

[3] All images included are screenshots taken by the author between 2014 and 2021 of *P. T.* (7780s Studio; Konami, 2014) and the PlayStation Network.

provided so as to familiarise readers with the content of the game. This is followed by four theoretical sections, each of which explores the various relationships between *P. T.* and the concept of haunting. Two of these relate more directly to the content of the game, discussing *P. T.*'s use of narrative and space, whereas the other two focus more on the context of the *Playable Teaser*, looking at aspects of metagaming, and the troubled history of its release and subsequent removal from digital store fronts. Each of these instances marks a distinct interpretation of the concept of haunting, while linking back to a single gameplay experience, which in turn cannot be read, I argue, without considering its relationship to the ghostly.

1: *P. T.* as Experience



IMAGE 2: HALLWAY

You find yourself in the well-lit hallway of what is clearly a domestic space. There are paintings on the walls, some furniture, houseplants, and photographs. Everything looks slightly dirty, abandoned; the floor is littered with empty bottles and cans, and the tops of the dressers are covered in rubbish. You notice an alarm clock, which reads 23:59. A radio is playing, a newsreader reporting on a triple murder in which a man shot his pregnant wife and two young children in their home, killing them instantly, before being arrested. The hallway itself is in an L-shape, making a sharp turn to the right. Along this second part of the corridor are three doors. The one on your right is locked; the one on your left is flanked by a coatrack and seems to lead outside. When you look up, you can see the second floor of the house, but there is no route to

get upstairs. The only way out is through a third door at the end of the hallway. A few steps leading down take you to another door, and as you push through it, you find yourself back at the beginning of the hallway.

You have completed a loop, the first of many, yet with each cycle, subtle changes start to occur. You can hear sounds: laughter, crying, the mewling of an infant. The door to your right opens a crack, only to be slammed shut, but two loops later it swings wide and you are able to access the bathroom. By now, you have already seen the ghostly figure lurking in the hallway, so you know you are not alone, and when she attacks you, you know you should fear her. You wake up back in the concrete room, but this time, you see the table in the corner more clearly. On it, you find a paper bag, and as you approach it, it starts talking to you:

> I walked. I could do nothing but walk. And then, I saw me walking in front of myself. But it wasn't really me. Watch out. The gap in the door ... it's a separate reality. The only me is me. Are you sure the only you is you?

When you once more enter the hallway, whoever is on the other end of the radio broadcasts knows you are there too, as the original report is now interspersed with new messages: a weird sequence of numbers; a disconnected series of statements and commands: 'You can't trust the tap water.' 'Look behind you. I said, look behind you.' 'Don't touch that dial now, we're just getting started.'

With each loop, the hallway transforms into a slowly escalating nightmare. It gets darker and you need a flashlight to see; then the lights turn to red. You discover a fridge suspended from the second floor with ropes, oozing blood onto the floor below. The radio adds its own commentary, informing you that 'after killing his family, the father hung himself with a garden hose they had in the garage'. You find a message scrawled above the final door: 'Forgive me, Lisa. There is a monster inside of me.' The broadcast changes again, an almost demonic voice, speaking distorted words in an unknown language. The framed pictures on the walls become moving, twitching eyeballs, and the space itself stretches around you, turning into a seemingly endless labyrinth. As you run to a door that you cannot see, you realise one of the pictures is now on the floor, revealing a peephole in the wall. You look through it and can just make out the inside of the bathroom. The voice from the radio promptly responds:

> I've got a message for all you folks down there in radio land. Now's the time for action. Our society is rotten to the core. I'm talking to all the fine, upstanding folks got their welfare cut, got their jobs pulled out from under 'em. Yeah, you! You know what to do! Now's the time! Do it!

Yet this is not the only sound: you hear a struggle, a woman crying, gasping for breath, a blade being pulled free, a scream, a rush of blood, a liquid gurgle. When you pull away from the peephole, you find a message scrawled on the wall above it: 'No turning back now.' Back in the hallway, you decide to enter the bathroom, and a foetus in the sink fills you in on the rest of the story. It tells you: 'You got fired, so you drowned your sorrows in booze. She had to get a part-time job working a grocery store cash register. Only reason she could earn a wage at all is the manager liked how she looked in a skirt. You remember, right? Exactly ten months back.'

The red light disappears, and the pictures return to normal. The alarm clock is still there, but now reads 0:00. The television screen warps, and again, as if something is wrong with the game, with your console. You hear the radio repeating a sequence of numbers over and over: '204863'. You hear a faint crying from somewhere. The screen cuts to an error message, causing the game to crash. The game reloads: the opening screen and text appear, and you are once more inside the first room. Back in the hallway, the alarm clock changes from 23:59 to 0:00. A clock strikes midnight. You hear a baby laughing, once, twice, three times. Then, the phone rings and a voice tells you that 'you've been chosen'. As you enter the next loop, the screen once more cuts to black, revealing more text:

> Dad was such a drag. Every day he'd eat the same kind of food, dress the same, sit in front of the same kind of games ... Yeah, he was just that kind of guy. But then one day, he goes and kills us all! He couldn't even be original about the way he did it. I'm not complaining ... I was dying of boredom anyway. But guess what? I will be coming back, and I'm bringing my new toys with me.

You are now outside. The camera pans out, switching from first-person to third-person view, showing a man walking down a street. Three names flash across the screen: Hideo Kojima, Guillermo del Toro, and Norman Reedus. And finally, a title: SILENT HILLS.

2: *P. T.* as Ghost Story



IMAGE 3: LISA

At its most basic level, a ghost story is a narrative in which a supernatural entity makes an appearance; as noted by Julia Briggs, '[t]he narrowest definition of the ghost story would describe it as a story about the spirits of the returning dead'.[4] Such tales rely on a particular sense of imaginative logic; she continues, '[g]host stories commonly provide an alternative structure of cause and effect, in which the supernatural is not explained away but offers its own pseudo-explanation according to some kind of spiritual law of action and reaction'.[5] Although meant to frighten, fictional ghost stories have often been designated as oddly comforting, since these fictional tales can provide a more rational frame for their audience to negotiate the supernatural, as invented ghost stories

> have some point to them, whereas only too often genuine experiences and ghostly apparitions in life have no discoverable meaning or application. […] This consequential patterning of the ghost story normally implies that there must be a reason (if not a strictly logical one) for supernatural events.[6]

It is this basic reasoning that creates the stories many people are familiar with, where 'the behaviour of the traditional ghost resembles that of a restless sleeper whose bed is

[4] Julia Briggs, 'The Ghost Story', in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Blackwell, 2012), pp. 176-85 (p. 177).
[5] Briggs, 'The Ghost Story', p. 177.
[6] Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (Faber, 1977), p. 15.

uncomfortable or who is troubled by guilt or an unfulfilled obligation. There is similarly an illogical logic in those "spirits created for vengeance".'[7] This is embodied within *P. T.* by the figure of Lisa, whose image is one of the most enduring of the experience. Her tall, gangly stature and disfigured face are the primary threat to the player, and her unpredictable behaviour within the house has been the source for much fear and speculation. A later revelation only served to heighten these emotions, as someone's hacking into and deconstruction of *P. T.*'s inner workings has revealed that the player is constantly followed and that, even when she appears invisible, Lisa is always behind them.[8]

When examining the narrative of *P. T.*, it is in the figure of Lisa that a potential focal point is therefore found, as it is her presence that places the experience within a particular frame. The narrative offered by the game is, arguably, both deceptively simple and incredibly complex. On the surface, it is a classic gothic tale of passion and revenge, and in its depiction of Lisa and the clues provided, *P. T.* appears to players as a tragic ghost story: the initial broadcast on the radio, detailing the recent crimes, go some way to set the tone, and the appearance of Lisa only confirms the use here of traditional models of haunting. Based on the information provided, players may be led to conclude that Lisa is the pregnant wife discussed in the news report, and that the house in which the player finds themselves is the residence she shared with her husband and killer. Additional details relating to the motives behind the killing are littered throughout, with hints pointing to alcohol abuse, the loss of the father's job, and a supposed extra-marital affair when Lisa starts work herself. The ghost of the murdered, pregnant woman has, it seems, come back to haunt the place where she lived out her final moments, ready to exact her revenge on anyone who gets too close.

Such an interpretation of the figure of the ghost immediately brings with it a sense of a past: there can only be unfinished business if, indeed, there was business to be finished. The spectre lives on beyond death, apparently stuck in a loop and violently lashing out, until a resolution is found, and they can rest in peace, as per the readings provided by Briggs. This model of haunting seems to appear within *P. T.*: viewing Lisa through the lens of a classic ghost story leads to a particular interpretation of the narrative clues found within the game. Something has happened to this woman before the player became involved, and it is through these events that she is now haunting this space, perhaps waiting for someone to solve the

[7] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, p. 16.
[8] The following article includes in-game footage, as well as a link to the original Twitter thread from hacker Lance MacDonald, who discovered Lisa's behaviour: Alysia Judge, '*P. T.* Camera Hack Reveals Lisa is Always Right Behind You', *IGN*, 9 September 2019 <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/09/09/pt-camera-hack-reveals-lisa-is-always-right-behind-you> [accessed 15 July 2021].

puzzle and release her from this stasis. Where Briggs alludes to such an understanding of present and past in her discussion of the ghost story, it is Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle who make the importance of these timelines explicit in their definition: 'Ghosts have a history. They are not what they used to be. Ghosts, in a sense, *are* history. They do not, after all, come from nowhere, even if they may appear to do just that. They are always inscribed *in a context*.'[9]

However, although closely linked to understandings of the ghost as brought to the fore during academia's spectral turn following the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993), the past/present dichotomy is less easy to maintain within the context of videogames. As Jesper Juul explains,

> Most computer games project a game world, and to play them is therefore to engage in a kind of pretense-play: you are both 'yourself', and you have another role in the game world. This duality is reflected in the *game time*, which can be described as a basic duality of *play time* (the time the player takes to play) and *event time* (the time taken in the game world).[10]

Juul positions the relationship between play time and event time here as one that entails mapping, alluding to the way in which the player's actions are projected into the game world: 'The moment of mapping is one that has a basic sense of happening *now*, when you play. Pressing a key influences the game world, which then logically (and intuitively) has to be happening in the same *now*.'[11] This results in a particular understanding of time within this context, and, according to Juul, leads to a situation in games where there is no way to represent a sense of past and prior moments or events:

> In this way, the game constructs the story time as *synchronous* with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is *now*. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are *happening* now, and that what comes next is not yet determined.[12]

In this way, Lisa's past and present are called into question by the context in which she appears. This does not necessarily negate her status as what I will call a traditional ghost: the radio broadcasts provide something akin to a backstory, which is coded as having occurred before the current instance of play, and seems to be setting up the possible cause for Lisa's status as

[9] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Pearson Longman, 2009), p. 160, emphasis in original.
[10] Jesper Juul, 'Introduction to Game Time', in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, 2004), pp. 131-42 (p. 131), emphasis in original.
[11] Juul, 'Game Time', p. 134.
[12] Juul, 'Games Telling Stories?: A Brief Note on Games and Narrative', *Game Studies* 1.1 (2001), n. p., emphasis in original <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/> [accessed 4 July 2024].

restless sleeper/vengeful spirit. At the same time, the *progression* of the haunting and the way in which Lisa's interactions with the player pan out during the time that the game is played locates the experience of *P. T.* away from the traditional ghost-story formula. Instead, it provides a link to Mark Fisher's understanding of hauntology and its dual direction. Fisher defines these directions as follows:

> The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).[13]

In this sense, the haunting in *P. T.* is not simply a replaying of history, of a spectral form locked in perpetual repetition; it also points towards the future of the player, who may find themselves unable to resolve the game, thus joining Lisa within this endless, looping hallway.

3: *P. T.* as haunted house



IMAGE 4: NIGHTMARE HALLWAY

The fracture between past and present is not just realised within the narrative of *P. T.*, but also in its use of space, and in particular, the relationship between its designed spaces and its status as videogame. Arguably, videogames are impossible spaces, entire worlds created through

[13] Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66.1 (2012), pp. 16-24 (p. 19), emphasis in original.

programmed code and realised as a graphical representation of a (fictional) reality. On the one hand, there is the option for players to view *P. T.*'s hallway as an example of embedded narrative space, defined by Christopher W. Totten as a spaces 'that contain[s] narrative information in the architecture itself'.[14] In this context, the designed spaces of videogames are able to transfer meaning to such an extent that narrative information can be gleaned from their traversal, helping to piece together the more overt clues found in, for example, cutscenes or dialogue. In this use of space as part of the narrative, the haunted house found in *P. T.* becomes, arguably, haunted by itself. As is noted by Daniel Vella, the use of embedded narrative space 'frames the gameworld as a repository of the past, a tissue of its own history', with the game space being transformed into 'a spatial repository of information'.[15] The hallway, then, is not a mere representation of a domestic space; it also carries within itself the events that came before, as well as any instances of gameplay that are experienced by the player with each subsequent loop.

In terms of visual representation, *P. T.*'s hallway presents the haunted house in a way that is hyperreal. I employ this term here as it is used within the visual arts, to indicate high-fidelity realism in representation, which is realised through the game's graphics, and the detail found in the depiction of the hallway and the items found within. The reality of the space is further emphasised by the player's ability to move around and interact with their surroundings. As Mark Wolf explains, environments in videogames are defined by their status as navigable spaces, 'space through which one must find one's way around'.[16] However, this emphasis on navigation does not always translate into cohesiveness, and although many videogames rely on Euclidean geometry, examples of non-Euclidean spaces can also be found. In its presentation of its hallway, *P. T.* transgresses the boundary between these two types of geometry: the hallway itself, its L-shape and contents, have a clear basis in a real-world understanding of dimensions and movement. Even the loop that players complete each time they pass through the doors at the end and start of this traversal is, arguably, a physical possibility, the end of the hallway simply returning the player to the beginning, two L-shapes ultimately creating a square. Where such an understanding falls apart, however, is in *the several steps leading down*

[14] Christopher W. Totten, *An Architectural Approach to Level Design* (CRC Press, 2014), p. 279.
[15] Daniel Vella, 'Spatialised Memory: The Gameworld as Embedded Narrative', in *Proceedings of The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2011*, n. p. <https://gameconference2011.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/spatialised-memory-daniel-vella.pdf> [accessed 18 January 2022].
[16] Mark J. P. Wolf, 'Theorizing Navigable Space in Video Games', in *DIGAREC Keynote-Lectures 2009/10*, ed. by Stephan Günzel, Michael Liebe, and Dieter Mersch (Potsdam University Press, 2011), pp. 18-49 (p. 19) <https://publishup.uni-potsdam.de/opus4-ubp/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/5043/file/digarec06_S018_049.pdf> [accessed 4 July 2024].

from the door at the end of the hallway, and to the start door. This results in a situation where players are not simply completing an endless loop of what is supposedly the same space; instead, they find themselves on a constant downward trajectory as they move through the hallway and its various mutations. Indeed, Wolf explains how 'connections in and of themselves are neither Euclidean nor non-Euclidean; it is the way they connect […] that produces one kind of space or the other'.[17] As a result, the addition of the steps highlights *P. T.*'s status as a hyperreal experience in the Baudrillardian sense, in that it responds to 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it', emphasising its status as a fantastical, impossible space.[18]

The best way to start understanding this aspect of the spatial experience is through Michel Foucault and the concept of heterotopia. Foucault starts by noting that certain sites 'have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect'.[19] He calls these sites 'heterotopias', which he describes as places that 'are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality'.[20] At the core of the heterotopia, Foucault notes, is a strange duality, an opposition of its place in reality and in one's experience of them:

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. […] Everyone can enter into these heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion: we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded.[21]

The heterotopia is both accessible and impenetrable; it is both part of reality and exists outside of it. Yet the concept does not only relate to a perception of space: Foucault includes time in his discussion and introduces the concept of the 'heterochrony', as he argues that '[h]eterotopias are most often linked to slices of time'.[22] These heterochronies, Foucault argues, operate on two levels: some accumulate time, whereas others are connected 'to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect. […] These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal.'[23] Within *P. T.*'s repeating hallway, both types of

[17] Wolf, 'Navigable Space', p. 36.
[18] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan University Press, 1994), p. 1.
[19] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 22-27 (p. 24), doi:10.2307/464648.
[20] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.
[21] Foucault, p. 26.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

heterochrony are represented. The haunting at the core of the narrative is an accumulation of time, of things that have happened *before* but are able to affect the current situation. Simultaneously, events are playing out in real time as players traverse the hallway and interact with the environment. The alarm clock inside the repeating hallway perhaps best exemplifies *P. T.*'s status as heterochrony: perpetually hovering between 23:59 and 0:00, it points to a space stuck forever in a single moment in time. *P. T.*'s possible reading as a ghost story appears to introduce multiple *stories* of haunting into its hallway. In its inclusion of impossible space, these stories become inscribed onto the loop: here, past and present coexist, with ghost and player simultaneously trapped in a never-ending downward spiral.

4: *P. T.* as Horror Game



IMAGE 5: GLITCH

Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren's interpretation of the spectral highlights the potential for the technical ghost: 'Generally, the ghostly can be said to refer to that which is present yet insubstantial (the spirit rather than the body), secondary rather than primary (a faint copy, a trace, a ghost writer), and potentially unreal or deceptive (a spurious radar signal).'[24] The idea of the unreal and deceptive, in particular, is of note here, as through its choices in gameplay, *P. T.* literalises the trope of the ghost in the machine. While the opening loops of

[24] Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 'Introduction', in *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, ed. by Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (Continuum, 2010), pp. ix-xxiv (p. x).

the game simply confine the player to the hallway, listening to radio broadcasts and attempting to avoid Lisa, the later stages of the experience break away from this fictional reality and into a more immediate one. Distortion of the demo itself replaces the supernatural apparitions: players are forced to solve in-game puzzles through non-diegetic user interface and menu screens. The radio interrupts its own broadcasts with messages that address players directly. Visual glitches hamper the play experience. One of several different error messages appear, their text referring to supposed bugs in the software, while others display notes that have been left behind in multiple languages: 'I'm heading there now.' 'I'll call later.' A final one seems to be part of a letter: 'Knowing you, I was sure you'd notice this game and play it. I will never – can never – forget that day 20 years ago. I have something to tell you. Contact me. – J.' The appearance of any one of these messages results in a software crash. Each of these instances impacts on the supposed separation between player and game, creating a convergence between game world and real world.

In doing so, *P. T.* invokes the concept of haunted media as coined by Jeffrey Sconce. He describes the idea of digital technology being considered in some way live, or even living, which in turn determines an audience's relationship to that particular medium: 'At times this sense of liveness can imply that electronic media technologies are animate and perhaps even sentient.'[25] The live(d) experience of playing the game, and being played by it in turn, impacts its players by 'bringing this spectral world into a home' in the form of 'either uncanny electronic agents or as gateways to electronic otherworlds'.[26] To achieve this effect, *P. T.* makes use of mechanics that emphasise the distortion of the fourth wall and the possible intrusion of the game world. Steven Conway defines the fourth wall in this context as an instance 'when the videogame medium consciously oversteps the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic, either by drawing something into the diegetic world from outside, or expelling something out of the diegetic into the non-diegetic'.[27] He goes on to note the difficulty in using this concept within the context of games: due to the centrality of interactivity, the game-player relationship requires a more direct investment through agency, and does not provide the neat delineations between reality/fiction (and the subsequent breach thereof) that are found in other media. There is an overlap between the fiction of the game and the reality of the player, as direct input is required to make progress and realise the game's narrative (or, at

[25] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Duke University Press, 2000), p. 2.
[26] Sconce, *Haunted Media*, p. 4.
[27] Steven Conway, 'A Circular Wall? Reformulating the Fourth Wall for Videogames', *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 2.2 (2010), pp. 145-55 (pp. 145-46), doi:10.1386/jgvw.2.2.145_1.

least, the version of that narrative as it will be experienced by the player). While some games do break the fourth wall in a way similar to other media, by openly acknowledging their status *as* game, other titles instead manipulate these boundaries rather than transgressing them. The result is 'not the breaking of the fourth wall in the traditional sense'; instead, 'the fourth wall is itself relocated, […] as it is moved from in front of the player to behind him or her'.[28] This has the potential to create an element of uncertainty in the player: rather than being 'in on the joke' with the developers and continuing to assess the game as a game, the movement of the fourth wall in the way described by Conway would include the player in a way that is both more immediate (directly affecting their experience) and less obvious (as they may not be aware such a shift has taken place).

It is this strategy of distortion and manipulation that is used by *P. T.*, placing it within a larger context of metagaming, which is defined by Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux as follows: 'The word *metagame* has become a common label for games about games, games within games, games around games, and games without games.'[29] In other disciplines, the prefix 'meta-' can relate to questions of intertextuality, or to an acknowledgement of the artifice within a work of fiction. Within the context of game studies, however, metagaming places a large amount of power with its players: 'Difficult to design, impossible to predict, deeply collaborative, and always ephemeral, metagaming undermines the authority of videogames as authored objects, packaged products, intellectual property, and copyrighted code by transforming single-use software into materials for making many metagames.'[30]

Indeed, since its release, *P. T.* has received continued engagement from players in efforts to mine its secrets. Whereas scenes removed from movies get left on the proverbial cutting-room floor, never to be seen again (or at least only in particular circumstances), certain elements of videogames remain embedded in the software and, although they have been made inaccessible to most players, the information is still available for those who know where to look. An example of this is the aforementioned camera hack: by changing the static position of the camera, one user has verified that Lisa is continuously positioned behind the player. The hacker responsible for this discovery, Lance McDonald, has shared several other finds via his YouTube channel.[31] Across these videos, McDonald is able to examine Lisa up close (an

[28] Conway, 'A Circular Wall?', p. 149.
[29] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 25, emphasis in original.
[30] Boluk and LeMieux, *Metagaming*, p .25.
[31] Lance McDonald, '*P. T. Silent Hills* Cut Content and Unseen Details – *P. T.* Hacking and Hidden Moments', *YouTube*, 26 September 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYSFN6UiVA8> [accessed 4 July 2024];

opportunity not afforded during a normal play experience) and highlights instances when the ghost appears that would otherwise go unnoticed. A similar video focuses on what can be found outside of the hallway, giving viewers a glimpse of what one can assume would have become the game world of *Silent Hills*.[32]

However, the relationship between the gameplay experience and the hacked footage is a complicated one: although the developers did not include these instances into *P. T.* as it is experienced by a player when interacting normally with the hallway, in the '*Silent Hill* Full Map Explored' video, an appearance of Lisa occurs that resets the game, upon accessing the town beyond the hallway (outside of the scripted cutscene). McDonald points to this as a specific event, and a deliberate inclusion on the part of the developers to return the player to the main game space when they have wandered out of bounds. This occurrence calls into question the status of the footage found when hacking *P. T.* and whether these additional events were intended to be seen by players or not. Either way, the material remains buried within the software and, as a result, can be found and mined for information. Examples of this practice can be seen in the context of other games, with fans of certain titles always eager to discover more about their favourite game.[33] The demand for such footage is arguably heightened by the level of secrecy surrounding *P. T.* With little to no explanation given regarding its narrative, players continue to search for additional details, both to help interpret the events of *P. T.* itself, and in a search for clues on what the final product, the game *Silent Hills*, might have been like, a question which will remain unanswered due to the cancellation of that title.

However, although the process of metagaming is in some ways able to empower the player, as argued by Boluk and Lemieux, the reality of this is more complex in the context of *P. T.* In the case of this horror game, it is the powerlessness, rather than the power, that is emphasised by the metagame and fourth-wall distortion. Tanya Krzywinska discusses horror games and their mechanics in relation to the position of their players, noting the emphasis found in videogames on interactivity, on *doing*, and how this process is manipulated in many horror titles:

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and '*P. T.* Unseen Content – Lisa's Hidden Behaviours – Hidden Scenes', *YouTube*, 20 March 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJHg1gmySTs> [accessed 4 July 2024].

[32] McDonald, '*P. T.* Unseen Content – *Silent Hill* Full Map Explored – Town and Streets Area', *YouTube*, 20 December 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHLPRrPXaPo> [accessed 18 January 2022].

[33] Other examples of this are the games by FromSoftware, in particular the *Dark Souls* franchise and related titles, which have entire communities dedicated to unravelling their lore and secrets. These include the YouTube channel of user @VaatiVidya, which is almost solely dedicated to the narrative analysis of FromSoftware titles (<https://www.youtube.com/@VaatiVidya>); and @ZullieTheWitch, who often posts content related to hidden game content (<https://www.youtube.com/@ZullietheWitch>) [accessed 27 May 2024].

> The element of pre-determination, which lies outside the player's sphere of agency, is therefore linked to the metaphysical dimension in which manicheanism operates. The concept of the moral occult plays a central role in my argument that horror-based videogames are strongly dependent on their capacity to allow players to experience a dynamic between states of *being in control* and *out of control*.[34]

P. T.'s use of metagaming and fourth-wall break constitutes an instance of players being out of control, whilst emphasising the control exerted by the game. In its use of messages and glitches, the demo not only acknowledges the existence of a world beyond the game, but directly addresses the player inhabiting that world. The supernatural malevolence already encountered in *P. T.* is, in effect, showing its awareness of and influence over the play experience, actively manipulating and seemingly thwarting the player's efforts to complete it by forcing errors and crashing the game. The message here is not one of an insubstantial, unknown entity causing strange behaviours of game and console, but rather of an actual *ghost in the machine*, a malevolent spectre invading and undermining the ability to play.

5: *P. T.* as Ghost

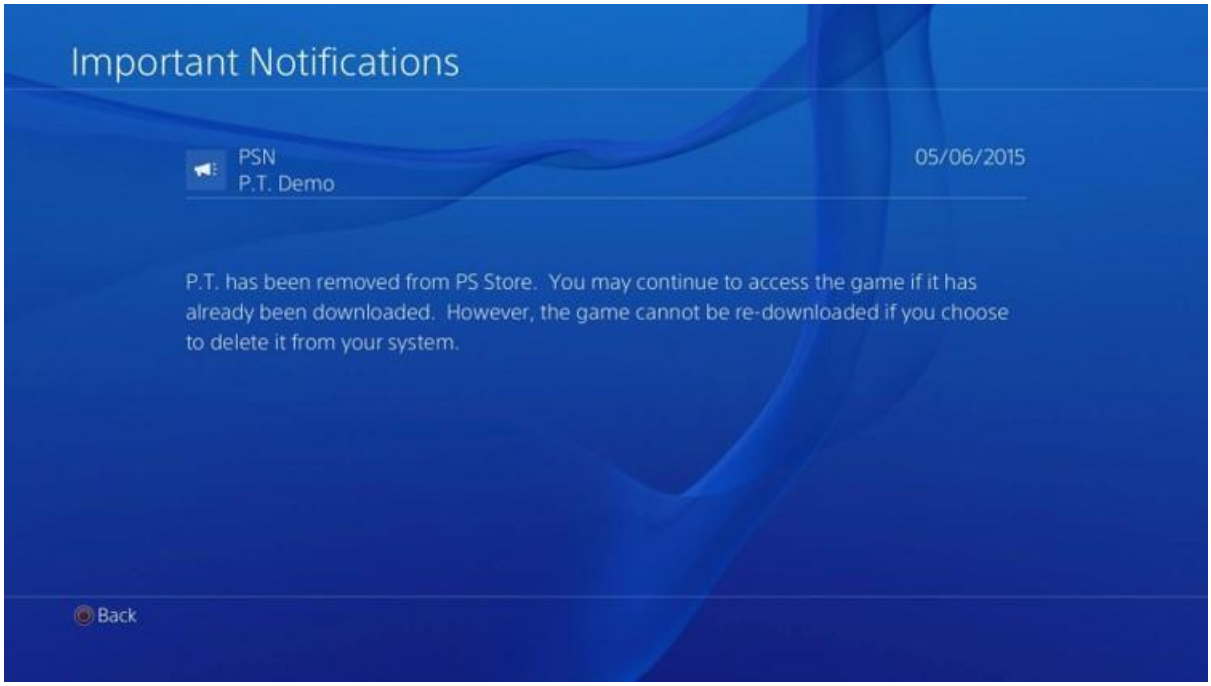


IMAGE 6: PSN REMOVAL NOTICE

While *Silent Hills* as a project has been cancelled, its demo is not dead. At the time of writing, in June 2024, it is just under ten years since the *Playable Teaser* first appeared on the

[34] Tanya Krzywinska, 'Hands-On Horror', in *Screenplay: Cinema / Videogames / Interfaces*, ed. by Geoff King and Krzywinska (Wallflower Press, 2002), pp. 206-24 (p. 208), emphasis in original.

PlayStation Network. No one knew who was behind 7780s Studios until the riddles of *P. T.* were solved and the ending revealed, which, in itself, has proved tricky. Diligent players were able to unlock the final teaser video within hours of *P. T.*'s release, yet the methods for doing so remain shrouded in mystery. Even to this day, the walkthrough of the demo on the IGN website, which includes information on how to complete the game, is still a work in progress. Last updated in January 2019, the guide includes several methods to reach what is listed as the 'possible "official" solution', as well as multiple methods and additional theories supplied by players.[35] Ultimately, however, there is still no definitive, fool-proof solution to the final puzzle, which has only added to *P. T.*'s allure. This is extended to the marketing surrounding the title on its release: first announced at Gamescom 2014, it simply appeared as a free demo, a small horror experience from an unknown developer, only revealing its distinguished lineage of Kojima, Del Toro, and the connection to *Silent Hill* to the player upon completion. In doing so, *P. T.* became perhaps the first interactive teaser trailer and, by extension, an excellent viral marketing tool.

Following these revelations, players discovered a trail of breadcrumbs left by the development team that reveal deeper connections, from small details (such as the name '7780s Studios' being a nod to *Silent Hill*(*s*)[36]) through to larger discussions in the years that followed, including theories that *P. T.* is a metaphor for the very public falling-out between Hideo Kojima and long-time employer Konami, which took place in 2015.[37] The cancellation of the *Silent Hills* title, which resulted from this feud, as well as the removal of *P. T.* from all distribution channels on 29 April 2015, has sparked its own controversy about developer/studio relationships, as well as the preservation of videogames. Ordinarily, games purchased via the PlayStation Network stay accessible to players even if they are removed from the storefront: the title does not appear in new searches, but can still be downloaded by its owner. In the case of *P. T.*, however, this option was removed in May 2015, meaning that the title can only be played if it is installed on a PlayStation 4 console. Similarly, the ability to transfer an installed

[35] Jon Ryan and others, '*P. T.* Demo Walkthrough', *IGN*, 5 January 2019 <https://www.ign.com/wikis/silent-hills-pt/P.T._Demo_Walkthrough> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[36] The number 7780 refers to the area size of the Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan, with the phrase 'Silent Hill' (or 'quiet hill') being a literal translation of the region's name. Shizuoka is often used as a nickname for the *Silent Hill* franchise in Japan. See also Brenna Hillier, 'What Does the "7780s" in *P. T.* Mean? Kojima Explains', *VG247*, 22 August 2014 <https://www.vg247.com/2014/08/22/silent-hills-p-t-7780s-hide-kojima/> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[37] For a summary of the split between Kojima and Konami, see Samit Sarkar, 'Konami's Bitter, Yearlong Breakup with Hideo Kojima, Explained', *Polygon*, 16 December 2015 <https://www.polygon.com/2015/12/16/10220356/hideo-kojima-konami-explainer-metal-gear-solid-silent-hills>; and for an example of the *P. T.* as metaphor theory, see TheGrateDebate '*P. T.*'s Hidden Meaning', *YouTube*, 16 August 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr4RvdREwl8> [accessed 15 July 2021].

version of the demo between a PS4 and the new PS5 console, released in 2020, was quickly removed.[38] Writing in April 2015, Crossley describes how '[t]oday, Konami will remove [*P. T.*] from the PlayStation Store and it will be neither game nor demo nor teaser nor advert. It will be nothing – a haunted space in a digital library, its memory slowly fading like an awful dream.'[39] *P. T.* invited players into its horrifying depths, and has now become its own ghost.

Despite this, *P. T.* has lived on in reports, stories, and homages. Often praised for its atmosphere and appearing on various lists of best horror games at the time of its release,[40] *P. T.* has gone on to inspire a number of spiritual successors, with titles like *Allison Road* (cancelled), *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team, 2016), and *Visage* (SadSquare Studio, 2020) among the most notable. In addition, the puzzles and secrecy surrounding *P. T.*'s initial release, further heightened by the involvement of Kojima, who is known for hoaxes and publicity stunts,[41] has led to extensive speculation in the intervening years, and discussions surrounding *P. T.* and a possible revival of the *Silent Hill* franchise have continued. Projects such as the (now seemingly abandoned) *Abandoned* project from the Dutch developer BlueBox Studios, which was announced on the official PlayStation Blog in April 2021, tapped into this speculation.[42] The tone and realistic graphics of the teaser trailer included in the announcement, as well as several supposed hints provided by the developers, soon sparked an interest from fans hungry for news about *Silent Hill*. Multiple games-journalism sources reported on what is now being referred to as 'conspiracy theories' in June 2021, which has resulted in attempts from the developers to debunk some of these rumours and in the BlueBox Studios website

[38] Michael McWhertor, '*P. T.* is not Playable on Playstation 5', *Polygon*, 6 November 2020 <https://www.polygon.com/2020/11/6/21549228/pt-ps5-backward-compatible-playable-playstation-5> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[39] Rob Crossley, 'In Memory of the Unbearable Enigma, *P. T.*', *Gamespot*, 29 April 2015 <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/in-memory-of-the-unbearable-enigma-p-t/1100-6426967/> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[40] Although *P. T.* has since disappeared from such lists (most likely due to the lack of accessibility), the game has received continued attention since its 2014 release. See, for example, David Theriault, '*P. T.*: The Best Horror Game That Never Was', *NonStop Nerd*, 29 October 2021 <https://nonstopnerd.com/2021/10/29/p-t-the-best-horror-game-that-never-was/>; and Mary Beth McAndrews, '*P. T.* is the Scariest Video Game That Never Was', *Dread Central*, 12 August 2022 <https://www.dreadcentral.com/editorials/435309/p-t-is-the-scariest-video-game-that-never-was/> [accessed 27 May 2024].
[41] Some of these examples are quite benign. See Jamie Payne, '4 Times Kojima Totally Trolled Us With Marketing Stunts', *Twinfinite*, 28 August 2018 <https://twinfinite.net/2018/08/kojima-trolled-us-marketing-stunts/>. Others are more far reaching (in every sense of the word). See Dave Smith, 'The World's First Head Transplant Surgery Might Be Part of One Giant Marketing Stunt', *Business Insider*, 22 April 2015 <https://www.businessinsider.com/head-transplant-hoax-2015-4?r=US&IR=T> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[42] Hasan Kahraman, '*Abandoned*, a Cinematic Survival Sim, Hits PS5 Later This Year', *Playstation.Blog*, 7 April 2021 <https://blog.playstation.com/2021/04/07/abandoned-a-cinematic-survival-sim-hits-ps5-later-this-year/> [accessed 15 July 2021].

being taken down.[43] Meanwhile, Konami itself has returned to the franchise, essentially reviving it from what appeared to be a certain death, with several *Silent Hill* projects greenlit in recent years. Writing in 2026, there are numerous (pending) releases: firstly, the main franchise has seen a critically acclaimed remake of *Silent Hill 2* (Bloober Team, 2024), and a similar reworking of the original was announced in 2025. In addition, three further videogames have been released or are nearing completion: *Silent Hill: The Short Message* (Konami, 2024); *Silent Hill f* (NeoBards Entertainment, 2025); and *Silent Hill: Townfall* (Screen Burn Interactive, 2026). Finally, 2026 saw the release of a new movie (*Return to Silent Hill*, Christophe Gans, and its novelisation by John Passarella). In this way, the liminal space of the town of Silent Hill and its inhabitants have been reawakened to haunt its players, even as *P. T.*'s hallway remains empty.

Its existence as a digital artefact and its subsequent disappearance adds to its ephemerality and, during its brief lifespan, *P. T.* has created what is perhaps the ideal gothic space:

> Disorientation: multiple interlinked networks of signs, images, bits, flows. Disruption: all spatial, temporal, physical and subjective coordinates diffuse, conflate, expand and enmesh. Where does it begin and end? How is it animated? What can it mean? In digital and virtual contexts, what are its frames, anchors, material supports? Who – or what – writes, reads, projects, imagines, perceives? Are the ghosts it generates actual, hallucinatory or medial? Are they effects of unconscious, textual or technical processes?[44]

Ultimately, *P. T.* fails to answer any of these questions, instead simply adding more of its own. What cannot be denied, however, is *P. T.*'s ability to live on, and to continually haunt its hallway and its players, thus becoming a ghost itself. As Bennett and Royle assert, '[t]o be human is to have a spirit, a soul, a *Geist* or ghost. But the more modern sense of "ghost" […] involves the idea of a spectre, an apparition of the dead, a revenant, the dead returned to a kind of spectral existence – *an entity not alive but also not quite, not finally, dead*.'[45]

[43] Some examples of the reportage can be found in the following: Ethan Gach, 'Kojima Conspiracy Theory Ends With Tears', *Kotaku*, 21 June 2021 <https://kotaku.com/hideo-kojima-conspiracy-theory-ends-with-tears-1847141712>; and Liam Croft, 'Hideo Kojima Fans Investigate PS5 Exclusive *Abandoned*, Reads Like Conspiracy Theories', *PushSquare*, 18 June 2021 <https://www.pushsquare.com/news/2021/06/hideo_kojima_fans_investigate_ps5_exclusive_abandoned_reads_like_conspiracy_theories> [accessed 15 July 2021].

[44] Fred Botting, *Gothic*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2014), p. 197.

[45] Bennett and Royle, *Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, p. 160, emphasis added.

'The Mystery Writers Conspire to Make Our Flesh Creep': Horror, Detection, and Mystery in the Late 1920s and Early 1930s

Mark Jancovich and Shane Brown

Introduction

In 1931, Dashiell Hammett was commissioned to edit a collection of horror stories, *Creeps by Night*.[1] If this choice may seem strange today, given that Hammett was so central to hardboiled detective fiction, the *New York Times* reviewer did not seem surprised. On the contrary, they claimed that the 'selection is understandingly and skilfully made, which is no more than one would expect from this source'.[2] In the same year, *Variety* published another review that may surprise readers today, a review that celebrated Universal's production of *Frankenstein* (dir. by James Whale, 1931) and assumed that 'the audience for this type of film is probably the detective story readers'.[3]

As both of these reviews demonstrate, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, understandings of detective and horror fiction were very different from those that are common today. In current academic work, they are seen as separate genres and most accounts of detective fiction (and of crime fiction more generally) make few, if any, references to horror as a genre.[4] On the few occasions that horror is mentioned, it is usually in relation to supposedly rare moments of interaction between otherwise independent genres, moments that are often understood in terms of hybridity. For example, Maurizio Ascari's 'counter-history' of crime fiction presents detective and horror fiction as separate territories, even though she acknowledges that 'border territories' exist in which 'processes of creative innovation often take place, thanks to acts of transgression and occasions of hybridisation'. In other words, the 'border territory' is understood as 'a fertile site of exchange' between otherwise distinct genres.[5]

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[1] *Creeps by Night: Chills and Thrills*, ed. by Dashiell Hammett (John Daly, 1930).
[2] Bruce Rae, 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 18 October 1931, p 25.
[3] Rush, 'Review of *Frankenstein*', *Variety*, 8 December 1931, p. 14.
[4] John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1976); Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Macmillan, 1980); Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. by Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge University Press 2010); Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (Yale University Press, 1981); Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[5] Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. xii. See also Peter Messent, *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); and Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction: From Poe to the Present* (Liverpool University Press 2013).

Elsewhere, Andrew Tudor has discussed how the search for 'Factor X' (that is, for a single characteristic that is identifiable in and unites all examples of a given genre) conceives of genres as distinct and independent from one another;[6] the same problem can be identified in many historical accounts of genres, which often work teleologically. As Martin Priestman has noted, many histories work backwards and search for 'antecedents' of current generic constructions, a tactic that 'produces an over-limited and somewhat distorted picture'.[7] Similarly, Edward James writes about the term 'science fiction', which was not even coined until the late 1920s; he observes that most histories start before this date and are made up of texts presented as 'precursors' of the genre, texts that were originally written and consumed in relation to different generic terms.[8] In other words, these 'precursors' were inevitably *not* read as science fiction before the 1920s; and may have been associated with, or differentiated from, texts that later conceptions of science fiction may obscure or neglect.

This problem also accounts for some of the debates over detective fiction's origins, given that different conceptions of the genre will select very different 'precursors'. For example, while some histories start with Oedipus and others with Edgar Allan Poe, it is important to note how few mention the gothic novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially given that Poe did not distinguish his detective stories from his other fiction. Also, as Kate Ferguson Ellis and others have pointed out, a key feature of the female gothic was the female investigator and her need to uncover the secret histories of her mysterious social world.[9] Of course, histories inevitably marginalise some materials, but the neglect of the gothic novel is significant in various ways. As some studies have shown, this elision of the gothic novel privileges a 'masculine' version of detective fiction, and excludes many women writers, the presence of whom would make the relationship to the gothic novel difficult to ignore.[10] Indeed, women writers such as Carolyn Wells and Mary Roberts Rinehart were still writing in the 1920s and Rinehart's fiction, particularly *The Bat* (1920), a play based on that fiction, was clearly understood as an example of *both* detective and horror fiction. It was also

[6] Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (Secker and Warburg, 1974).
[7] Martin Priestman, 'Introduction: Crime Fiction and Detective Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Priestman (Cambridge University Press 2003), pp. 1-6 (p. 3).
[8] Edward James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press 1994).
[9] Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (University of Illinois Press, 1989). While Ellis focuses on the female gothic, it is equally clear that many male-centred gothic novels are also investigative narratives.
[10] Catherine Ross Nickerson, *The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by American Women* (Duke University Press, 1998); *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. by Nickerson (Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Lucy Sussex, *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction: The Mothers of the Mystery Genre* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

one of the most successful and influential plays of the period, and had an immense impact on the American horror films of the silent period.[11] In other words, the marginalisation of these women writers not only enables a particular construction of the Golden Age (which is often seen as the 1920s and 1930s, when, as we will see, many histories and canons of the genre were first being constructed), but it also artificially maintains a sense of distinction between detective and horror fiction.

Nor is it simply women writers and their associations with horror that are marginalised in many academic histories; so too are other examples of popular literature. In the 1920s, the single most successful writer of crime, horror, and detective fiction was Edgar Wallace, whose huge output and massive readership gets little or no mention in most histories. One reason for this omission is that, as Julian Symons puts it, 'detective stories were mostly read by the "upper and professional classes" and thrillers by those with less money and inferior status'.[12] Of course, as we will see, even this distinction between detective fiction and the thriller works to distinguish categories that were not seen as separate from one another during the period. Furthermore, this distinction tends to privilege the intellectual over the physical, and in ways that were directly mapped onto a privileging of the upper class and/or masculine over the lower class and/or feminine.

The following essay therefore offers an account that concedes that, as Ascari argues, academic scholarship has done an admirable job of deconstructing the genre of detective fiction as it has been inherited from, and developed since, the Golden Age.[13] But this article also argues that this scholarship has not devoted the same energies to a deconstruction of critical constructions of the genre since the late 1920s and early 1930s. As will be shown, this was a period in which there was little sense of distinction between detective and horror fiction; but it was also one in which, as Howard Haycraft observed in 1946, there was 'an outpouring of serious critical discussion of the once-lowly whodunit and its relations by marriage unequalled in any comparable period in the 100-year history of the genre'.[14] Furthermore, in this critical discussion, a small but significant grouping actively sought to deny an association between detective and horror fiction, and so to construct detective fiction as an independent genre. However, given that this construction of the genre was explicitly designed to purge the most

[11] Mark Jancovich and Shane Brown, '"Most Stories of This Type": Genre, Horror, and Mystery in the Silent Cinema', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 42.2 (2022), pp. 168-90.
[12] Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (Penguin, 1985), p. 21.
[13] Ascari, *A Counter-History*.
[14] Howard Haycraft, 'Foreword', in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Grosset and Dunlap, 1946), pp. v-vi (p. v).

popular literary traditions, or at least those which had the largest reading publics, it was never going to prove stable or complete. On the contrary, writers such as H. Douglas Thomson could not single-handedly separate detective and horror fiction from one another. Although he battled to distinguish them in his study of the genre, *Masters of Mystery* (1931), he had put them back together by 1934 when he edited *The Mystery Book*.[15]

We should therefore be clear that our approach to genre is not one that seeks to identify the 'Factor X' that defines a specific genre and so distinguishes it from others. On the contrary, we are concerned to look at genre terms historically and to examine how these terms were understood in different historical periods. In the process, we aim to avoid the tendency of imposing understandings of a genre derived from one historical period back onto earlier periods, where either the genre did not exist as a category or was understood very differently. More concretely, we will demonstrate that while 'detective fiction' and 'horror' were both established generic terms in the 1920s and 1930s, they were not seen as separate from one another but rather as virtually synonymous terms. Furthermore, both terms were understood in relation to a larger, overarching category – mystery – which was not limited to the detective story as intellectual puzzle. On the contrary, the mystery concerned an investigation into the seemingly inexplicable, and so staged a confrontation between rationality and the seemingly irrational. In Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), Sherlock Holmes investigates events that seem to be caused by the supernatural beast of the title, events for which he eventually provides a rational explanation; but lurking within this story is an alternative possibility – that rationality will ultimately fail to account for reality and that the supernatural will be shown to be real.

If the mystery stories of the 1920s were therefore about the tension between the rational and the irrational, they did not privilege one over the other: some examples stressed the powers of rationality and others stressed their insufficiencies. The popularity of these stories should hardly be surprising, then, given that the 1920s was a period in which critics from across the political spectrum were debating a series of social changes associated with new industrial systems and the new forms of consumerism associated with them.[16] For many social and cultural commentators, these social changes privileged scientific rationality over traditional religion. For this reason, these changes were exemplified by, but in no way limited to, the

[15] H. Douglas Thomson, *Masters of Mystery: A Study of the Detective Story* (Collins, 1931); and *The Mystery Book*, ed. by Thompson (Odhams Press, 1934).
[16] Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Pantheon, 1984).

Scopes Monkey Trial of 1926, which debated whether schools in Tennessee should teach the accounts of creation provided by the Christian Bible or the scientific theories associated with Charles Darwin.

However, while the Scopes Trial forced many to 'take a stand', as the anti-industrial Agrarians put it, the line between science and religion was nowhere near as clear as we might imagine it today.[17] As Warren Susman notes, transformation

> becomes a key word in this period. Taking on meaning in the new worlds of physics and modern biology, it was used in connection with a fairy world where rocks changed to gold and frogs become princes. It could, and often did, suggest a world of ambiguous sex roles where girls might easily 'be' boys and even boys might 'be' girls. Transformation seemed to be what the new culture was about.[18]

If these ideas stressed the unreliability of appearances, they not only suggested that magic might be an illusion that could be given a rational explanation, but also that science might be magical. As Susman puts it, 'some of America's most distinguished practical scientists – Edison and Burbank are examples – were presented to the enthusiastic and interested American public as "wizards" rather than scientists'.[19] Alternatively, in Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), Van Helsing is keen to categorise his research on vampires as scientific and as a rejection of superstitious accounts of this phenomenon.

To this end, the following essay examines reviews of fiction from the period, particularly in the *New York Times*, a publication that hardly represents the entire reading public of Britain and the US, but that was a prestigious and influential tastemaker. Furthermore, it addressed a general middle-class readership and was therefore not too high-brow to ignore genre fiction, nor so low-brow that it was interested in little else. In addition, the article returns to the key collections and studies through which the history, canon, and identity of detective fiction as an independent genre was being constructed.

The first section starts with an examination of horror as a category in the period and demonstrates that it was clearly understood as a fictional 'type,' even when not explicitly named. However, this section also demonstrates that this 'type' was generally understood as part of a larger generic type, 'mystery', which also included detective fiction and was understood as being virtually indistinguishable from horror. The second section then moves on to detective fiction and the ways in which it was understood in terms of mystery. In other words,

[17] Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Harper, 1930). See also Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[18] Susman, *Culture as History*, p. xxvii.
[19] Ibid.

this section explores the ways in which detective fiction often featured an investigation into that which seemed to defy rational explanation, and so worked to make the reader's flesh creep and to incite horror. As we will also see, even the detectives were associated with the uncanny, and many stories were understood as more blood-curdling, sensational, and thrilling than we would expect today. Finally, the last section moves on to the collections and studies that attempted to establish a distinction between detective and horror fiction during the period; and it demonstrates the difficulties that their writers and editors encountered in this attempt, difficulties that illustrate not only the lack of distinction elsewhere but also that the materials most popular with readers were those that were either opposed to, or blithely unaware of, these distinctions.

Horror and Mystery in the Late 1920s and Early 1930s

As Rick Altman has pointed out, one problem with genre studies is that, outside the academy, the explicit 'naming of a genre' is actually quite rare, and it is more common for descriptions to 'imply generic affiliation'.[20] Consequently, in the 1920s, texts were often generically identified through the use of associated terms. For example, in the case of horror, stories were often described as inducing 'chills', 'terror', or 'shock', or as being designed to evoke the 'eerie', 'weird', or 'creepy'. Often these narratives were claimed to be 'hair-raising'; to make one's 'flesh creep'; or to give one 'the heebie jeebies' – although inversely, some cases were criticised for failing to achieve these effects. The term 'thriller' turns up with great regularity in the 1920s but was not simply associated with realist crime dramas, but rather with stories designed to produce a 'thrill', whether this was through vigorous action or the shivers provoked by the 'mysterious', 'strange', and 'uncanny'. The 'thriller' was therefore linked to the word 'chiller', and texts described as thrillers were often said to make audiences 'shudder' or 'quiver' with nerves. These terms are also linked with a series of others, such as 'blood-curdling', which not only appears in numerous reviews but also establishes a link with other terms. In other words, while some texts were said to be 'gruesome', this term was not only associated with the sense of the 'gory', the 'morbid', and the 'macabre' but also with the 'shocking', 'grotesque', 'dreadful', 'horrific', or 'horrifying'.

The regularity with which these terms were used not only suggests that they were part of an established vocabulary but that they referred to a 'type', a 'type' that most readers would recognise. For example, in its review of Edith Birkhead's study *Tales of Terror* (1921), the

[20] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (British Film Institute, 1999), p. 128.

New York Times described these tales as 'a literary species, a definite type in literature',[21] and also uses the familiar associated terms in relation to this 'type': it will create 'terror' and 'shock'; prove 'blood-curdling', 'thrilling', 'horrific', 'uncanny', and 'mysterious'; or make one's 'flesh creep' or induce 'gooseflesh'. This type was also associated with 'props' and 'clichés' such as 'underground vaults, ill-fitting doors with rusty hinges, easily extinguished lamps, and a trap door'.[22] Elsewhere, it is claimed that Mrs Radcliffe is responsible 'for originating the stock props of ruinous old castles, desperate villains, secret passages, vaults and trapdoors'.[23] There are even references at the time to fairly familiar horror threats: 'Here run rampant were wolves, vampires, voodoo, witchcraft, the abhorrent rites of the Satanists, horrible chemical mixtures which cause the arms and legs and head of the victim to fall from his living body, parasitic hands that pull at the vitals of their unfortunate possessors, and hideous maniacal surgery into ghastly obscene creatures.'[24]

If some of these references relate to the gothic, 'horror' was also used as a generic noun at the time. For example, Edward Sackville West's gothic novel *The Ruin* (1927) supposedly lacked 'the picaresque structure of the earlier types of the horror story';[25] while a review of Frederick Stuart Greene's short-fiction anthology *The Grim Thirteen* (originally published 1917) referred to it as a collection of 'Thirteen Horror Stories'.[26] Of course, not all references were quite as emphatic, and a collection of M. R. James's ghost stories, which are referred to as such, 'ghost stories' being a familiar term at the time, was described as constructing 'a chain of horror'.[27] In fact, in the mid-1920s, there seems to have been a minor boom in the publication of horror and ghost stories. In 1927, then, a review of Cynthia Asquith's *The Ghost Book* (1927) praised one story on the grounds that 'so skilfully is the tale told, so effectively is the slowly mounting sense of horror produced, that the reader's nerves tingle and goose-flesh rises, and any sudden sound, even the most ordinary, makes him start with a shriek in the night'.[28] This not only uses the term 'horror' in relation to the ghost story but further illustrates that both are related to the various associated terms discussed earlier.

[21] Brander Matthews, 'The Cabinet of Gothic Tales of Terror', *New York Times*, 25 September 1921, p. 2. This is a review of Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* (Constable and Co., 1921).
[22] Matthews, 'The Cabinet of Gothic Tales', p. 2.
[23] Anon., 'Gastronomic Origins of the Horror Story', *New York Times*, 25 May 1930, p. 8. See also Anon., 'The Ruin and Other Recent Works of Fiction', *New York Times*, 6 January 1927, Book Reviews Section, p. 9.
[24] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 25 November 1928, p. 34.
[25] Anon., 'The Ruin', p. 9.
[26] Anon., 'Thirteen Horror Stories', *New York Times*, 18 March 1928, p. 29 and p. 32.
[27] Anon., 'A Book of Ghost Stories and Other Works of Fiction', *New York Times*, 3 January 1926, p. 8.
[28] Anon., 'Ghost Stories', *New York Times*, 5 June 1927, p. 9.

If 'horror' had the status of a generic noun, it was also associated with a familiar generic canon. One article, for example, listed a series of writers whose fictions were 'full of horrors' – Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry James – the only surprise being Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881).[29] Furthermore, one reader wrote a letter in response to this 'list of "ghost stories"' that complained about the omission of another 'horrific work of the imagination, "Dracula," by Bram Stoker. All other tales of the horrible and the uncanny are as prosaic as John Bull and his beefsteak and ale alongside of that blood curdling, hair-raising thriller.'[30]

Nonetheless, understandings of horror in the 1920s were very different from today, with horror and detective fiction not seen as two distinct categories, but often as virtually indistinguishable from one another. For example, the *New York Times* did not differentiate them but reviewed them under a broader heading, 'Mystery'. On occasion, the heading was called 'Mystery and Horror' but only towards the end of the 1920s.[31] As Mark Jancovich has argued elsewhere, the term 'mystery' is a complex one that is not simply about the puzzle story, but is also concerned with the strange, eerie, and mysterious.[32] This explains the relationship between stories described as horror or detective fiction today: while not all horror stories involved detection, most featured an investigation into mysterious phenomena; and while not all detective fiction involved horror, most featured an investigation into the mysterious, eerie, and strange. As outlined above, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is seen as a classic detective story today but features an investigation into the spectre of supernatural monstrosity; while a classic horror novel such as *Dracula* (1897) is largely a narrative of investigation, at least until the protagonists diagnose the threat and the story shifts from one of investigation to one of pursuit.

This association is even made explicit in one review: 'The term "mystery story" has come to be so generally applied to stories dealing with crime and its detection that one is apt to forget that there are other mysteries – those that have to do with things that are beyond our knowledge. It is with such mysteries that the tales in this collection deal.'[33] Similarly, a review of Philip Macdonald's *Murder Gone Mad* (1931) identifies it as both a murder mystery, in which 'an insane person [is] killing for the weirdest of motives', and one in which 'horror is

[29] Anon., 'Toxins in Literature', *New York Times*, 29 January 1912, p. 10.
[30] C. T., 'A Tale of Horror', *New York Times*, 31 January 1912, p. 10.
[31] Anon., 'Mystery and Horror', *New York Times*, 8 May 1927, p. 25; and Anon., 'Mystery and Horror', *New York Times*, 21 August 1927, p. 2.
[32] Jancovich, '"The Meaning of Mystery": Genre, Marketing, and the Universal Sherlock Holmes Series of the 1940s', *Film International*, 3.17 (2005), pp. 34-45.
[33] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 16 October 1927, p. 26.

piled upon horror'.[34] Elsewhere, *The House of Dr Edwardes* (1927) – which was adapted for cinema as *Spellbound* (1945) – was another 'story of horror', in which the heroine 'undergoes some thrilling and horrifying experiences' when she is menaced by 'a dangerous homicidal maniac'.[35]

Consequently, these detective stories were often indistinguishable from other stories of 'mystery and horror', such as *The Swinging Shutter* (1930), in which there 'is no murder […] though there are two attempts that fail by an uncomfortably narrow margin'. However, there is an investigator – the 'solution to the mystery is brought about partly through the efforts of a young woman who senses that something is wrong' – while the story is praised for its 'atmosphere of mystery and horror'.[36] Similarly, *The Shadow Thing* (1928) was reviewed under the title 'Creeping Horror', and was described as being for 'those who delight in tales of weird and psychic phenomena, of creeping horrors and mysterious deadly forces lurking in the night, of sly malevolence and of devastating occult powers'. Here, the close relationship between horror and mystery is explicit, and the author is only distinguished from other writers of 'mystery stories' on the grounds of ability: he 'knows how to write; he knows how to build up gradually, subtly, insidiously, an atmosphere of suspicion and terror'.[37]

Mystery, Investigation, and Detection

Consequently, as these reviews make clear, mystery often featured an investigation into that which seemed to defy rational explanation. For example, detective fiction often features 'the familiar theme of the murder in a locked room',[38] a classic example of which is John Dickson Carr's *It Walks by Night* (1930), in which a 'bridegroom is brutally slain […] and in such circumstances that it seems absolutely impossible for anyone to have entered or left the room without the knowledge of the police'.[39] Furthermore, the apparent impossibility of the events depicted in these stories creates an atmosphere that is strange, eerie, and mysterious. For example, Carr's *The Three Coffins* (aka *The Hollow Man* (1935)) is another 'locked room' mystery that appears to involve an '"invisible" murderer', a situation that generates 'a thoroughly creepy atmosphere' and was sure to 'keep the reader's hair standing happily on end until the last page'.[40] Nor were these horrific elements seen as a surprise in the review. On the

[34] Rae, 'New Mystery Stories', p. 25.
[35] Anon., 'The Mystery Writers Conspire to Make Our Flesh Creep', *New York Times*, 15 January 1928, p. 66.
[36] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', 25 November 1928, p. 34.
[37] Anon., 'Creeping Horror', *New York Times*, 4 November 1928, p. 6.
[38] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', 25 November 1928, p. 34.
[39] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 23 February 1930, p. 28.
[40] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', 23 February 1930, p. 28.

contrary, they were a sign of the novel's effectiveness: it was an 'uncommonly successful' novel that had a 'plot full of mysteries' and was praised as 'one of the good ones'.[41] In other words, mysteries were often supposed to suggest the possible presence of supernatural forces and so induce a feeling of horror. For example, another detective novel, Maurice Renard and Albert Jean's *Blind Circle* (1928), was supposed to give 'the reader his money's worth in horror and mystery. What could be more horrible or more mysterious than four dead bodies, all absolutely identical in every respect?'[42] Even more restrained writers such as Agatha Christie required 'a mysterious murder': without mysteriousness, there is no need for a detective, and certainly not for a brilliant one.[43]

One article in the *New York Times* even claimed that mystery writers 'conspire to make our flesh creep'.[44] For this article, and many others at the time, mystery was specifically concerned with the 'mysterious', 'eerie', and 'strange.' Consequently, while Edgar Wallace may be remembered as a writer of detective fiction today, he was heavily associated with horror in the 1920s. For example, a review of *The Door with Seven Looks* (1926) claims that the 'first sign of horror in the story occurs' early on and that the story features a 'detective' who is confronted by a series of 'mystifying incidents', including 'the mysterious secret of the seven locks'.[45]

Consequently, as many reviews demonstrate, numerous detective stories were set in locations that were supposed to evoke a sense of the weird, uncanny, and horrific. For example, one Philo Vance novel by S. S. Van Dine, *The Scarab Murder Case* (1930), is set 'in a private museum of Egyptian antiquities', where its victim is 'found lying dead at the foot of the statue of Anubis, the Egyptian God of the Dead'.[46] Similarly, Carr's third Bencolin novel, *Castle Skull* (1931), features a weird setting in 'a castle on the Rhine', 'the ghostly Castle Skull, so called because its architectural form suggested a grinning death's head'. The story also features grisly action that includes a 'world famous magician' who is 'fished from the Rhine'; and a 'retired actor, who was shot five times and then burned to death on the ramparts' of the eponymous castle.[47] Nor are these features unique to this volume, as is made clear by the other Bencolin novels: *It Walks by Night* (1930), *The Lost Gallows* (1931), and *The Waxworks Murder* (1932). Ethel Lina White's *Wax* (1935) is also set around 'the Chamber of Horrors', a

[41] Kay Irvin, 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 6 October 1935, p. 22.
[42] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 21 October 1928, p. 26.
[43] Anon., 'Murder on the Links', *New York Times*, 25 March 1923, p. 14.
[44] Anon., 'The Mystery Writers Conspire', p. 66.
[45] Anon., 'Mystery and Horror', 8 May 1927, p. 25.
[46] Anon., 'Philo Vance in the Spotlight', *New York Times*, 25 May 1930, p. 16.
[47] Rae, 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 4 October 1931, p. 23.

waxwork exhibition that becomes 'the focal point' for a series of 'mysterious happenings'.[48] However, this is also a detective story in which a female journalist investigates 'the local legend that no one has ever passed the night in the place and lived to see the dawn'. It is therefore 'a mystery-horror tale' that features 'mounting horrors' until the 'secrets [of the waxworks] are laid bare' by the heroine.[49]

These features are also emphasised by titles of the early Ellery Queen novels, such as *The Greek Coffin Mystery* (1932) and *The Egyptian Cross Mystery* (1932); and even Agatha Christie was not immune to this tendency; according to one review, 'The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb' (1924) did not merely feature an eerie setting but also weird paraphernalia such as a reproduction of the 'head of the god Anubis'.[50] Similarly, the content of Carolyn Wells' *Spooky Hollow* (1923) is suggested by its title, and it was described as a 'detective story' involving a 'ghost which was reported to haunt both the bedroom and the temple ground' of an old house. Furthermore, the *New York Times* was neither surprised nor disappointed by these horror elements, but rather described the novel as 'a very clever detective story, one of the best she has done'.[51]

Even when the settings are not weird and strange, many detective stories turn on a mysterious intrusion into the everyday world, an intrusion exemplified by the cliché of the body in the library. Christie even constructed a novel around this cliché, in which a couple wake up one morning to find a grotesque spectacle: the corpse of a strange woman, the victim of a grisly murder, is lying on the carpet in their library.[52] Such intrusions also feature in other stories by her, such as *Murder on the Links* (1923), which the *New York Times* described as a story in which a 'man of great wealth […] is found dead on the golf links with a dagger plunged in his back'.[53]

Similarly, the villains of these detective stories are often seen as possessing uncanny powers, even if these powers were only those of ingenuity and deception. An obvious example is Sherlock Holmes' adversary Professor Moriarty. Even in Christie's *The Big Four* (1927), Hercule Poirot is pitted against a criminal organisation of which one member is a figure of 'fiendish ingenuity', 'a genius for disguise' who is determined to annihilate Poirot. For some critics at the time, the 'fiendish' criminal masterminds were a key cliché of many detective

[48] Isaac Anderson, 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 1 September 1935, p. 15.
[49] Anderson, 'New Mystery Stories', 1 September 1935, p. 15.
[50] Anon., 'A Detective's Affairs', *New York Times*, 20 April 1924, p. 20.
[51] Anon., 'Latest Works of Fiction', *New York Times*, 9 September 1923, p. 18 and p. 21.
[52] Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library* (Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1942).
[53] Anon., 'Murder on the Links', p. 14.

thrillers, a form that Christie's novel was supposed to parody.[54] Nonetheless, as the *New York Times* put it, 'most of the thrills of the story' are provided by the villain's stratagems, and by Poirot's attempts to thwart them.[55]

Even the detective heroes themselves were frequently seen as uncanny figures. They are usually distinct from the everyday police and distinguished by their exceptional powers of perception, powers which enable them to see that which is invisible to others. For example, most reviewers saw Holmes as the pre-eminent detective hero and claimed that his appeal was due to his 'uncanny ability to see what remained hidden from others'.[56] However, while these detectives have uncanny powers, they are usually associated with science rather than the supernatural. For example, Dr Thorndyke in R. Austin Freeman's *The Cat's Eye* (1923) is described as 'a medico-legal expert, who possesses the uncanny ability of putting two and two together and producing the correct result, whether it happens to be four or five or anything else'.[57] If this review tended to ridicule Thorndyke's unexpected conclusions, the association with science was presented positively elsewhere. In fact, Dr Thorndyke was repeatedly referred to as 'a scientific detective',[58] even though his methods, 'while they are strictly scientific, appear to be little short of miraculous'.[59] Similarly, while S. S. Van Dine was described as 'a modern exponent of the psychological-method-of crime-detection',[60] his detective hero, Philo Vance, was seen as uncanny to the point of omnipotence: 'Philo Vance is not only a detective, he is a God out of the machine.'[61]

Moreover, these detective stories were also associated with other aspects of horror. For example, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is often regarded as Christie's 'masterpiece',[62] but it was also described in the *New York Times* at the time as 'blood curdling'. Certainly, it was conceded that 'many detective stories' are even 'more exciting and blood-curdling', and that it is ultimately 'Poirot's method that holds the reader's interest' in this novel;[63] but such statements still imply that Christie's novel had its share of blood-curdling drama, even if it was *less* blood-curdling than other detective stories. Similarly, while it was also claimed that she

[54] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*.
[55] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 2 October 1927, p. 30.
[56] Anon., 'A Scientific Detective', *New York Times*, 11 April 1926, p. 17.
[57] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 4 September 1927, p. 17.
[58] Anon., 'A Scientific Detective', p. 17; and Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 25 March 1928, p. 35.
[59] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 3 February 1929, p. 20.
[60] Anon., 'Books and Authors', *New York Times*, 18 December 1927, p. 16.
[61] Anon., 'Philo Vance in the Spotlight', p. 16.
[62] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 203.
[63] Anon., 'Superior Mystery', *New York Times*, 18 July 1926, p. 18.

'does not devote her talent to the creation of thrills and shocks, but to the orderly solution of a single murder', this claim does not mean that 'thrills and shocks' are absent, but only that they are not her *primary* devotion. Further, in both cases, it is implied that her relative lack of 'blood-curdling' drama and of 'thrills and shocks' distinguished her fiction from the *majority* of detective stories. Even then, her stories still revolve around the mysterious, in that her murders take place 'under particularly perplexing circumstances'; and in 1945, the cinematic adaptation of *And Then There Were None* (1939) was clearly reviewed as a horror film while, as late as 1972, the London *Times* described her as 'the old frightener' in its review of another cinematic adaptation from that year, *Endless Night*.[64]

Nor was Christie unique in this context; and while S. S. Van Dine was often supposed to exemplify the conception of detective story as intellectual puzzle, his Philo Vance novels were also seen as featuring 'sensational murder' so that the 'reader has indeed many thrills', even if they are also 'given a very satisfactory explanation of what happened' at the end.[65] Furthermore, in 1928, in an article on a boom in Hollywood horror production, *Motion Picture Classic* consulted Van Dine as an expert on the type.[66] Even film adaptations of the Philo Vance novels were described in terms that suggest their association with horror. For example, *The Bishop Murder Case* (1929) was described as a 'spine-chilling narrative' and one that that was effective enough that viewers 'were impelled to scream' while watching it.[67]

As we can see then, the detective and the horror story were hardly seen as separate genres in the 1920s and 1930s. Instead, these stories were commonly understood as 'mysteries', tales that confronted both the protagonists and the reader with strange, eerie, and uncanny events – events that seemed to defy rational explanation – and that required investigations that sought to explain these events and so overcome the sense of dread that these events were supposed to induce both in the characters *within* these stories and the readers *of* these stories.

Distinction and Expulsion: Constructing Detective Fiction as an Independent Genre

If the 1920s and 1930s were a period in which detective and horror fiction were not distinct categories, it was also one in which there were attempts to construct a distinction between them. For example, several collections and studies were produced at the time that proffered canons

[64] Jancovich, '"Two Ways of Looking": The Critical Reception of 1940s Horror', *Cinema Journal*, 49.3 (Spring 2010), pp. 45-66; Richard Hayman, 'Review of *Endless Night*', *The Times*, 6 October 1972, British Film Institute Clippings File, n. p.
[65] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 2 October 1927, p. 30.
[66] Dorothy Donnell, 'Gorifying the American Screen', *Motion Picture Classic*, December 1928, pp. 18-19 and p. 38.
[67] Mordaunt Hall, 'Philo Vance's Deductions', *New York Times*, 1 February 1930, p. 20.

of detective fiction and tried to define it as an independent genre.[68] As Haycraft put it in 1946, the late 1920s and early 1930s 'witnessed in the public prints an outpouring of serious critical discussion of the once-lowly whodunit and its relations-by-marriage unequalled in any comparable period in the 100-year history of the genre'.[69]

Nonetheless, other collections demonstrate the continuing relationship between detective and horror fiction. For example, as we have already seen, in 1931, Hammett edited *Creeps by Night*, although he was primarily known as a writer of hardboiled detective fiction. As one reviewer wrote of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930): 'If the locution "hard-boiled" had not already been coined it would be necessary to coin it now to describe the characters of Dashiell Hammett's latest detective story.'[70] However, even his hardboiled novels look different in this context; and if they were known for their grisly violence and 'perfectly gorgeous murders',[71] they also featured numerous elements of horror. As its title makes clear, *The Dain Curse* (1929) operates around the suggestion that a supernatural curse might explain its numerous murders; and the cover of its first edition claimed that 'Mr Hammett's unequalled detective succeeds in vanquishing the curse that hangs over' the heroine, while a reprint later in the same year featured a cover that depicted a young woman who is being menaced by a skeleton.

Even *The Maltese Falcon* rewards a re-examination in this context; its first edition featured a cover that did not emphasise urban criminality but displayed an image of the falcon and of a mass of fabulous treasures: the cover further emphasised elements of the novel that associated it with gothic materials, particular Poe's 'The Raven' (1845) and 'The Gold Bug' (1843). Even within the novel, the falcon is a fabulous object that dates back to the Knights Templar and its history is one of robbery, intrigue, and murder. To put it another way, this story also suggests that a curse might explain its various murders; and this context may explain the lack of surprise with which the *New York Times* announced Hammett's collection of horror stories: 'Mr Hammett, that realistic mystery writer who understands the technique of detective fiction, has collected "weird, fantastic, supernatural and incredible" stories […] in a fat volume that makes stimulating reading.' The volume was therefore judged to be a good one, 'which is no more than one would expect from this source'.[72] Hammett was not seen as an odd choice

[68] See, for example, *Great Stories of Detection, Mystery, and Horror*, ed. by Dorothy L. Sayers (Gollancz, 1928), published in the US as *Omnibus of Crime* (Payson and Clarke, 1928); *The Mystery Book*, ed. by Thompson; *The Great Detective Stories*, ed. by Willard Huntington Wright (Scribners, 1927); and *Crime and Detection*, ed. by E. M. Wrong (Oxford University Press, 1926).
[69] Haycraft, *The Art of the Mystery Story*, p. v.
[70] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', 23 February 1930, p. 28.
[71] Anon., 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 18 August 1929, p. 16.
[72] Rae, 'New Mystery Stories', 18 October 1931, p. 25.

but, on the contrary, as well suited to the collection and even as inspiring high expectations for it.

Similarly, Dorothy L. Sayers edited *Great Stories of Detection, Mystery, and Horror* (1928), a collection that the British dust jacket describes as 'Stories of Sensation, Amateur Detectives, Haunting, Possession, Revenge, Witchcraft, Vampires, Crime; Stories of Police Detectives, Intuitive Detectives, Journalistic Detectives, Comic Detectives, Scientific Detectives; Tales of Doom and Destiny, Disease and Madness, Blood and Cruelty'. Again, the *New York Times* was hardly surprised that she was its editor or that a volume published in the US as *The Omnibus of Crime* should actually be 'an anthology of mystery and horror'. The review was even published under the title, 'Miss Sayers Analyzes the Causes of Gooseflesh', the final word referring to responses that today are more usually associated with horror than detective fiction. The structure of the volume is also revealing, given that the first section concerns tales of 'Detection and Mystery', while the second is 'devoted to Mystery and Horror'. In other words, 'mystery' is used as a term that bridges detection and horror. Finally, the collection was praised as one in which even 'a fairly omnivorous reader […] may feel sure to find some tales that he has not previously encountered', although even then this reader was described as a fan of 'mystery and horror' rather than 'mystery and detection'.[73] Nor were these generic terms significantly different by the time of her later collections. *The Second Omnibus* (published in 1932) was described as an 'anthology of stories of crime, detection, mystery and horror',[74] and *The Third Omnibus of Crime* (1935) was described as featuring stories 'equally divided between those dealing with detection and mystery and those in which the element of horror is foremost'.[75] This comment even implies that the distinction is simply one of emphasis; all the stories involve mystery, detection, and horror, even if different stories *stress* different elements.

Alternatively, while Sayers' collections demonstrate that many in the period understood horror and detective fiction as elements within a larger category, other collections and studies were attempting to distinguish them from one another, attempts that also demonstrate the effort that was required to separate them. For example, this effort can be seen in R. Austin Freeman's early essay on the detective story, where he is concerned to *refute* the idea 'that the detective story needs to be highly sensational' and complains that it 'tends to be confused with the mere crime story in which the incidents – tragic, horrible, even repulsive – form the actual theme,

[73] Anon., 'Miss Sayers Analyses the Causes of Gooseflesh', *New York Times*, 11 August 1929, p. 2.
[74] Anderson, 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 7 February 1932, p. 12.
[75] Anderson, 'New Mystery Stories', *New York Times*, 24 March 1935, p. 18.

and the quality aimed at is horror […] mere crude and pungent sensationalism' that works to 'make the reader's flesh creep'.[76] In this way, sensationalism is associated with both physical and emotional response and is contrasted with the detective story, which, it is claimed, 'differs from all other types of fiction' to the extent that 'the satisfaction that it offers the reader is purely an intellectual satisfaction'.[77] This preoccupation can also be found in the first major collection of detective fiction, E. M. Wrong's *Crime and Detection* (1926), even if he concedes that 'there must be some emotion in it too, or else our sympathy might be as much with the hunted as with the avenger of society'.[78] Nonetheless, Wrong still emphasises the intellectual aspects of the stories, and condemns sensational elements that might associate detective fiction with horror.

The next major collection of the period, Willard Huntington Wright's *The Great Detective Stories* (1927), also sought to distinguish the detective story from the larger category of mystery, and in terms that were even more emphatic than those of his predecessors. For example, he identifies three main 'kinds of literary entertainment' – 'the romantic, the adventurous, and the mystery novel' – and claims that detective fiction is not only a fourth type but 'the youngest, the most complicated, the most difficult of construction, and the most distinct'.[79] Certainly, he feels obliged to acknowledge detective fiction's links with 'mystery' and describes the former as 'a highly sophisticated off-shoot' of the latter. But if this position might imply that detective fiction is simply a branch of mystery, Wright corrects such implications by arguing that 'the relationship is far more distant than the average reader imagines'. Wright even goes so far as to distinguish detective fiction from 'fiction in the ordinary sense' and argues that it 'belongs rather in the category of riddles'.[80] Once again, then, he associates detective fiction with the intellectual and distinguishes it from the sensational: 'In each [the detective story and puzzles like the crossword] there is a problem to be solved; and the solution depends wholly on mental processes.'[81]

Sayers' collection is therefore fascinating due to its inclusion of the categories that others were so concerned to expel. She not only features stories of 'mystery and horror' that are 'apart from detection', but explicitly discusses a continuum of fiction 'extending from the

[76] R. Austin Freeman, 'The Art of the Detective Story', *Nineteenth Century and After*, May 1924, pp. 713-21. Reprinted in Haycraft, *The Art of the Mystery Story*, pp.7-17 (p. 9). References are to the reprint.
[77] Freeman, 'The Art of the Detective Story', p. 11.
[78] Wrong, 'Introduction', in *Crime and Detection*, pp. ix-xxx (p. xvii).
[79] Wright, 'Introduction', in *The Great Detective Stories*. Reprinted in Haycraft, *The Art of the Mystery Story*, pp. 33-70 (p. 35). References are to the reprint.
[80] Wright, 'Introduction', p. 35.
[81] Wright, 'Introduction', p. 35.

literature of pure deduction on the one hand, through various types of mystery – natural and supernatural; explained and unexplained – to tales of sheer horror, without any mystery at all'.[82] Horror is therefore seen as present across this continuum: 'Every tale in this book is guaranteed to have puzzled or horrified *somebody*; with any luck at all, some may puzzle and horrify *you*.'[83] In other words, puzzlement is as much a feature of 'the tale of sheer horror' as horror is a feature of 'the literature of pure deduction'. Nonetheless, she returns to 'mystery' as a key conceptual term and, while she refers to some stories as 'puzzles', mystery is about something more than mere intellectual problems solving: 'The mysteries made only to be solved, these horrors which we know to be figments of the creative brain, comfort him [the reader] by subtly persuading that life is a mystery which death will solve, and whose horrors will pass away as a tale that is told.'[84]

In this context, the work of H. Douglas Thomson is revealing. His *Masters of Mystery* (1931) was the first book-length study of the detective story in English, and he devotes much of it to expelling horror from the category of mystery and constructing detective fiction as an independent genre. However, only three years later, he edited a substantial collection, *The Mystery Book* (1934), which includes both detective and horror fiction, and discusses mystery in similar terms to Sayers. This was probably due to the demands of the publishing market: after all, it was Sayers' collection that seems to have been the runaway success of the period; it was reprinted numerous times and was followed by several additional volumes. In his book, Thomson sets out to correct the assumption 'that this genre to which we so joyously responded had no art at all, but was a specious ostentation of Blood and Thunder',[85] the phrase 'blood and thunder' often being used to describe horror at the time.[86] Thomson also associated the term with 'sensationalism and morbidity',[87] and claimed that, in contrast, detective fiction 'must be first and foremost a problem' that exists as a 'feather to tickle the intellect'.[88] His position also presented detective fiction as a profoundly masculine genre, while women were associated with the sensational: 'The most obvious reason for Woman's indifference to the intellectual fireworks is her delight in the emotional values. To every woman who prefers the problem,

[82] Sayers, 'Introduction', in *Great Stories of Detection, Mystery, and Horror*, pp. 9-47 (p. 45).
[83] Sayers, 'Introduction', p. 47.
[84] Sayers, 'Introduction', p. 9.
[85] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 13.
[86] See Jancovich and Brown, '"Most Stories of This Type"'.
[87] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 21.
[88] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 57 and p. 34.

there are at least four who prefer the shocker. Woman loves to be thrilled and to have her knees banging each against either.'[89]

Unfortunately, these distinctions prove highly unstable and result in numerous ironies. For example, Thomson is obliged to expel a large amount of material that many others regard as classics of detective fiction. For example, Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) is claimed to be in 'bad taste'[90] so that, regardless of its numerous virtues, Thomson distinguishes it from detective fiction due to its association with the sensational novel. Even Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are a problem for Thomson, who complained that Doyle and his contemporaries 'were partial to the thriller',[91] a category which Thomson describes as 'hair-raising, steeped in the supernatural, and just a trifle long-winded'.[92] Furthermore, his distinction between the intellectual and the sensational (in which the latter is associated with 'the thriller') creates another irony: the writer that he identifies as the 'paragon of orthodoxy', by which he means masculine, intellectual detective fiction, is a woman, Agatha Christie; while the epitome of the feminine, sensational thriller is a man, Edgar Wallace, one of the most commercially successful writers of the 1920s – one publisher even claimed that one in every four books read in Britain during the period had been written by Wallace.[93]

Horror also returns in Thomson's discussion of the thriller, which even begins with the following quotation: 'I have supp'd full with horrors.'[94] For Thomson, the thriller is not just action-oriented; in addition, 'the connoisseur has to bear with the "copious effusion of blood"'.[95] It is even associated with terror and its 'great masters' are 'Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins'.[96] On the one hand, Thomson presents the thriller as a form of horror rather than detective fiction; but, on the other, he defines the thriller (and, by extension, horror) as an inferior 'species' of the larger 'genus' of detective fiction.[97] At one moment, the thriller is foreign material that pollutes the otherwise healthy body but at the next moment, it is an appendage of the body but one that is disfiguring, debilitating, and ultimately unnecessary.

Nor are these the only problems that Thomson encounters in his use of Christie and Wallace. Certainly, some of Wallace's stories are seen today as indisputably horror (he even

[89] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 41.
[90] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 63.
[91] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 221.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Neil Clarke, *Stranger Than Fiction: The Life of Edgar Wallace: The Man Who Created King Kong* (The History Press, 2014).
[94] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 212.
[95] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 213.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 212.

wrote the original script for *King Kong* (1933)) but others, such as the J. G. Reeder stories, are now classics of detective fiction; while other stories operate in a generic universe where distinctions between detective and horror fiction seem irrelevant or meaningless. Furthermore, as we have already seen, Christie was not purely nor simply a writer of detective fiction, and even Thomson acknowledges that, while stories could be read as intellectual puzzles, others were 'thrillers pure and simple'.[98] He therefore finds *The Secret Adversary* (1922), *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), and *The Big Four* (1927) embarrassing and feels obliged to exclude them from his canon of Christie novels, while directing particular anger at *The Big Four*, which he describes as 'low-browism with a vengeance'.[99] In other words, it is not Christie's fiction that Thomson celebrates but a selective version of it, and even then he tends to play down the 'blood-curdling' elements of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in order to identify it as her 'masterpiece'. His version of Christie refers to an idealised and edited version of her output; and this idealised version is then used to prop up another ideal type, 'the Orthodox detective story'.[100]

However, by 1934, Thomson's collection, *The Mystery Book*, was very different. The title of his study, *Masters of Mystery*, narrowed the term 'mystery' through its subtitle, *A Study of the Detective Story*. Conversely, *The Mystery Book* used an understanding of mystery that was more in keeping with that of the *New York Times* and Sayers. This understanding is established in the first sentence of its Introduction, where the association of mystery with thrills is not presented as a problem but rather as a central pleasure: 'It is in our nature to love a mystery and to be thrilled by the obscure.'[101] Of course, he still celebrates mysteries that operate like the 'riddles […] crossword puzzles, jig-saws and problems of infinite variety', but he concedes that 'the mystery story has other attractions, since human nature craves for excitement and adventure as well as mental gymnastics'.[102] He still describes tales of horror and the supernatural as 'more primitive […] born of superstition, fear of death, and our childlike terror of the dark', but they are now a valuable element of the mystery: there is a part of us that 'needs thrills to save us from the bald monotony of the daily round' and this is why people 'create our Frankensteins and Draculas and revel to our hearts content in such imaginary terrors'.[103]

[98] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 207.
[99] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 206.
[100] Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, p. 203.
[101] Thomson, 'Introduction', in *The Mystery Book*, pp. 7-10 (p. 7).
[102] Thomson, *The Mystery Book*, p. 7.
[103] Thomson, *The Mystery Book*, pp. 7-8.

If his previous study had opposed detective fiction to horror, and had done so through a distinction between the intellect and the senses, his 1934 collection imagines the relationship between detective and horror fiction in very different ways. Rather than opposed categories, the appeal of detective and horror fiction was their exploration of the tension between the intellect and the senses. In other words, detective and horror fiction are presented as two ends of a spectrum of mystery, not as opposed categories in which the former needs to distinguish itself from, and/or expel, the latter. As he puts it,

> The outlandish world of the spirit is peopled by the strangest apparitions, witches riding on their brooms across the moon on All-Hallows-Eve, foreign idols and reincarnated mummies, vampires, werewolves, horrid shapes and all the devils of the Black Mass. Science may cross swords with spiritualism but nothing can prevent our fancy from roaming the moonlit churchyards.[104]

On the one hand, mystery covers the spectrum from science to spiritualism but, on the other, the genre was *about* the struggle between these opposed forces: science and the supernatural; and the intellectual and the sensational. If Thomson had previously championed stories that appealed to reason rather than the feelings, *The Mystery Book* accepts those stories that appealed to 'our feelings and not our reason' and, as a result, it does not simply readmit horror into the category of mystery but presents it as one side of a dialectic.[105]

Conclusion

In this way, Thomson's position ends up sounding similar to that of Ernest Mandel in *Delightful Murder* (1984). Like Thomson, Mandel regards mystery as being at the heart of detective fiction – '[t]he real subject of the early detective stories is thus not crime or murder but enigma' – and mystery is 'the apotheosis of the analytical mind in its pure form'.[106] If this statement emphasises one side of the equation, it still presents mystery as an encounter between rationality and that which seems to defy rational understanding. As Mandel puts it, 'the real problem of the classical detective is […] death and mystery. Mystery is the only irrational fact that bourgeois rationality cannot eliminate.'[107] If detective fiction therefore seeks 'victory […] over forces of obscurity', not only is 'the victory never final or complete', but there is always the threat (or promise) of an alternative ending, the victory of irrationality.[108] In other words,

[104] Thomson, *The Mystery Book*, p. 9.
[105] Thomson, *The Mystery Book*, p. 10.
[106] Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (Pluto, 1984), p. 15 and p. 17.
[107] Mandel, *Delightful Murder*, p. 27.
[108] Mandel, *Delightful Murder*, p. 28.

while mystery can work towards a '*Scooby Doo* ending', in which the mysterious is finally vanquished through rational explanation, it can also work in the opposite direction: towards that of an '*X-Files* ending', in which the irrational proves to be 'real' and rationality is either defeated, or only triumphs through vehement denial and repression. To put it another way, if the '*Scooby Doo* ending' demonstrates that the irrational is simply an illusion, the '*X-Files* ending' demonstrates the opposite: that rationality is an illusion.

In this way, the mystery story is about the *tension* between the rational and the irrational, and it was the product of a period in which this tension was a key social, political, and cultural issue, an issue that resulted in, but was also intensified by, the Scopes Monkey Trial in the US, which explicitly questioned whether children should be taught to believe the Bible or the scientific theories of Darwin. Given this tension, it is hardly surprising that some commentators would want to privilege a particular version of the mystery that stressed the intellectual puzzle over the physical and the emotional thrill evoked by the strange, eerie, and uncanny. But it should also be clear why such attempts largely failed at the time (except for among a small elite), and why detective and horror fiction were not seen as distinct genres but as elements within the larger category of mystery. However, although this distinction did not achieve acceptance in the 1930s, it did come to dominate in later periods. But that is another story.

Communion and Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*

Alyssa Q. Johnson

> 'Yet as a good Catholic you must believe in original sin.'
> 'Perhaps I'm a bad Catholic.'[1]

Noemí, Silvia Moreno-Garcia's heroine in *Mexican Gothic* (2020), wears a rosary for the sake of fashion but finds little comfort in her Catholic religion. Nor does she feel reverence for religious iconography, responding to her impending forced marriage by quipping 'I'll be wed in the Church of the Holy Incestuous Mushroom' (p. 239). And yet, the novel associates elements of the haunted house with the Catholic Church, and is saturated with gothicised religious language and imagery. For Moreno-Garcia, a cursed fungus becomes a medium of communion that binds together a family and grants some of its members eternal life. The mushroom Eucharist requires literal consumption of flesh, riffing on gothic notions of transubstantiation and the vampire. In various ways, this novel's horror descends from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), in which the perverse Eucharist of blood binds together evil vampiric communities. Similarly, Moreno-Garcia's distorted fungal Eucharist comments on the damage that communities can cause through warped religious symbols and language. In this essay, I demonstrate how Moreno-Garcia's incorporation of a gothic Eucharist in the vein of long nineteenth-century precursors like *Dracula* emphasises the horrors of a community bound together not by mutual affection or kindness, but through evil enchanted mediums that harm the Doyle family, as well as those they abuse and manipulate. First, I locate *Mexican Gothic* within the gothic tradition and its topoi, before discussing the gothic Eucharist as a symbol that ties the novel to *Dracula* while sharpening *Mexican Gothic's* postcolonial critique. The novel uses the gothic and Catholicism, both discourses of the coloniser, to unveil historic sins that go beyond the literary and that continue to erupt from the dark past and haunt the present.

Mexican Gothic riffs on a variety of gothic traditions, including that of the gothic romance, which can be difficult to define. Holly Hirst notes the limitations of defining the genre purely through the templates of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938).[2] Joanna Russ's collection of gothic-romance topoi, which draws on these

[1] Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic* (Del Rey, 2020), p. 89. All additional references to this text will be cited using page numbers in parentheses in the body of the essay.
[2] Holly Hirst, 'The Gothic Romance', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 357-72 (p. 357).

foundational novels, is nonetheless useful. Russ highlights in particular the house, the good and selfless heroine, isolation in the country, the 'Super-Male' (who is older, brooding, and evokes complicated feelings in the heroine), 'Another Woman' (typically an opposite of the heroine and generally deeply 'immoral'), a 'Buried Ominous Secret' that will inevitably be revealed, and a 'Shadow-Male' (often a marital prospect who appears benign while concealing his heinous and violent crimes from the heroine, who he works to seduce).[3] *Mexican Gothic* features modifications of all of these. The young socialite Noemí Taboada, known for flirtatious behaviour, a budding interest in anthropology, and a flighty approach to her future, travels from Mexico City to High Place, an English estate in rural Mexico, to help her newly married, deeply wholesome cousin Catalina, ill with something far more sinister than the tuberculosis her suspicious new husband Virgil claims she has. The tenacious Noemí is in some ways a reimagined and modern interpretation of Catherine from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847): she is bold, provocative, a little self-absorbed, and invested in the finer things of life. Her cousin Catalina's romantic mindset, maternal personality, and desire to be virtuous align her with gothic ancestors from the pages of Ann Radcliffe's novels, as well as Jane Eyre herself. Meanwhile, Noemí finds the house smelly and damp, filled with creepy servants and foreboding art. Virgil's family, the Doyles, emigrated from England decades ago to open a silver mine and establish High Place, built on the backs of local men whose deaths the family patriarch, Howard Doyle, caused. Although the mine brought them great wealth, it dwindled, and Noemí learns that the family – and the house – have a sinister reputation.

While most other colonisers left during or after the Mexican Revolution, 'the Doyles lingered in this land', where High Place was built to be 'a little piece of England', complete with 'European earth' (p. 18). The Doyle family are not religious in any conventional sense of the word, but Noemí learns, through conversations with locals and engaging unwillingly with the house's spirits, that they serve a different sort of god: Howard Doyle. Centuries ago, he co-opted a pagan religion that incorporated healing mushrooms, shaping its practices with cannibalism and incest so that he could live forever. The spirit of Agnes, his late wife and sister, provides a mind to host this fungal enchantment; her haunting of the house is perhaps a version of Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, her body secretly locked away in a tomb, sustaining the Doyle family's magic. Howard believes in eugenics and hopes that incorporating women of colour into his family's bloodline will strengthen his abilities to reincarnate himself, via the

[3] Joanna Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 6.4 (1973), pp. 667-70, doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.1973.00666.

power of enchanted fungi, into the body of his grandson. Completing the family are Francis, Virgil's unintimidating cousin who eventually works to help Noemí, and his mother Florence, a harsh, strict woman who manages the household and worships Howard unquestioningly. As Noemí uncovers the dark secrets of their past and works to save herself, her cousin, and Francis by destroying the house and escaping, the novel explores racism, colonialism, and religious identity. Moreno-Garcia re-envisions the gothic legacy through casting women of colour as gothic heroines who, in this story, save themselves.

At High Place, the shapes and topoi of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic cluster around the Doyle family. One of the most prominent and quintessential gothic motifs in the novel is that of the emergence of historical horrors into characters' presents. Kate Ferguson Ellis writes that the 'failed home', whose disease a gothic heroine has the ability to 'purge', has been a central focal point of the genre since its eighteenth-century emergence.[4] Instead of redeeming this house, however, Noemí works to destroy it, and she can only accomplish these goals by collaborating with the spirits of Agnes, Howard's late sister/wife whose corpse fuels the enchantment on the house; and Ruth, Howard's late daughter/niece who was driven to murder in an attempt to purge the house's evil. Alison Milbank calls the gothic 'the literary form that unites the ruin – the link between the past and present (which also marks their dislocation) – with the imprisoned protagonist, who desires to escape'.[5] Noemí, initially an unwelcome guest at High Place, becomes Howard's next target as he believes he can force her to marry his nephew, whose body he will reincarnate himself into, and procreate with her. Moreno-Garcia therefore pulls from the gothic tradition in which the heroine is trapped in a house that should be safe and in a past that invades the present. Furthermore, Eugenia C. DeLamotte contends that gothic works are primarily concerned with the boundary between the self and the Other.[6] This conflict is central to *Mexican Gothic*, where the individual is subsumed to the familial identity, linked by the evil fungus that Howard Doyle wields. The book's gothic topoi, in a setting of 1950s Mexico, critique colonialism, adding the language of eugenics and racist essentialism espoused by the novel's villains to gothic generic conventions. Moreno-Garcia's postcolonial gothic and perverse Eucharist comment on the legacy of colonialism and permit her dual heroines to fight its monstrosities.

[4] Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. ix and p. xii.
[5] Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), p. 8.
[6] Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 20.

Part of Moreno-Garcia's gothic contribution is the centring of collaborative female characters. As Hirst points out, broadly accepted definitions of gothic romance tend to erase the nuances of female relationships.[7] Moreno-Garcia's novel resists a tendency within the genre to pit women against each other. *Mexican Gothic*'s dual heroines, cousins Noemí and Catalina, are not really romantic rivals; they support and care for each other in a way that pushes against critical definitions that insist female characters must exist in opposition to one another. Even minor female characters Ruth and Agnes, embedded in the horrific history of the house, are not reduced to rivals for male attention. Instead, their spirits collaborate with the living women. Whereas the colonising Doyles subject women to all sorts of abuses like forced marriage, incest, and assault, Noemí protects Catalina, and the two work together (and with the spirits of Doyle women, colonisers once themselves during their lives) to overcome their oppression. Religious structures have a reputation for suppressing the voices of women, and even in the context of the novel, the Doyles' evil rituals have silenced Agnes, whose mind hosts the evil fungus, and Ruth, whose haunting guides Noemí. However, since *Mexican Gothic*'s women do not compete with but support each other, even across time, interpreting the novel need not be confined to examining Noemí and Catalina's relationships with the Doyle men. Even though the novel's conclusion hints at a future relationship between Noemí and Francis, this potential romance seems far less important than the kinship shared by the novel's female characters.

Furthermore, I argue Moreno-Garcia's intersectional feminist approach to the gothic enables elements of her postcolonial critique. Of course, Moreno-Garcia is not the first to use this genre as a vehicle for wrestling with historic global harms. Clive Bloom observes that North American contemporary gothic frequently uses horror to grapple with the legacies of enslavement and colonialism.[8] The rise of a subgenre, postcolonial gothic, focuses on these concerns specifically. As Bloom notes, since the 1980s, Latin American creators such as Luis Ospina or Guillermo del Toro often engage with aforementioned gothic 'European tropes' as a means of commenting on 'contemporary social issues' or making 'political critiques of dictatorial and exploitative regimes'.[9] However, Latinx use of the genre is complex; as Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz write, 'the Gothic has been considered by some to be a sort of colonial imposition in Latin America, a foreign mode of representation that does not reflect

[7] Hirst, 'The Gothic Romance', p. 360.
[8] Bloom, 'Introduction to the Gothic Handbook Series: Welcome to Hell', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1-27 (p. 9).
[9] Bloom, 'Introduction', p. 18.

regional identities'.[10] The mode itself, then, can be read as a colonising form of storytelling. Despite this, Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz describe the current use of Latin American gothic as a means 'to criticise and denounce local issues pertaining to past and present histories of political, social, and gendered violence'.[11] *Mexican Gothic* responds to all three kinds of violence in creative and rhetorically powerful ways, often using the motif of perverse religion, like the distorted, fungal version of the Eucharist, to specifically expose and condemn colonising forces.

Sarah Ilott writes that postcolonial gothic works like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993) 'engag[e] with their source text to critique the underpinning ideologies while appropriating their aesthetics'.[12] These fictions use the frames of the gothic while problematising what lies beneath. *Mexican Gothic* follows this pattern, using the topoi of the gothic, including gothicised religion, while critiquing the colonising forces in Mexico, which the Doyles and their evil religion symbolise. Their faith is neither Catholic nor Christian – it is a distorted parody of Catholicism thrown into distinction by Noemí and Catalina's sincere Catholic faith. The Doyles' pagan religion, like historical Catholicism, has been an agent of colonisation. Although on the surface level, the Doyles' practices, marked with cannibalism, incest, and eugenics, look significantly worse, the novel asks us to consider if they are actually more villainous than European colonisers who distorted religion, albeit in a less gothic fashion, as a colonising tool. Beyond critique, Gina Wisker sees the potential for postcolonial gothic not merely to explore the 'ever-present colonial past' but also to potentially 'reclaim and rewrite the past, revision a lived present and speculate about the future'.[13] Moreno-Garcia's heroines destroy the evils of High Place, burning it to the ground, and despite concerns about Francis' internalised fungus, the novel ends with a limited optimism, a sense that the survivors will heal and move on.

Mexican Gothic also responds to the genre's heritage in its use of religion. The gothic is well known for its anti-Catholic roots. Early gothic, as in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) or Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), portrays Catholicism as monstrous, parasitic, and perverse. As Victor Sage shows, the gothic is generally a Protestant-leaning

[10] Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz, 'Latin American Horror', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 31-47 (p. 31).
[11] Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz, 'Latin American Horror', p. 33.
[12] Sarah Ilott, 'Postcolonial Gothic', in *Twenty-First Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 19-32 (p. 19). *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, gives voice to Bertha Mason. *The Piano* shares relationships with Jane Mander's *The Story of a New Zealand River* (1920) and *Wuthering Heights*.
[13] Gina Wisker, 'Postcolonialisms', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 105-21 (p. 106).

genre, at least in the nineteenth century, and it frequently engages with contemporaneous 'doctrinal and political' conflicts between Catholic and Protestant groups.[14] Certainly, the genre's relationship to religion is complex, and not all critics see the gothic as anti-Catholic.[15] Nonetheless, as Diane Long Hoeveler writes, '[r]eligion was tightly bound up with political allegiances and, in many ways, choosing a religion was a statement about loyalty'.[16] Throughout long nineteenth-century British gothic, Catholics associated with the European continent are often depicted as strange, perverse, and 'Other', largely due to national, political, and religious identity markers that carried particular resonances for an implicitly Protestant English audience and an English empire. By depicting religious outsiders as monstrous, Protestant audiences could reassert a sense of normativity in not merely their own faith but in their national sense of English religious affiliation. Specifically, as Patrick O'Malley suggests, the nineteenth-century Catholic Church itself was portrayed as vampiric; thus, it is no surprise that contemporaneous vampire fiction is invested in Catholic emblems and symbols.[17] Mid-nineteenth-century gothic romances like *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* continued to centre religion but lack the vehement anti-Catholicism of early gothic, often focusing directly on Protestant forms of faith. The genre became less explicitly invested in Catholicism across the long nineteenth century, notably, as Milbank argues, growing ever more conservative in works like *Dracula*, where the supernatural monster is real and religion itself is gothicised.[18] Gothic religious iconography thus became and remains a staple of the genre, but seldom does gothic fiction present religion as a simple personal declaration of faith. Religion in the gothic instead provides an inroad to broader explorations of socio-cultural issues.

In line with this, *Mexican Gothic* does not see religion as a site for individual choice; instead, religion becomes a locus of group identity, a discourse of power, and a weaponised tool. As George Haggerty observes, within early gothic novels, 'family transgressions are often expressed in religious terms'.[19] In *Mexican Gothic*, too, the crimes of the Doyle family take on

[14] Victor Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (Macmillan, 1988), p. 29.
[15] For instance, Maria Purves resists this reading, as many (primarily non-canonical) early gothic novels depict Catholicism in a positive light. See Purves, *The Gothic and Catholicism: Religion, Cultural Exchange, and the Popular Novel, 1785-1829* (University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 2.
[16] Diane Long Hoeveler, *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in British Popular Fiction, 1780-1880* (University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 22.
[17] Patrick O'Malley, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 130.
[18] Milbank, *God and the Gothic: Religion, Romance, and Reality in the English Literary Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 305.
[19] George E. Haggerty, 'The Horrors of Catholicism: Religion and Sexuality in Gothic Fiction', in *Catholic Figures, Queer Narratives*, ed. by Lowell Gallagher, Frederick S. Roden, and Patricia Juliana Smith (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 33-56 (p. 55).

religious language and iconography. Catholicism's emblems and perversions correlate to identity and allegiance. Howard is treated and referred to as a god by members of his family; he is 'lord and priest and father, and they were all his children and acolytes, blindly obeying him' (p. 248). Those who dissent against Howard's will are punished or killed. The Doyles, though not Catholics, are gothic religious fanatics whose own religion uses mushrooms and unholy rituals to attain immortality. Noemí's flashbacks show her a ritual in which Howard's sister/wife gives birth to a child that is then consumed by the priests and Doyle, who eat the 'flesh of the gods' (p. 217) as the baby is the product of an incestuous relationship, and therefore also of Howard Doyle's own bloodline. Howard has lived various lifetimes by eventually taking over the bodies of his own children. The Doyle blood allows them access to the powers of the fungus, and ingestion clinches the deal. Noemí recognises this as a 'demented cycle. […] Children are but food. Food for a cruel god' (p. 270). The discourse of religious fanaticism is part of what makes the Doyle family so gothic; their faith in and consumption of the fungus binds them together and lodges them within the gothic tradition of religious fanaticism.[20] The novel does not depict Catholicism as Other – after all, the heroines Noemí and Catalina are Catholic. They differ in their degree of devoutness, but their Catholicism is sincere and not intrusive upon their daily lives or the lives of others. Conversely, the Doyles' violent rituals present a distorted version of religious iconography empty of theology or religious practice. The English Doyle family are dangerously Other because of their goals and crimes as colonisers; they are monstrous for their actions rather than their religious affiliation. While, as Bloom points out, much of the gothic's 'Catholic symbolism' has now become cliché rather than meaningful, I suggest here that *Mexican Gothic*'s engagement with distorted Catholic imagery emphasises the damages enacted upon community through religion's role in colonisation.[21] Nowhere is this clearer than in the novel's version of the Eucharist: an evil, powerful fungus.

Although *Mexican Gothic* is not explicitly focused on doctrinal interpretations of the Eucharist, the novel employs Christian iconography throughout. The taking of the Eucharist, also known as communion or the Lord's Supper, is a Christian sacrament.[22] Protestants generally consider the ritual to be symbolic, while some Catholics believe in transubstantiation

[20] Religious fanaticism is a significant recurring motif within long nineteenth-century gothic, from depictions of Catholic villains from Robert Wringhim in James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), to the use of St John or Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*, or even the Mormons in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).
[21] Bloom, 'Introduction', p. 17.
[22] Though interlocking, these terms are not synonymous. The Eucharist refers to the sacrament itself or the sacred elements, while communion and the Lord's Supper refer to the ritual partaking of the elements.

or the Real Presence. Christian communion can take different forms but features a few common elements, typically including a prayer or blessing before participants consume consecrated morcels of bread and wine (or grape juice) as a community. These elements symbolising the body and blood of Christ are descended from Christian historical practices, as well as Christ's Last Supper with the apostles. In biblical accounts, Christ breaks bread and shares it with his disciples. Then, he shares a cup of wine with them. In several of the accounts, Jesus tells his disciples to 'do this in remembrance of me'.[23] During communion, Christians are generally supposed to remember and reflect upon Christ's sacrifice and/or their own sins.

Regardless of the details, congregants are linked through their partaking of these elements. Communion is thus important for the community. Bernhard Blankenhorn writes, '[w]hen we celebrate the Eucharist and partake of his body and blood, we are joined ever more closely to the Church, Christ's mystical body'.[24] The sacrament is therefore not merely individual. Blankenhorn considers communion a 'sacrament of friendship' with a variety of purposes that benefit both the individual and the group.[25] Participating in communion should, then, in its ideal embodiment, connect one to a hospitable community, reinforcing and strengthening bonds of unity. In its purer forms, Lauren Winner observes, '[t]he Eucharist thereby makes possible a kind of hospitality. It encapsulates and offers God's gracious hospitality to us, and – because God welcomes not only me, but also my neighbour – makes it possible for me to be hospitable'.[26] However, as she also points out, Christian sacraments are frequently subject to human error and damage. Particularly in the context of communion, she writes, meals 'define and bind communities – but that binding and defining can slip easily toward exclusion, the reification of boundaries, of exploitation. […] Instead of enjoyment, meals can devolve into greed; instead of binding community together, meals can fracture community with envy.'[27] The Eucharist, like any Christian sacrament, can be damaged, and when it is, hospitality and community suffer.

In gothic representations of the Eucharist like that epitomised in *Dracula* or *Mexican Gothic*, the sacrament is not merely damaged, but perverse. The gothic Eucharist has a history

[23] See Mark 14. 22-25, Luke 22. 18-20, and 1 Corinthians 11. 23-25. Ralph McMichael points out that Paul's description in 1 Corinthians is dated as the earliest of these but observes that 'this does not mean that it represents the earliest tradition'. See McMichael, *Eucharist: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2010), p. 11.
[24] Bernhard Blankenhorn, *Bread from Heaven: An Introduction to the Theology of the Eucharist* (Catholic University of America Press, 2021), p. 1.
[25] Blankenhorn, *Bread from Heaven*, p. 5.
[26] Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (Yale University Press, 2018), p. 39.
[27] Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, p. 15.

marked with anti-Catholicism, as Protestants could 'Other' Catholics by calling their communion practices idolatrous, supernatural, or cannibalistic. Beyond this, the consumption of flesh, whether Christ's or a human's, literal or figurative, calls back to the idea of the vampire. As Sage argues, the use of blood in *Dracula* is polyvalent, an 'extended play on various senses' of the term, including 'an imaginative inversion of the Roman Doctrine of the Eucharist'.[28] Even the sharing of Christ's figurative body in the use of the Host to repel the Count is analogous to the literal sharing of blood in Stoker's *Dracula*, for heroes and villains alike. These Eucharistic symbols unite their teams and serve practical purposes: sustenance, control, and even medicine, as in the blood transfusions used to revive Lucy Westenra, who has been bitten by the Count. However, *Dracula* represents the sharing of these elements as horrifying and perverse. Its versions of the bread (body) and wine (blood) reflect deep perversions of the sacrament, whether these distortions are in service of rescuing London from an evil vampire or mechanisms of the evil Antichrist vampire himself. Renfield, who is effectively Dracula's acolyte, repeatedly declares, '[t]he blood is the life!' in an ironic allusion to Deuteronomy 12:23, which forbids the Hebrews from consuming blood.[29] The vampire completely inverts the Eucharist instated and practised by the Church.

The representation of communion in *Dracula* has led some scholars[30] to accuse the novel of anti-Catholicism, while it has led others to read the novel as pro-Catholic,[31] focused on Anglicanism,[32] or as even ecumenical.[33] Madeline Potter encourages critics to look beyond the tensions between the novel's 'Catholic aesthetic' and 'Protestant assumptions', and to delve instead into Stoker's eclectic and inclusive theology.[34] Van Helsing's use of the Host as a weapon, as Jonathan Greenaway notes, would be appalling to Protestants and Catholics alike.[35] Potter points out that this 'indulgence' is unorthodox and 'eccentric', cobbling together both 'orthodox and heterodox theological presuppositions'.[36] Regina Schwartz and Patrick McGrath

[28] Sage, *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition*, p. 51.
[29] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Penguin, 2010), p. 159.
[30] O'Malley, *Catholicism*, p. 130; and Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 191-93.
[31] D. Bruno Starrs, 'Keeping the Faith: Catholicism in *Dracula* and its Adaptations', *Journal of Dracula Studies*, 6 (2004), n. p. <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol6/iss1/3/> [accessed 4 July 2024].
[32] Noelle Bowles argues that the novel is actually much more concerned with Anglican controversies than with the relationship between Protestantism and Catholicism. See Bowles, 'Crucifix, Communion, and Convent: The Real Presence of Anglican Ritualism in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*', *Christianity and Literature*, 62.2 (2013), pp. 243-58.
[33] Milbank, *God and the Gothic*, pp. 231-32.
[34] Madeline Potter, 'Ecumenism to Ontology: Stoker's Theology of the Host', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 27.3 (2022), pp. 526-42 (p. 526).
[35] Jonathan Greenaway, *Theology, Horror, and Fiction: A Reading of the Gothic Nineteenth Century* (Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 160.
[36] Potter, 'Ecumenism to Ontology', p. 527.

suggest that the modern Eucharist has shifted 'from ritual to poetry', something that primarily holds deep symbolic, rather than supernatural, meaning.[37] Thus, while the communion elements continue to possess literal significance, they also take on a meaning beyond Christian ritual, especially within the gothic, where religious symbols can become vehicles for cultural exploration and critique. *Mexican Gothic* has deep roots not just in earlier gothic depictions of religion, but specifically in gothicised depictions of the Eucharist, exemplified in *Dracula.* Moreno-Garcia's response to this tradition is similarly interested in religious iconography. Regardless of the medium itself (the bread, the wine, or Moreno-Garcia's mushrooms), these sacraments can be consumed and used in exclusive or exploitative ways that harm communities and pervert hospitality.

In both gothic examples, Eucharistic symbolism heightens a sense of real evil, while serving as a means of creating communities. In *Dracula*, the Catholic Host is directly pitted against Dracula's perverse Eucharistic acts. Lucy's suitors share their own blood with her through blood transfusions, linking them to her and each other. Additionally, the central monster takes blood and bestows it upon some with the intent of creating more vampires in his image. In one of the most chilling scenes, the Count drinks Mina Harker's blood and forces her to reciprocally drink from his chest. Dr Seward recounts how the men open the door to the room where they think Mina and her husband Jonathan are sleeping; they find Jonathan 'in a stupor,' and

> Kneeling on the near edge of the bed facing outwards was the white-clad figure of his wife. By her side stood a tall, thin man, clad in black. […] With his left hand he held both Mrs Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink.[38]

The Count clearly sees this blood sharing as linking them, using a horrifying version of the language of marriage to taunt Mina. She herself later recalls the attack's sexualised violence and sadism, remembering the Count telling her

> 'you, their best beloved one, are now to me, flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood; kin of my kin; my bountiful wine-press for a while; and shall be later on my companion and my helper. […] you are to be punished for what you have done. You have aided in

[37] Regina M. Schwartz and Patrick J. McGrath, 'Introduction', in *Toward a Sacramental Poetics*, ed. by Schwartz and McGrath (University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), pp. 1-17 (p. 7).
[38] Stoker, *Dracula*, pp. 313-14.

> thwarting me; now you shall come to my call.' […] he pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast. When the blood began to spurt out, he took my hands in one of his, holding them tight, and with the other seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow.[39]

The men ward off Dracula using 'the Sacred Wafer' before Mina comes out of her stupor and begins to weep, as she has just been the victim of a terrible assault.[40] While it is clear that this use of the Host to protect someone can be morally justified, the vampire slayers more than overcome their squeamishness toward desecrating the sacred to attain those purposes. Indeed, Lori Branch sees Van Helsing's use of the Host as parallel to Dracula's use of humans, as both actions are 'profoundly impersonal' in their utilisation of the pure (unknowing women or the insane Renfield in Dracula's case; the Host in Van Helsing's) with impure motives (colonising the world, slaying a vampire).[41] Stephen Purcell suggests that the novel's pragmatic use of Catholic imagery, from the vampire-repelling function of the rosary to the Host's protective powers, reflects characters' willingness to weaponise religious elements for 'immoral purposes'.[42] They violate the holy, be it the Host or the body of a former beloved, in the service of greater ends, something Moreno-Garcia's Doyle family similarly embraces in their desecrations of religious iconography, pagan practices, and human life. *Dracula,* therefore, provides a template for Moreno-Garcia's depiction of religious iconography, concentrated in the motif of the perverse Eucharist, as a tool of colonial power. Greenaway concurs that in *Dracula*, 'theology can all too easily be used to provide a discursive framework for violence and domination'.[43] The men employ the Host as a weapon in service to an essentially colonialist system, protecting their country (and women) from the foreigner working to colonise it. Violence and religion continually mingle in the novel, and while we expect this from the evil vampire, the men are not innocent of these crimes. They may not be as blatantly evil, but they, too, succumb to acting violently. The Count's attack on Mina parallels rape, as many critics have observed, as does Lucy's violent slaying by the men. The sharing of blood therefore creates – and damages – communities.

A scene in *Mexican Gothic* parallels Dracula's assault upon Mina. Howard Doyle wants Noemí to become part of the family, planning to inhabit Francis' body after forcing Noemí into

[39] Stoker, p. 320.
[40] Stoker, p. 314.
[41] Lori Branch, '*Dracula*'s Sacramental Prosaics and the Remains of Religion in Modernity', in Schwartz and McGrath, pp. 237-58 (pp. 243-44).
[42] Stephen Purcell, 'Not Wholly Communion: Skepticism and the Instrumentalization of Religion in Stoker's *Dracula*', *Christianity and Literature*, 67.2 (2018), pp. 294-311 (p. 296), doi:10.1177/0148333117708257.
[43] Greenaway, *Theology, Horror, and Fiction*, p. 165.

marrying him. Before reaching this point, however, Howard makes her ingest the fungus to link her more tightly to the house and the Doyles. Although she has been consuming it passively (and initially unwittingly) through the air and through her food, the fungal instrument of control running through Howard's veins becomes an active, violent weapon with the power to prevent Noemí from leaving High Place. Noemí is forced to kneel beside Howard, who is lying ill in bed. She tries to escape, but Virgil pushes her down. Howard forces her to kiss him, smiling eerily and 'showing off his stained teeth – stained with black', before pressing 'his lips against hers. Noemí felt his tongue in her mouth and then saliva burning down her throat as he pressed himself against her and Virgil propped her in place' (p. 204). Later, Howard opens one of his own blisters and pours that liquid into a cup he wants Noemí to drink from.

This dark, forced sharing mirrors that enacted upon Mina Harker. For vampires and the Doyles alike, consent is completely disregarded, both in terms of physical boundaries and in terms of community affiliation, which is forced through shared substances like blood or the fungus. Sexual deviance and religious deviance are certainly entwined in this book, a connection that can be interpreted as riffing on earlier gothic, wherein, as O'Malley has shown, religious and sexual deviance are depicted as intertwining within Catholicism.[44] Even the forced marriage ceremony between Noemí and Francis parallels a perverse communion that echoes Stoker's perverse communions in *Dracula.* The family repeats a Latin ceremony in 'choreographed obeisance to the father', and instead of partaking of the bread of communion, Noemí and Francis share in 'two tiny, dried pieces of yellow mushrooms' (p. 257). Noemí herself recognises this as 'a strange parody of the communion wafer' (p. 257). The ceremony reiterates the fanatical religion that the Doyle family practices, in which Howard is god, immortality is the goal, and fungal mushrooms that feed off a sacrificed maternal figure invert the idea of Christ's body given as a willing and kenotic sacrifice for all, as Agnes' body is forcibly taken for Howard. In a sense, this looks like an extreme, perverted form of Catholicism that distorts religious iconography to maintain power and control over the bodies of women and the spaces the Doyles have colonised.

Dracula's gothicised religious symbolism is therefore taken up in *Mexican Gothic*, wherein the colonising Doyles are bound through a mysterious fungus framed through the lens of Catholicism. Though treated as holy by the family, the mushrooms can be read as a vehicle desecrated to serve their violent, greedy ends. The Doyles' religion deifies Howard and justifies the family's violent, genocidal actions, from cannibalism and incest to eugenics and murder.

[44] O'Malley, *Catholicism*, p. 18.

For Dracula, blood sharing becomes a perverse version of communion that gives Mina a hypnotic mental connection to the vampire. Similarly, substance sharing in *Mexican Gothic* mentally connects the inhabitants of High Place. Noemí's mind, like Mina's, is invaded because of the 'gloom', a haunting of High Place orchestrated through a fungal network; this gives Virgil some access to her private thoughts, and he seems able to impose thoughts upon her. Francis explains that the fungus connects all of them in a 'web' that has the power to 'preserve memories' and 'thoughts' (p. 211). Noemí, who receives important messages from the spirits of Agnes and Ruth, seems particularly able to connect with these memories, a trait which Doyle sees as stemming from her ethnic identity, and which he believes makes her an ideal candidate for forced marriage into the family. This form of community lacks hospitality or welcome; it is imprisonment for Noemí and Catalina, who, in their identities as Mexican women with indigenous blood, are seen by the Doyle men as mere commodities. Like the silver mined decades ago, Howard sees these women as conquests he can possess and destroy. However, the same fungus that enables Howard's horrible reign empowers the women to communicate across generations, as they work to ultimately destroy both him and the fungus itself.

Furthermore, colonisation provides a central concern for both novels. *Dracula*, often read as deeply anxious about the decline of the British empire, fits among a cluster of late nineteenth-century works that Steven Arata reads as invested in 'reverse colonisation', in which 'the coloniser finds himself in the position of the colonised, the exploiter is exploited, the victimiser victimised'.[45] Part of the vampire's threat is his desire to colonise England through creating more vampires, a plan he prepares for by shipping boxes of Transylvanian earth to his London homes. Similarly, Howard Doyle 'brought earth from England to ensure the conditions here would be like the ones in our motherland', soil that would host not merely the English garden but the fungus that would enable their colonial success (p. 237). Moreno-Garcia thus adapts and inverts the imperial-gothic tradition. While *Dracula* recounts the story of British heroes protecting their homeland from the reverse colonisation of an evil vampire, *Mexican Gothic* centres a haunted mansion that can only by exorcised by indigenous women who can defeat Mexico's colonisers. Instead of reversing the colonisation by colonising the oppressors, the novel works to reverse colonisation itself by undoing it. The Doyles are not themselves colonised; they, their family home, and their way of life are destroyed. Moreno-Garcia's novel's toppling of the coloniser is painted as victorious, rather than anxiety-producing. This includes the destruction of the fungus.

[45] Steven Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 108.

As I have been arguing, in Moreno-Garcia's world, the fungus serves as Eucharistic medium, binding and sustaining the Doyle family, holding memories, and providing their perverse religion a sacred symbol. Soon after her arrival, Noemí takes a walk in the Doyle family cemetery, where she finds actual mushrooms. There, Francis introduces her to the native fungi and tells her about the 'connection between certain cultures and mushrooms' (p. 98). Noemí is already familiar with the local variety, called 'Teonanácatl', also known as '[t]he flesh of the gods' (p. 98). She recalls her indigenous grandmother's cultural practice, telling Francis that 'the Mazatec ingest similar mushrooms during certain ceremonies. It's not about lust, it's *communion*' (p. 99, emphasis added). Although her comment about lust stems from a previous attempt at flirtatious banter, Christian discourses about communion become the framework through which Noemí reads and explains historic mushroom use. She understands this practice as descendent from older, non-Christian practice, but she uses Christian language to describe it, here and throughout the novel. Francis does this as well, later telling her that the Doyle family's '[c]asual cannibalism' is also a 'communion. Our children are born infected with the fungus, and ingesting their flesh means ingesting the fungus; ingesting the fungus makes us stronger and in turn it binds us more closely to the gloom. Binds us to Howard' (p. 281). It is partaken of formally, but it also pervades the air at High Place, and his mother Florence contaminates their food with the fungus. This perverse Eucharist binds the group together, just as Dracula's blood does with the women he infects, or as the sacrament binds together the members of a church. Potter's reading of *Dracula*'s theology as inflected with the bizarre and not easily explicable can be applied to Moreno-Garcia's novel as well, since the book's use of religion eschews clear-cut explanations and interpretations.[46] Noemí and Catalina are Catholic, but the Doyles' religion blends pagan and Catholic iconography with the symbol of the ouroboros and horrifying rituals involving incest, murder, and cannibalism. Their religion is clearly fictive, but it pulls from gothic religious concepts. *Mexican Gothic* participates in the long nineteenth-century gothic tradition of distorting and questioning the sacred to dramatic and critical effect, and it contributes to postcolonial gothic's goal of exposing the damaging powers and consequences of colonialism.

The novel's gothic reinterpretations riff on established gothic templates while building upon the traditions of perverse Eucharists and damaged communities. The language of communion is repeatedly invoked in *Mexican Gothic*, highlighting the quasi-religious centrality of the Eucharistic fungus. The Doyles can connect to the fungus as the family blood

[46] Potter, 'Ecumenism to Ontology', p. 529.

is 'special. The fungus bonds with us, it's not noxious. It can even make us immortal' (p. 212). This fungus binds the community of believers who ingest it. Further, it bestows gifts: eternal life on Howard Doyle, and communion with the house for others. It gives Noemí the ability to understand the house through memory flashbacks that ultimately enable her to uncover the Doyles' secrets and escape. The fungus also binds individuals to the house; they get sick if they leave without having partaken of an antidote tincture. In this, the perverse Eucharist distorts hospitality. Rather than coming from a table where all are welcome to feast, this fungus ensures that none can leave. Furthermore, the fungus' impact on the Mexican miners who succumb and die because of it is the opposite of hospitality. Rather than offering protection and community to all, the Doyles' communion creates extreme exclusion and enacts violence. Doyle considers the miners to be 'mulch' and lets the fungus destroy them (p. 212). The family goes beyond perversely killing their own children and harms the community they have colonised. Although the fungus has ambiguous origins, the Doyles impose it upon the land around High Place as part of their invasion. Significantly, local healer Marta Duval brews a tincture that serves as an antidote for the evil fungus. In this way, the duelling natural forces continue to underscore the novel's critique of colonialism.

The Doyles' evil fungus is fuelled by the sacrificed body of Howard's late wife and sister, Agnes, hidden in a tomb. In this construction, she becomes both a Mary figure and a Christ figure as she gives birth to and sustains these Eucharistic mushrooms. Howard acknowledges that '[h]er spirit lives on in High Place' (p. 75). His statement is not merely figurative; Agnes' spirit saturates and haunts the house. When they find her corpse, Noemí sees in it

> the face of death. It was the open, screaming maw of a woman, frozen in time. A mummy, a few teeth dangling from her mouth, her skin yellow. The clothing in which she had been buried had long dissolved into dust, and instead she was clothed in a different finery: mushrooms hid her nakedness. They grew from her torso and her belly, they grew down her arms and her legs, they clustered around her head creating a crown, a halo, of glowing gold. The mushrooms held her upright, anchored her to the wall, like a monstrous Virgin in a cathedral of mycelium. (p. 282)

Agnes becomes a perverse and victimised Mary holding the house together, the central figure that serves as the glue for this depraved familial religion. Agnes is therefore the Real Presence in High Place, the physical manifestation of a sacrifice that provides a twisted life to the community. Importantly, Noemí reads Agnes' corpse as a religious emblem in a Catholic cathedral, viewing her through a framework of religious iconography, one that serves as an interpretive lens, object for critique, and locus of fear in the novel. Agnes gives birth not to a

child but to the horrific haunting of the house, known as 'the gloom', the matrix of fungal memories, minds, and spirits that reside at High Place. In a strange un-dead state, Agnes hosts and sustains the fungus, the body of a white woman invading Mexican soil against her will so that Howard Doyle can live forever, conquering and harming whomever he pleases. Through Agnes, Ruth's hauntings and memory, Catalina, and Noemí, Moreno-Garcia's novel specifically addresses the impact of colonisation and violence on women, who could not receive the primary evil gift bestowed by the fungus. Instead, they adapt it into a means of communication as they work to resist.

The fungus is thus a Eucharistic *and* vampiric medium that facilitates eternal life for some and murders others, heightening Moreno-Garcia's postcolonial critique. Some must die for some to live; this is the only way the fungus as a medium can truly flourish. Without the bodies of Agnes (and the murdered children) or the bodies of the dead miners, the colonising Howard Doyle could never have obtained such power. Noemí sees in one of the house's haunted memories that his immortality originated in a cannibalistic religious ceremony where a fungus provided eternal life. Howard, in his actual youth, killed the priest of the life-giving mushroom cult and became 'holy', as he killed the original members of the order and began his demented quest to perfect the ceremony through inbreeding, murder, and infant cannibalism, warping and expropriating an existing indigenous religion for his own healing, self-aggrandisement, and profit (p. 207). The Doyles do not feed the community: they consume it. Colonisation is, in this novel, the inverse of hospitality. Deeply embedded in the gothic tradition, Catholicism operates both as a colonising religion and a colonising framework in *Mexican Gothic*. The Doyles are obviously colonisers, and the fungal medium of High Place is also a colonial imposition. As Noemí's education has brought her to learn, mushrooms are part of indigenous religious practices that extend beyond Central America. The novel's golden mushrooms, through this gothic Eucharist, become incorporated and interpreted through the frame of Catholicism. Through reproducing and offering her own spin on these Catholic emblems, Moreno-Garcia critiques the colonisation that Catholicism helped enact, particularly in Latin America. This simultaneous use and critique construct a complex interpretive matrix and a fruitful ambiguity within the novel, especially as the Doyles themselves, the novel's active and violent colonisers, do not practise Catholicism. Conversely, Noemí and Catalina's Catholicism offers them comfort, rather than harm, despite not being an indigenous Mexican religion. While Noemí seems indifferent to her own Catholicism at the outset of the novel, she does pray to 'a little figurine of San Judas Tadeo' over Francis' bedside once they have escaped (p. 294). Hence, it seems Catholicism itself is not inherently the subject of critique. In presenting both perverse

and nominally helpful religion, Moreno-Garcia avoids early gothic anti-Catholicism and shifts the focus to the damages enacted by colonisers who use religion as a weapon.

Nevertheless, the Doyles continually twist religious concepts surrounding the Catholic Eucharist. Catholic frames reveal the true horrors of the Doyle family, whose perverse religious practices allow them to kill and colonise without remorse. Prior to their arrival in Mexico, invasive Catholicism had already built strong colonial roots. Therefore, the Doyles invaded not just Mexico but also Catholicism, rendering the land, its people, and its religious practices into something truly horrifying and evil. Their motto, inscribed on Agnes' tomb and elsewhere, is 'Et Verbum caro factum est', Latin for 'and the word became flesh'. This direct quotation from John 1 (in reference to the incarnation of Christ) is part of a longer phrase: 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.'[47] Noemí hears this refrain coming from the family insignia, the ouroboros, the snake eating its tail. As the Doyles do not practice a recognisable form of Christianity, it initially seems odd that they would incorporate this well-known biblical passage into their family motto. Partly, their misuse of religious language heightens the novel's overall sense of and engagement with horror, much as Van Helsing's misuse of the Host sharpens the horrific necessities that the vampire slayers are compelled to take on in *Dracula*. Additionally, however, this passage's use of light imagery in the context of Christ underlines Moreno-Garcia's distortion of religious language, framing, and imagery.

The dark secret of the Doyles' eternal life lies in the sacrifice of a woman, Agnes, whose corpse, frozen in time, haunts the place and sustains the immortalising power of the bioluminescent fungus that Howard Doyle wields as an instrument of power and longevity. This eerie version of the Christian Eucharist, which depicts an imported fictional European religion as evil, underscores the postcolonial critique. While Noemí is a nominal Catholic and Catalina is devout, the Doyles' own eugenicist, genocidal religion stands in stark contradistinction to the colonising work of Catholicism in Mexico, even as the Doyle family's crimes are grounded in racism and colonial imposition. This juxtaposition leads to no simple or easy answers, but it is clear that the source of light at High Place is not holy. It is deliberately, when read through religious frames, perverse. Light imagery is also used around Noemí, however, as she becomes a figurative light shining among the Doyles as well as a literal one, symbolised in her 'lucky talisman', a small cigarette lighter (p. 296).[48] Her smoking habit leads

[47] John 1. 14, *King James Bible*.
[48] 'Let there be light' is one of her many quips (Moreno-Garcia, p. 121).

her to carry this lighter, provoking Florence's disapproval as fire could potentially harm the fungus, which dislikes light and finds cigarette smoke irritating. Eventually, it is used to light the lamp Noemí employs to burn down the haunted house and its vampiric mushrooms. As Francis recalls, revealing some degree of Catholic education, fire is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, something which Noemí forgets. He declares that it 'transforms whatever it touches,' a description not just religious in nature (p. 109). The light of the fungus became a medium that negatively and harmfully transformed Mexican land and those unfortunate enough to serve the Doyles, but so, too, can Noemí's light transform High Place by burning it down. In her hands, this light becomes a form of rebellion against oppression.

As this essay has argued, *Mexican Gothic* specifically uses gothic tropes like the perverse Eucharist to engage in postcolonial critique. Wisker asserts that '[c]olonialism and imperialism are also vampiric, leaving victims as drained husks, dead or forever in servitude'.[49] In *Mexican Gothic*, Howard Doyle's late wife and sister Agnes is literally this husk, her decaying body imprisoned to forever sustain the system until Noemí burns it all down, symbolically taking agency over the colonising, draining forces that the Doyles represent. As Wisker continues, postcolonial gothic works 'to revalue and restore worldviews, languages, customs, practices, religions' that 'invaders found other and so threatening'; it 'otherises the invaders, exposes their destruction, their illegitimate reconfiguration of the lives of others'.[50] The Doyles are the monsters in this novel, the white Others revealed as villainous, genocidal, incestuous, and cannibalistic. *Mexican Gothic* asks readers to confront the reality of colonisation in Mexico, showing the horrific genocide and cannibalism of the Doyles to be one step away from the actual colonisation of the land and deaths of indigenous peoples like those in Noemí's ancestry. Moreno-Garcia paints a gothic romance where Latin American heroines unseat the patriarchal colonisers, destroying their legacy and the haunted house that sustains it.

The perversions of religious symbols and rites in *Mexican Gothic* are deeply gothic descendants of the nineteenth-century tradition. Moreno-Garcia depicts the perverse Eucharist, the Doyles' fungus, as a dark and dangerous binding agent for a community where religion has gone badly astray. Depictions of twisted sacraments can terrify and compel audiences, especially those who participate in these religious rituals, asking them to reflect upon their own religious practices and the communities they are bound to. Dark Eucharists demonstrate the violent consequences of perverting hospitality. In *Mexican Gothic*, colonialism is presented as

[49] Wisker, 'Postcolonialisms', p. 107.
[50] Wisker, 'Postcolonialisms', p. 108.

the antithesis of hospitality. Only brave women, working together in communities that resist distorted religion, can oppose colonisation and the damage it causes.

Feathers, Fangs, and Feminine Becoming-Animal: *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan*

Angela Morrison

A high-school student begins menstruating and shortly thereafter develops fangs, claws, grey fur, and an insatiable desire for flesh and blood. A ballerina gets her first lead role and dances herself into a frenzy, sprouting swan feathers, red eyes, and webbed toes in her pursuit of perfection. In their depictions of grotesque animalistic metamorphoses that coincide with the social and bodily upheavals of feminine adolescence, John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) exemplify a characteristic generic and tonal ambivalence within late-twentieth and early twenty-first century horror cinema as it attempts to negotiate cultural anxieties surrounding categorical instabilities of gender, sexuality, and species, anxieties that are rapidly increasing as technological advancements and climate crises heighten feelings of bodily alienation and instability.[1] Contemporary horror cinema expresses deep apprehension in the face of categorical limits as well as a longing for new, unanticipated forms of embodiment. Both *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan* illustrate and embody horror's ambivalence by foregrounding and thematising the taxonomic limits of foundational categories such as 'animal' and 'human', depicting bodily excess in the forms of menstruation, self-mutilation, and physical metamorphoses, and blending genres and tonalities, incorporating elements of body horror, melodrama, camp, science fiction, and black comedy. What aligns these two films and sets them apart from other horror films is that their violent and grotesque animalistic metamorphoses occur in tandem with and in response to the melodramatic upheavals of feminine adolescence, a framing that emphasises the significant overlap between psychoanalytic theories of abjection and Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophies of becoming.

Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophies of becoming and psychoanalytic theories of horror and abjection are frequently opposed as modes of critical and philosophical thought. Rather than holding these two critical approaches in opposition, this essay contends that contemporary horror cinema, and in particular, the subgenre of feminine-adolescent body horror that these two films fall within, configures abjection as a starting point for unanticipated transformations, rather than a limit where meaning falls apart. Typically, Deleuzian (and Deleuzo-Guattarian)

[1] *Black Swan*, dir. by Darren Aronofsky (Warner Brothers, 2010); and *Ginger Snaps*, dir. by John Fawcett (Motion International, 2000).

philosophy is framed as a radical alternative to psychoanalysis and other intellectual traditions predicated on binaries and dichotomies,[2] or what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term 'arborescent' structures.[3] However, horror is the genre best suited to illuminate the significant overlap between the questions underpinning both Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy and psychoanalysis, namely the instabilities of singular, bounded selfhood, the complex relationship between self and Other(s), the materiality of embodiment, and the limits of signification. In particular, feminine-adolescent horror is similarly concerned with transgressions of bodily and psychological limit points, and the simultaneous danger and promise of transformations and metamorphoses. When thought of in conjunction, these critical approaches provide insight into how contemporary horror negotiates pervasive social anxieties, not by attempting to contain these threats, but by creatively refashioning them as potentially liberatory or anticipatory of new modes of being.

Although each film emerged from a different cultural context – *Ginger Snaps* is an indie Canadian horror film with a robust cult following[4] and *Black Swan* is a star-studded mainstream Hollywood film with a well-known director (and an added layer of prestige due to Natalie Portman's Best Actress Oscar win for the film) – these contextual differences do not eclipse their shared concerns with femininity, bodily limit points, and animalistic metamorphoses. *Ginger Snaps* follows morose teenage sisters Ginger (Katharine Isabelle) and Brigitte (Emily Perkins) as they wait out their adolescence in their shared basement bedroom, staging bloody suicide photoshoots to pass the time and begrudgingly attending high school – what Brigitte refers to as a 'mindless little breeders' machine' and a 'hormonal toilet' – rolling their eyes at their immature classmates and overly enthusiastic mother, Pam (Mimi Rogers). On the night that Ginger begins menstruating for the first time, she is bitten by a werewolf, a supernatural intervention that allows her to circumvent the traditional, normative dictates of puberty and instead become an ever-changing wolf girl. From the moment she is bitten, Ginger begins a chaotic, violent transformation that leaves Brigitte troubled and desperate to bring her sister back to who she used to be. *Black Swan* focuses on Nina (Portman), a shy, uptight, perfectionist ballerina in New York City who lives in a cramped apartment with her abusive mother (Barbara Hershey) and devotes her entire life to dancing. Nina's entire world changes when she gets cast

[2] See Richard Rushton, 'Deleuzian Spectatorship', *Screen*, 50 (2009), pp. 45-53, doi:10.1093/screen/hjn086.
[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 17.
[4] This is the central concern of Ernest Mathijs's book *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), wherein he traces the film's production and reception history, detailing how and why it developed into a cult phenomenon.

in the lead role(s) of Odette/Odile in her company's production of *Swan Lake*. She begins having visions of her own transformation into a swan, a process that undoes her previously stable sense of self and allows her to blossom into a newly assertive, uncontrolled version of herself, open to new experiences and unconcerned with perfection. Despite these promises of freedom and newness, both films end with their protagonists in states of physical breakdown and disarray, reflecting horror cinema's characteristic ambivalence about radical departures from humanity.

The violent transformations in *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan* resonate significantly with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concept of becoming-animal, a process that involves a departure from one's stable human identity in favour of an endlessly shifting, nonsingular, relational becoming. This expansive philosophical framework guides my consideration of the metamorphoses in these two films, as its emphasis on unpredictability and the multiplicitous possibilities of change opens up space to untangle the generic and categorical ambivalence of these two films. As Eve Tuck notes, part of the richness (and difficulty) of Deleuzian philosophy is that it is simultaneously literal and figurative, a point that underscores the ambiguously supernatural transformations within these two films, and that hints at the generative possibilities of irresolvability.[5] Neither film 'resolves' questions of what it means to be human or animal, or whether the protagonists' metamorphoses are 'real' or imagined, explicable by science or magic or mental illness. Both films suggest that if humans are no longer necessarily human, if a person is no longer necessarily a singular being, and if a girl might also be a werewolf or a swan, then a relatively conventional body-horror film might also offer rich possibilities for thinking beyond stable categories and binaries.

Multiplicitous Subjects: Becoming-Animal

Deleuze and Guattari first introduced the concept of becoming-animal in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), a sprawling philosophical work that argues against linear, hierarchical, so-called 'arborescent' or 'molar' forms (institutionally normalised structures like psychoanalysis, biology, linguistics, capitalism, and systematic philosophy), and instead finds value, joy, and liberation in lines of flight, deterritorialisation, nomadic movements, and improvisational 'rhizomatic' or 'molecular' thinking.[6] Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise becoming-animal as an escape route, specifically in response to the

[5] Eve Tuck, 'Breaking up with Deleuze: Desire and Valuing the Irreconcilable', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 23 (2010), pp. 635-50 (p. 637), doi:10.1080/09518398.2010.500633.
[6] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 17-18.

'power takeover by the signifier, [or] a subjectification of affects', which is to say a stifling of genuine expression or an attempt to organise and encapsulate experiences that exceed strictly established political and social structures.[7] Leaving behind one's singular human form may be the only option when faced with an impasse or blockage created by restrictive binary structures of gender and species, an act that Deleuze and Guattari consider 'a truly political option'.[8]

Becoming-animal does not proceed by resemblance, identification, or imitation, but rather, 'only [by] an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying'.[9] As one leaves behind their unified human form, they embark on a relational process of coming apart and back together again, incorporating new, non-human elements into their being, never quite reaching an endpoint but endlessly becoming in unexpected and unanticipated directions, exceeding and evading structures of signification and subjectification. Within the process of becoming-animal, there is no 'animal become', as it is not a process with a fixed outcome where one completes a transition from one state of being to another, but is rather an endless becoming, an infinitely proliferating middle with no 'start' or 'end' points.[10] Such endlessness cannot, however, be accommodated by the narrative constraints and time limits of mainstream cinema, and for the most part, *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan* do neatly narrativise their protagonists' experiences. Ginger's transformation begins the moment she is bitten by a werewolf and ends with her death at the end of the film, and Nina's metamorphosis commences with her casting as Odette/Odile in her ballet company's production of *Swan Lake* and climaxes during her opening-night performance. Yet as this essay demonstrates, despite these surface level reterritorialisations, there are elements of the characters' becomings that exceed, or cannot be contained by, conventional cinematic structures.

One way that the films do this is by visualising subjectivities that are multiplicitous and shifting, rather than singular and bounded, visually signalled by too-close relations, doubles, mirrors, and reflective surfaces. Ginger and Brigitte resemble each other so closely, with their gothic/Victorian dresses, long dark hair, hunched posture, and expressions of disdain, that they might as well be twins. Neither of them goes anywhere without the other, prompting their mother Pam to scold Brigitte that she need not follow Ginger around like her shadow. Nina is surrounded by doubles, mirrors, and reflective surfaces, whether in the ballet studio, costume-

[7] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 14.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 10.
[10] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 238.

fitting room, the bathroom, her bedroom, or in the form of her hallucinated doppelgänger who sometimes morphs into her fellow dancer and professional rival Lily (Mila Kunis). To Deleuze and Guattari, becoming and multiplicity are the same thing, meaning that the process of becoming implies that one no longer appears to be a singular, fixed entity, but rather a boundless, constantly shifting legion of relations.[11] In each film, this ever-shifting multiplicity is signalled by visual presentations of doubleness or multiple selves that blur the boundaries between self and Other. This notion of relational nonsingularity is one of the main differences between Deleuzian philosophy and psychoanalysis with its individualistic bent and adherence to binary structures of gender, subjecthood, and consciousness. Yet as the following analysis illustrates, when considered in relation to the generic ambivalence and bodily excess of horror cinema, the overlap between psychoanalytic concepts such as abjection and Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy becomes clear, particularly their mutual concerns with intersubjectivity and border crossings and violations.

Literary scholar Gerald L. Bruns suggests that the anarchy of becoming is not just a logical or formal problem, but may also have social or what he terms 'asocial' significance.[12] By *a*social, Bruns seems to imply that the deterritorialisation of becoming-animal marks a real attempt to depart from one's previously well-defined form and become anarchic, unfixed, and illegible within the terms of overarching social structures. Bruns conceptualises it as 'a movement from unity to complexity, that is, from organization to anarchy, which is the mode of being of whatever is uncontainable within an order of things'.[13] The becomings in *Black Swan* and *Ginger Snaps* are animated by such an impulse toward kinetic, open-ended forms of embodiment that are difficult to contain, particularly within rigid social structures governing feminine embodiment and sexuality. Neither film allows for a total annihilation of legibility, yet nonetheless, each frames becoming-animal as a (violently) escapist process with social ramifications.

While there are surface-level differences between the social realms of the two films – *Black Swan* takes place in the rigid, mannered world of the New York City Ballet, *Ginger Snaps* within the bleak (fictionalised) Canadian suburb of 'Bailey Downs' – both films establish that these social settings are structured by restrictive patriarchal expectations of (adolescent) feminine embodiment and sexual expression. In *Black Swan*, the patriarchal underpinnings of

[11] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 249.
[12] Gerald L. Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways)', *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), pp. 703-20 (p. 705), doi:10.1353/nlh.2008.0003.
[13] Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal', p. 704.

the world of professional ballet come to light through and are articulated by artistic director Tomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel),[14] who uses his powerful position and artistic temperament to justify his controlling and inappropriate behaviour. In particular, he regularly initiates and pursues sexual relations with his prima ballerinas, seducing Nina during a private rehearsal, and instructing her to go home and masturbate in order to enhance the sensuality of her performances. Tomas fosters an environment where his sexual attention comes along with, and is deemed necessary to, professional and artistic success. When Nina replaces Beth (Winona Ryder) as prima ballerina and Tomas's favourite, Beth completely loses her sense of identity and has a breakdown, during which she verbally attacks Nina, calling her a 'little whore', and later attempts suicide by walking into traffic. In the world of ballet, women's sexual desires are not only downplayed or ignored, but are forcibly configured as non-existent. Having spent her entire life within this dancerly milieu, Nina begins the film with no knowledge of her own sexual wants and a fearful attitude toward sex in general. She bristles when Tomas first asks her if she enjoys sex, and on more than one occasion, she is referred to as 'virginal', 'fearful', and 'frigid', a perfect embodiment of the White Swan Odette from *Swan Lake*. For Nina, there is seemingly no alternative to this fearfulness and ignorance of sex and sexual desire, because her internal world has been so fully shaped and structured by these externally imposed restrictions and expectations.

There is a more general or widespread air of repression in *Ginger Snaps*, reflected in the stuffy suburban organisation of Bailey Downs and the leering stares of the teenage boys who sit on the bleachers watching the girls play sports in gym class, yelling out lewd comments and cornering them after class to ask for dates. In the bleak, dead-end town of Bailey Downs, living within the confines and familiar scripts of heteronormativity – dating, marriage, reproduction, the nuclear family – seems to be the only option. Any deviation from this script is marked as aberrant and dangerous. For example, after Ginger begins her transformation, she becomes sexually ravenous and aggressive, pursuing anyone who crosses her path – her classmate Jason (Jesse Moss), local drug dealer Sam (Kris Lemche), and even her younger sister Brigitte. Her unapologetically heightened sexual appetite marks her as a 'freak', as she laments, alienating her from those around her because they become frightened of her, and leading her classmate Trina (Danielle Hampton) to call her names such as 'bitch' and 'slut'. In both films, young women are expected to be sexually responsive and receptive, but only in ways that reflect men's desires or maintain the patriarchal status quo. What the films have in

[14] 'Leroy,' or 'Le *roi*' translates to 'the king' in French, further emphasising his grandiose patriarchal position.

common is that once Ginger and Nina begin their animalistic becomings, the boundaries between self/Other, feminine/masculine, active/passive, and human/animal begin to blur, thus disrupting these simplistic social expectations by configuring embodiment and relationality as fluid, open, and unpredictable rather than fixed and unyielding. As Ernest Mathijs observes, the characters in these films are 'marginalized not as individuals, but because they aim to be their very own species'.[15]

In both cases, the films establish these restrictive social settings and then suggest that becoming-animal offers an escape route from the structures and limited options that keep people trapped and without options, unable to achieve personal or relational fulfilment. At the same time, this process is presented as troubling, violent, and socially alienating, with Ginger being ostracised for her sexual openness, and Nina labelled as 'sick' and mentally unwell as she rapidly changes form. Although the limitations of cinematic narrative and form cannot ultimately accommodate the endlessness and radical departures of becoming-animal, this ambivalence need not be an impasse or an endpoint, but rather an opportunity for 'valuing the irreconcilable', to use Tuck's provocative phrase.[16] The films confront big existential and ontological quandaries of what it means to be human, and where the line between human and animal lies. Both films trouble the very notion of separation between these terms by depicting their protagonists in liminal states, their recognisably 'human' bodies combined with animal characteristics, such as fangs, swan feathers, red eyes, wolf fur, and sharp claws. These varying states of in-betweenness suggest the fundamental instability of binary oppositions in general, not only between human and animal, but also masculine and feminine, alive and dead, and science and the supernatural. These dualistic terms cannot be reconciled with each other, nor can they be kept comfortably apart.

Beyond just pointing to the fact that these culturally foundational oppositions are unstable, cannot be resolved, and are easily unsettled, the films open up space to imagine creative alternatives. Tuck notes that for Deleuze, 'what performs as contradiction in society are actually a multiplicity of lines of flight that "flee in every direction"'.[17] Rather than become mired in the impasse of meaninglessness, or in the insufficiency of current categories to describe embodied experience, Deleuzian becomings allow these films to expand outward and imagine new possibilities. Both Ginger and Nina respond to the (lack of) choices they are presented with – in Ginger's case, the normative linear trajectory of puberty, heterosexual

[15] Mathijs, *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 58.
[16] Tuck, 'Breaking up with Deleuze,' p. 648.
[17] Tuck, 'Breaking up with Deleuze', p. 645.

courtship, marriage, and reproduction, and for Nina, acquiescing to controlling and abusive behaviour in order to remain the perfect daughter and prima ballerina – by spiralling out in unexpected directions, forging new paths that demonstrate that either obeying or rejecting social and cultural conventions are not the only two options. Horror cinema is particularly well suited for 'valuing the irreconcilable', as it is able to envision and imagine such 'lines of flight' through innovative special and practical effects and generic expectations of the supernatural, inexplicable, or fantastic, while also acknowledging and foregrounding its inherent limitations in terms of its artifice and durational constraints. Turning to the relationship between psychoanalysis and horror provides further insight into the way that contemporary horror cinema encodes and expresses cultural, social, and generic tensions and oppositions.

Horror, Excess, Abjection

The connection between horror cinema and psychoanalytic theory is a rich one, and scholars such as Robin Wood and Carol Clover have previously offered insight into the way that films such as *Halloween* (1978) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) negotiate the gendered dimensions of Oedipal dynamics and castration anxiety.[18] Brigid Cherry notes that although psychoanalysis is largely disputed and critiqued within the practical field of psychiatry, 'Freudian psychoanalysis is nevertheless an application that still offers productive readings of various horror films and cycles', as it probes the seemingly timeless unconscious anxieties and pleasures that horror films draw upon and provoke.[19] One prominent psychoanalytic touchstone within horror-film scholarship, and one that has particular resonance with Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy, is Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of abjection as 'the place where meaning collapses'.[20] *Abject* refers to that which has been rejected or expelled in a subject's formation but that nonetheless haunts and confronts the subject as its limit or undoing, marking the place where language and signification break down. Bodily fluids, waste, sickness, and death bring the subject face to face with the inexplicable, with its outside, and with what cannot be incorporated into itself – that which must be actively rejected and denied, yet tolerated nonetheless. Kristeva narrates the confrontation with the abject as an encounter with something

[18] See Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to American Horror Film', in *Movies and Methods, Vol. 2: An Anthology*, ed. by Bill Nichols (University of California Press, 1985), pp. 195-220; Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 1992); *Halloween*, dir. by John Carpenter (Sony Pictures, 1978); and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, dir. by Tobe Hooper (Bryanston Distributing Company, 1974).
[19] Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (Routledge, 2009), p. 101.
[20] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Louis-Ferdinand Céline (Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

that is understood as '[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing.'[21] The nothing/something of abjection puts pressure on and constantly threatens to cross and violate the boundaries of the subject, generating feelings of anxiety and revulsion. Indeed, abjection produces anxiety precisely because it alerts the subject to the tenuousness and perhaps even illusoriness of bounded individuality.

For Kristeva, the feeling and cultural genre most closely aligned with abjection is horror, an idea that is later taken up and expanded upon by film scholar Barbara Creed. In Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), she explores how different manifestations of female monstrosity in horror cinema index cultural fears surrounding feminine embodiment and sexuality, and contends that feminine monsters are threatening precisely because they confront the (masculine) viewer with that which he has abjected in order to cohere as a subject – the feminine, the maternal, the bodily. Kristeva emphasises the social and cultural functions of abjection in her explorations of 'the different ways in which abjection works within human societies, as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject'.[22] Ginger and Nina's respective transformations do not provoke horror only because they transgress the lines between human and non-human, but also and perhaps especially because they are partial, open-ended, becoming. Ginger ends the film almost totally transformed into a wolf, yet some of her old characteristics remain, as she walks on her hind legs and responds to human speech, her gaze focused and humanistic. Nina's form is similarly unstable and shifting, as she passes through multiple stages of becoming-swan, sometimes partially transformed, sometimes with white feathers, sometimes black, and sometimes appears entirely human again. Neither character resolves into a stable identity that upholds the symbolic order, with its clear boundaries between subject and object, man and woman, human and animal, but rather, remain in perpetual states of change and ambiguity, obscuring the very foundations of these binary oppositions.

Horror cinema more broadly tends to question the terms of such binary pairs, generating its strong cultural and spectatorial impact by envisioning monsters, creatures, and supernatural events that violate established rules of biology and bodily sovereignty. Linda Williams remarks that there seems to be a fundamental connection between horror and excess, placing horror (alongside pornography) under the 'extended rubric of melodrama' and contending that these 'body genres' depart from 'classical' forms due to their '"lapses" in realism, by "excesses" of

[21] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.
[22] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993), p. 8.

spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive'.[23] Formal excess – grotesque depictions of blood, mutilated bodies, soundtracks saturated with screams and cries at the expense of dialogue or music – spills out beyond the screen and encourages an (almost) mimetic relationship between horror films and their audiences, who jump, shiver, and cringe in response to the gory, violent, shocking, or repulsive onscreen spectacles, typically carried out on the bodies of victimised women. For Williams, horror cinema's excess – the direct impact that its depictions of shrieking victims, gore, and bodily fluids have on the spectator's body – prompts a fluid, nonbinary form of spectatorial identification and viewing pleasure that oscillates between active and passive, masculine and feminine, and victim and hero. This dynamic and genderfluid form of spectatorial engagement emphasises the insufficiency of any strict category to encapsulate the kinetic experiences of identification and embodiment. While her analysis does not ultimately depart from the overarching binary frameworks of psychoanalysis, Williams begins to conceptualise forms of spectatorial engagement and identification prompted by horror cinema's excess that are more fluid and diffuse than psychoanalysis typically allows for, somewhat anticipating contemporary horror's reappraisal of categorical fixity.

Throughout her essay, Williams specifically refers to slasher films, associated with adolescent franchises such as *Friday the 13th* (1980-2003) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984-2003). Such films are exemplary of horror cinema's turn toward the body and away from the spectrally supernatural, a shift that Linda Badley connects to a postmodern cultural saturation of sexual and bodily imagery in the years following the sexual revolution in the 1970s.[24] Badley connects cultural discourses and imagery surrounding issues such as AIDS, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, pornography, and political sex scandals to widespread fears about the unpredictability, uncontrollability, and unknown capabilities of the human body, arguing that horror cinema narrativises these fears in our post-Victorian, post-Freudian era.[25] Slasher films do this by confronting audiences with bodies turned inside out, violated by an overpowering force – a killer, perhaps supernatural, but oftentimes not – depicting blood, body parts, and innards leaking or pouring out of bodies, boundary crossings that destroy any stable sense of 'inside' and 'outside'. Through a campy excess of gore and superhumanly strong, often indestructible killers, slasher films confront audiences with human powerlessness in the face

[23] Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44.4 (1991), pp. 2-13 (p. 3), doi:10.1525/fq.1991.44.4.04a00020.
[24] Linda Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 13.
[25] Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, p. 13.

of abjection, and the fragility of bodily integrity and life itself.

Ginger Snaps and *Black Swan* are also exemplary of this period in which horror films increasingly began to narratively, thematically, and formally approximate the relentless confrontations with abjection that have come to define late-twentieth/early twenty-first century North American life, yet stage such confrontations differently than slasher films. Ginger and Nina's bodies are transformed from within rather than dismantled from without, as occurs in the slasher film. This form of internal 'body horror' marks a departure from the aggressive phallic logic of the slasher, and instead presents an intimate and private violence that comes from within the body, a violence that is also indicative of a desire for expansion and transformation. Both 'strains' or subgenres approach the same issues, yet go about it differently and reach different conclusions. The majority of slasher films end ambiguously, retaining a sense of dread that even if the killer has been defeated, another might be around the corner. Body horror tends toward a less fatalistic open-endedness, suggesting that if the category of 'human' no longer sufficiently encapsulates embodied experience in the twenty-first century, there is also nothing to replace this term, and so we seemingly live in a perpetually liminal state of unbounded becoming, a state that provokes anxiety and excitement in equal measure. Instead of helplessness, body horror suggests openness, even if it is similarly terrifying.

This strain of body horror is where psychoanalysis begins to overlap with Deleuzian cinematic philosophy. Kristeva writes that, within aesthetic confrontations with the abject (specifically in literature), '"subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable', a conceptualisation that raises questions about how such an experience translates into cinematic sounds and images.[26] If abjection marks the boundary of what is thinkable, might it also mark the limit of what is cinematically representable? The limits of representability similarly concern Deleuze, albeit somewhat differently. Throughout his two books on cinema, Deleuze refutes the notion of 'representation' altogether, contending that cinematic images are not representations *of* something, but are parts of the whole of existence with a privileged ability to express change, time, and movement within this whole. For Deleuze, cinema is the art form most able to express and emulate thought, and in particular, to emphasise that thought is not only a human activity, but a larger process that involves movements and changes in the non-human, inanimate, and natural worlds. To reflect this, Deleuze emphasises *movement* and *time* in cinema, rather than familiar film-studies subjects

[26] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 18.

such as narrative, character, theme, genre, or identity. Akin to his conceptualisations of becoming-animal, Deleuze de-emphasises the notion of resemblance or linguistic metaphor, instead configuring cinematic imagery as 'a plastic mass, an a-signifying and a-syntaxic material, a material not formed linguistically even though it is not amorphous and is formed semiotically, aesthetically, and pragmatically'.[27]

Deleuze acknowledges the insufficiency of language to describe or encapsulate the movements of cinema, characterising cinematic signification systems as belonging to 'non-linguistic semiotics', wherein meaning is not entirely lost, but is no longer beholden to a bounded linguistic system.[28] This notion of non-linguistic semiotics closely resembles the experience that abjection initiates, the breakdown of strict linguistic structure and signification. Williams begins to articulate this experience in her consideration of mimetic spectatorship and identificatory fluidity. If language structurally depends on the dichotomies of subject/object, outside/inside, and signifier/signified, abjection scrambles these binary pairs and generates a jarring sense of danger, causing the subject to freeze in terror, turn away, or else attempt to reject the non-object it is confronted with. Psychoanalytic discourse frames this as a deeply unsettling phenomenon, whereas Deleuzian philosophy (and body horror) sees generative potential in reframing the very foundations from which meanings arise. Deleuze writes: 'we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask'.[29] What if, he asks, when confronted with abjection or limit points, the subject did not fall apart or turn away, but instead took off in a 'line of flight' that creatively reconfigured the very notion of fixed boundaries?

Ancient associations of abjection with the 'abominations' of 'sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration; decay and death; [...] murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest' persist in films such as *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan*, yet such materials are not *only* treated with terror and revulsion, but rather, following horror's ambivalent shift toward the body, are framed as having emancipatory potential.[30] Each film tonally and stylistically embeds a sense of humour, curiosity, and even mundanity in relation to these abject materials, framing abjection as an ambiguous starting place, rather than an immobilising endpoint. Both films frame their metamorphoses as confrontations with abjection

[27] Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 28.
[28] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 34.
[29] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 7.
[30] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 9.

that initiate rhizomatic Deleuzian becomings, exemplifying the trend in contemporary horror cinema to thematise and envision the breakdown of strict binary categories that has accompanied the twentieth-/twenty-first century obsession with the limits and potentialities of the body.

'A Goddamn Force of Nature': Bodily Fluid(s)ity and Ambiguous Becomings

Ginger Snaps opens on a quiet grey suburb, the low hum of wind and electrical wires only punctuated by the sounds of dogs barking in the distance and a woman's rake scraping the grass as she collects crisp brown leaves. The placid dullness is almost immediately interrupted when the woman's child, playing in the sandbox feet away from her, lifts his hand from the sand and absentmindedly rubs blood across his face. The woman approaches her son, the camera creeping forward alongside her, and her gentle, sweetly musical inquiry – 'What have you got there?' – stops dead in the air as her expression drops into one of revulsion and panic. She reaches down and picks up a severed dog paw covered in blood with its bone protruding, immediately throwing it down and scooping up her son. The mother softly inquires after her dog, and the scene immediately cuts to a canted reverse shot, quickly zooming in on her face as she screams in terror, the piercing sound matched by the high-pitched violins on the soundtrack. The film's grotesque violence explodes to the surface as the camera rushes along the grass to reveal the remains of the dog, torn open, body parts and innards strewn across the ground in front of his doghouse.

These opening moments establish a number of the film's formal and thematic preoccupations: explosions of deep-crimson blood and bodies torn to shreds, the thin and blurry line between humans and animals, quiet banality juxtaposed with intense terror, and a sense of dark humour in the casual way the little boy plays with his dead dog's paw. Patricia Molloy suggests that the film's tonal atmosphere of bleakness, dread, and horror stems from the boring and restrictive experience of growing up female in a nondescript North American suburb. Although Ginger does not intentionally initiate her own becoming-animal – it begins as a result of a werewolf bite – the process provides her with an escape route from the stifling path to womanhood that such a location encourages, allowing her to instead morph into an ageless,

genderless, speciesless being.[31] Despite its initial promise of boundlessness, Ginger's becoming is, for Molloy, doomed from the start, yet she concedes that 'it at least gave [Ginger] some moments of glory and resistance to the boundaries of gender and biological determination before her own (inevitable) demise'.[32] When considered as a Deleuzian becoming, however, Ginger's demise is not necessarily so inevitable or so final.

On the surface, Ginger's becoming-animal takes the recognisable form of lycanthropy, a manifestation of human/animal hybridity with an extensive and rich mythic history, with roots in Indigenous rituals, medieval folk tales, and medical and psychological case histories.[33] Whereas the majority of cinematic depictions of werewolves such as *The Wolf Man* (1941) and *The Howling* (1981) focus on masculine transformations, *Ginger Snaps* emphasises the particularities of the relationship between femininity, animality, and supernatural monstrosity.[34] According to Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, nineteenth-century werewolf narratives associated male lycanthropy with a noble moral struggle against 'the beast within', whereas feminine lycanthropy was typically framed as a 'natural' extension of women's animalistic sexuality, or as punishment for their predilections for pleasures of the flesh.[35] *Ginger Snaps* takes up this archaic yet persistent association between feminine sexuality and animality, encoding a sense of critique by balancing sardonic humour and tragic violence in its alignment of Ginger's lycanthropic metamorphosis with her first period and sexual experiences. When Ginger describes her wolflike symptoms to the school nurse, she nods along and gently reassures Ginger that blood, hair, and carnal urges 'come with the territory' of puberty. Elizabeth Grosz writes that within Western cultures, 'there remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions'.[36] Beyond the more general cultural sense that the human body is unpredictable and chaotic, as discussed by Badley, Grosz draws attention to the specific gendered anxieties surrounding embodiment, that *women's* bodies in particular are uncontrollable, beholden only to the chaos of nature rather than culture and language, and

[31] Patricia Molloy, 'Perpetual Flight: The Terror of Biology and Biology of Terror in the *Ginger Snaps* Trilogy', *Jump Cut*, 49 (2007), n. p. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/GingerSnaps/> [accessed 12 September 2022].
[32] Ibid.
[33] See Charlotte Otten, 'Introduction', in *A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture*, ed. by Otten (Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 1-18.
[34] *The Wolf Man*, dir. by George Waggner (Universal Pictures, 1941); and *The Howling*, dir. by Joe Dante (Embassy Pictures, 1981).
[35] Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror, and the Beast Within* (I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 112.
[36] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (University of Indiana Press, 1994), p. 204.

therefore pose a threat to meaning and order.

For Ginger and Brigitte, menstruation is not so much an unknown threat as it is a symbol of conformity and assimilation. Alongside their nearly identical physical appearances, the sisters share an intense disdain toward social norms, refusing to listen when their mother tries to discuss puberty with them, making fun of the girls in their class who wear makeup and nail polish, and proclaiming their wish to hide in their basement lair instead of attending high school. The sisters agree with one another that they would rather be dead than find themselves 'moaning about cramps' in the tampon aisle or adhere to the rituals of high-school dating and sex. Toward the beginning of the film, when a classmate approaches Ginger and suggests they 'go out sometime', she stares at him with disgust for a prolonged moment and responds with a short 'no'. Ginger and Brigitte isolate themselves from other teenagers, only spending time with one another, either ignoring other people altogether or speaking in snappy, sarcastic tones to their peers, parents, teachers, and potential suitors. Layers of dark clothing and makeup, humour, irony, and disdain act as protection for the sisters. They shield themselves by obscuring any visual indication of their changing adolescent bodies in an attempt to avoid containment by reductive definitions of femininity as defined by physical characteristics.[37] The sisters attempt to remain in a state of undefinable suspension, neither children nor adults, men nor women, easily able to slip between the cracks of their small town, hiding within their black hoodies and Victorian dresses, cloistering themselves away in their bedroom.

Their shared orientation toward life is encapsulated by their blood oath/suicide pact: 'Out by sixteen or dead in this scene, but together forever. United against life as we know it.' The pact originates from the sisters' belief that there is next to nothing of value in this world as it is currently organised, save for their bond with each other. It is also an acknowledgement that some forms of relation might survive beyond the breakdown of meaning that comes with fundamental changes and boundary crossings, even past the boundary between life and death. The Fitzgerald sisters separate themselves from other people – in effect socially abjecting themselves – and attempt to live on the outskirts of humanity and of life itself. It is therefore hardly surprising when Ginger takes this desire even further by plunging headfirst into a non-human metamorphosis that allows her to skirt the edges of the categories that would contain her as human, as woman, as living. The sisters embrace their (self-inflicted) 'otherness' and configure their precious alliance, rooted in opposition to life and to all things normative, as stronger than death. This macabre pact is thus aligned with Kristeva's assertion that abjection

[37] Molloy, 'Perpetual Flight'.

'is an alchemy that transforms the death drive into a start of life, of new significance'.[38] In this film (and per their pact), death, the ultimate abjection, does not mark an end point, but rather, a point from which to interrogate the limits of human constructions of embodiment and relation by experimenting with biological indeterminism and relational nonsingularity.

Ginger's becoming-animal especially brings this point to life, beginning with a pivotal scene, shot through canted angles, in which Ginger and Brigitte walk through a playground at night before coming across another mutilated dog corpse that they decide to utilise in a grotesque prank against their school bully, Trina. Brigitte notices blood dripping down Ginger's leg, and mistakenly attributes the blood to the dog, in an emphasis of the thin line between human and animal, living and dead. Ginger touches the blood and proclaims: 'I just got the curse.' Forcefully underlining the double cultural connotation of 'the curse', moments later, she is violently attacked and bitten by a werewolf, initiating the point at which, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, 'the human being encounters the animal'.[39] Ginger emerges from this attack bloody and severely mangled, and by all logical accounts, her survival is unlikely. She confronts literal death and experiences the metaphorical death of her human self, and from this point on lives a Deleuzian becoming-wolf that is framed as a supernatural lycanthropic transformation. Ginger and Brigitte had previously associated the transition from adolescence to womanhood with conformity, with a life of subordination to male partners and the expectation that they devote their lives to bearing and raising children, stuck in the fenced-off cookie-cutter suburbia of Bailey Downs. The sisters consider death to be a much more desirable option than living in conformity, but once Ginger is bitten, realise that life and death are not the only two possible states of being. Initially, Ginger is alarmed and troubled by the physical changes she experiences (she screams at Brigitte, 'I can't have a hairy chest, B, that's fucked!') and by her rampant desire to 'tear everything to fucking pieces'. As the film progresses, however, Ginger becomes attuned to the exceptionality of her transformation and begins to embrace her increasing categorical indeterminacy, retaining some of her human features while also incorporating wolfish and, as Ernest Mathijs observes, felinic qualities, further underlining the multiplicity of becoming-animal.[40]

Instead of the dull predictability of heteronormative adolescence that Ginger anticipated, she begins to inhabit a kinetic state between human and animal, neither one nor the other, growing fangs, a tail, sharp claws, and grey fur, forging carnal relations that blur the

[38] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 15.
[39] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 239.
[40] Mathijs, *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 45.

lines between sex and violence with the people (and animals) that cross her path. Deleuze and Guattari write: 'In becoming-wolf, the important thing is the position of the mass, and above all the position of the subject in relation to the pack or wolf-multiplicity', asserting that becoming-animal is never singular, that 'you can't be one wolf, you're always eight or nine, six or seven'.[41] Becoming-animal rethinks conceptions of subjectivity and relationality as it proceeds by way of expansion, propagation, and occupation and involves the (re)discovery of the self as a multiplicity, akin to the way that some animals exist in bands or packs.[42] Ginger seductively implores those around her – Brigitte, Sam, Trina, her classmate and lover Jason – to join her in such a pack-like existence, blending into each other, swapping biological materials, ever-changing in a rhizomatic expansion. As Mathijs notes, the sisters' initial relationship (and their pact) anticipates this more extreme form of nonsingularity, their closeness suggesting that they are not discrete individuals, but one consciousness spread across two bodies.[43] Ginger attempts to incorporate the people around her into her becoming-wolfpack through too-close bodily contact, whether she is choking Trina, whispering in Brigitte's ear, pinning Jason down in the backseat of his car, or biting the school janitor.

Articulating the connection between becoming-animal, disease, and werewolf or vampire narratives, Bruns writes:

> the bitten subject is drained away by a kind of infection or contagion, and in turn is no longer containable within the alternatives of living and nonliving, human and nonhuman, man and beast, but who nevertheless remains abroad in the world, roaming in swarms or bands that consume whatever is around them.[44]

Echoing Badley's observations about contemporary body horror's obsession with disease, *Ginger Snaps* characterises lycanthropy as akin to an infection or illness, spread through blood and sexual fluids. Rather than being drained of life, however, after Ginger is 'infected', she outwardly embraces her own physical vitality and sexual autonomy, dressing in tight-fitting and revealing clothes, prowling down the school hallways relishing in the newfound attention she receives from her peers, showing off her wolfish fangs and silvery hair. Her monstrous and gruesome transformation does not destroy her, but rather, makes her feel, in her own phrasing, 'like a goddamn force of nature', more alive than ever. Becoming-animal reframes contagion as an integral part of relationality, as an important form of affective contact that in its

[41] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 29.
[42] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 239.
[43] Mathijs, *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 58.
[44] Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal', p. 705.

destruction is constructive of new forms.

What initially seems to be a 'curse' revitalises death-obsessed Ginger, as her transformation completely reimagines embodiment and relation, presenting lively alternatives to puberty, heterosexual monogamy, and womanhood. Ginger glimpses a form of existence where singularity does not exist, where one might resemble a teenage girl, but actually be an ever-shifting wolf/human, growing more powerful as others join the pack. Ginger's invitation to Brigitte to 'swap some juice' so they can become their 'very own pack' evokes the spectres of abjection and disease, the threat of mixing bodily fluids (particularly between family members), yet this threat is overshadowed by the openness and freedom promised by the multiplicity of becoming-wolf. Ginger's transformation prompts the realisation that she need not become any one thing, in particular not a woman in any straightforward sense, but rather to remain in a state of *becoming*.

According to Creed, horror films 'bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order to finally eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between human and non-human'.[45] *Ginger Snaps*, in keeping with contemporary horror's ambivalent obsession with bodily disarray, does not attempt to settle or resolve the slippery relationship between human and non-human, singular and plural. Echoing Creed, Matt Hills writes that horror cinema 'restores pre-Oedipal pleasures of "the abject" [...] before restoring the pleasurable structures and orders of the Symbolic'.[46] In his view and in Creed's (and in the overarching view of psychoanalytic film theory), horror films stage confrontations with what is abject, taboo, chaotic, and inarticulable, only to symbolically defeat or neutralise these elements in a reassertion of the social and symbolic status quo. In *Ginger Snaps*' world of relentless confrontations with abjection via bodily fluids (particularly blood and vomit), dead bodies, and partially transformed creatures, there is no stable and ordered equilibrium to return to. Rather than framing such abjection as a threat to be contained, the film envisions how its constitutive paradoxes might be a starting place for 'lines of flight' away from biological or social determinism, away from suburban malaise, toward a kinetic, open-ended becoming.[47]

Graceful Terror and Feminine Adolescence in *Black Swan*

Feminine adolescence provides a guiding thematic frame for the generic ambiguity of both

[45] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 14.
[46] Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 46.
[47] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 9.

Ginger Snaps and *Black Swan*. Whereas *Ginger Snaps* adheres to the dominant quotidian definition of 'adolescent' – high-school aged teenagers in the midst of puberty – part of *Black Swan*'s ambivalence stems from the lack of clarity about how old Nina is supposed to be. On the surface she appears to be a young adult, performing with similarly aged dancers in a professional ballet company, yet she lives at home with her mother (who she calls 'Mommy') who feeds her, dresses her, and tucks her into bed at night. Catherine Driscoll's definition of 'female adolescent' as 'not necessarily teenagers and not exclusively young women either', but rather 'defined as in transition or in process relative to dominant ideas of Womanhood', is thus useful here, particularly her emphasis on *process* and *transition*.[48] Indeed, adolescence has particular resonance with Deleuzo-Guattarian becomings, as it is characterised by intense change, indeterminacy, and reformulations of one's body and affective connections. *Black Swan* melodramatises this connection, as Nina's delayed/interminable adolescence is interrupted and reformulated by a dizzying, expansive, multiplicitous becoming-swan.

Similar to Ginger and Brigitte's wilful avoidance of the social and physical experiences of puberty, Nina embodies a state of gendered ambiguity – not a girl, not quite a woman. Nina's juvenility is partially contextualised by the state of perpetual pre-pubescence that professional ballerinas find themselves trapped in. In her book on the history of ballet, Deirdre Kelly quotes scholar and former ballerina Susan Young, who states that

> remaining physically prepubescent fed into the practical, that is biomechanical – requirements of the female dancer. This is because a *ballerina* seeks to present the illusion of weightlessness, of occupying as little space as possible in order to suggest a chaste and unattainable woman-child.[49]

Whereas Ginger and Brigitte resist puberty through an obstinate assertion of their own nihilistic worldview, Nina's embodiment and gender expression are meticulously managed and organised by the structures and expectations of professional ballet. Quoting novelist Ryan Heppenstall, Kelly draws attention to how cultural elevation ungenders and dehumanises the ballerina, who is considered to be 'an idealized and stylized creature of the Theatre', with an 'eternal virginity about her', remaining forever 'inaccessible' and 'unravished'.[50]

Black Swan jarringly disrupts this pristine virginal unravishedness through frequent depictions of blood and gore – the rash on Nina's shoulder, her bloody finger as she pulls off a

[48] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 6.
[49] Deirdre Kelly, *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection* (Greystone Books, 2012), p. 136.
[50] Kelly, *Ballerina*, p. 1.

hangnail, her hallucination of blood dripping into the water as she takes a bath, the gaping red wound in her stomach after she accidentally stabs herself while performing – signalling Nina's departure from her meticulously contained and managed self, evoking menstrual blood or the blood that might accompany one's first penetrative sexual experience, thus aligning her with the ambiguous pleasures of abjection. In an essay elaborating the rich and contentious relationship between horror film, ballet, and femininity, Charlotte Gough writes that the female dancer on film has been 'historically denied control of her own image and reduced to the body, while that body must also be used as a controlled instrument to meet the physical and aesthetic requirements of the dancing role and choreography, as well as of the audience(s)'.[51] *Black Swan* establishes these dynamics both in its filmic world and formal organisation, proffering Nina as a perfect embodiment of the tightly regimented, utterly devoted, softly feminine ideal ballerina, before this stability is shattered by Nina's becoming-swan and her experiences become 'increasingly violent and fragmented'.[52]

The film's tonal and generic inconsistency mirrors and heightens the contradictions of Nina's becoming-swan, in which she experiences ecstatic pleasure and aesthetic perfection at the same time as she descends into madness. Mark Fisher elaborates on *Black Swan*'s unique relationship to genre in his contention that it moves between melodrama, naturalism, and body horror (comparing the film to 'prime-period Cronenberg'), even arguing that it enacts a form of 'Irigarayan horror' wherein horror stems from the absence of any alternative to patriarchal constructions of feminine subjectivity and sexuality.[53] Steven Shaviro suggests that the film's emotional and bodily excesses form a bridge between horror, pornography, and melodrama (Linda Williams' 'body genres'), and that critical attempts to read the film through singular categories such as 'camp' and 'serious drama' lead to its fractured reception.[54] Responding to Fisher, Amber Jacobs poses a key question: 'Is there something about the horror genre which structurally prevents it from having a sense of the beyond?'[55] This provocative question suggests that perhaps horror, for all of its obsessions with categorical fluidity, bodily and

[51] Charlotte Gough, 'The Ballerina Body-Horror: Spectatorship, Female Subjectivity and the Abject in Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977)', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 17 (2018), pp. 51-69 (p. 53) <https://irishgothicjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/the-ballerina-body-horror.pdf> [accessed 26 August 2024].
[52] Amanda Martin Sandino, 'On Perfection: Pain and Arts-Making in Aronofsky's *Black Swan*', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 12.3 (2013), pp. 305-17 (p. 306), doi:10.1386/jvap.12.3.305_1.
[53] Mark Fisher and Amber Jacobs, 'Debating *Black Swan*: Gender and Horror', *Film Quarterly*, 65 (2011), pp. 58-62 (p. 601) doi:10.1525/FQ.2011.65.1.58.
[54] Steven Shaviro, 'Black Swan', *The Pinnochio Theory*, 5 January 2011 <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=975> [accessed 5 November 2022]; Mathijs similarly suggests that the two 'stylistic streams' of *Ginger Snaps* are horror and melodrama (*John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 28).
[55] Fisher and Jacobs, 'Debating *Black Swan*', p. 61.

relational chaos, and imaginative, unforeseen modes of being, cannot ultimately allow for a sustained vision of anything beyond or alternative to current social and bodily hierarchies and categories, particularly those that entrap women within the violences of objectification. Jacobs's contention that *Black Swan* not only reproduces but romanticises the terms of the 'patriarchal imaginary' is warranted to the extent that Nina begins the film as a demure, perfectly unresistant 'passive sexualized object', content to organise her life around externally imposed expectations without complaint, obsessively striving for technical perfection in her dancing to impress her instructors, and demonstrating nearly complete obedience to both Tomas and her terrifyingly overbearing mother.[56] Nonetheless, throughout the film, generic and tonal inconsistencies produce textual cracks within which a 'beyond' can be glimpsed – modes of being and relating with the potential to surpass or exceed the patriarchal imaginary, the boundaries between human and animal, and horror-film binaries of monstrousness and normality. Although *Black Swan*, like most horror films, ultimately sweeps away or forecloses access to this imagined 'beyond' through narrative containment, I would suggest that this does not necessarily render completely useless the film's glimpses, however brief, of alternative modes of being and relating. Nina's becoming-swan is an expression or instantiation of such a 'beyond' that undoes and reformulates all of her affective connections and relationships, including her relationship to Tomas, Lily, her mother, Beth, and most importantly, to her own body and its relationship to the world.[57]

Much like Ginger, Nina rediscovers herself as a multiplicity through these new and/or changed relationships, in a becoming that blurs and exceeds the boundaries between self and Other, singular and plural, human and animal. In a detailed reading of the film's relationship to Deleuzian philosophy, Simone Bignall explains Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'ontological emergence', or the idea that subjectivities are multiplicitous, composed of elemental parts arranged in complex and always contingent relations.[58] Objects, environments, relations, personality traits, and preferences weave together to produce an ostensibly coherent singular self, yet such traits and qualities are always in motion, and can be swept away and altered at any time, particularly with a dramatic upheaval such as becoming-animal. Bignall describes Nina's elemental parts as including objects and qualities that define and surround her such as 'dancing, music box, shyness, broken toenail, ambition, frigidity, plush toys', and that these

[56] Fisher and Jacobs, p. 59.
[57] Simone Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain, and Becoming-Animal', *Culture, Theory, and Critique*, 54 (2013), pp. 121-36 (p. 130), doi:10.1080/14735784.2012.749110.
[58] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', pp. 130-31.

elements, along with Nina's external relationships, combine to create the (relatively) cohesive, stable figure called 'Nina'.[59] Becoming-animal involves the dissolution (or deterritorialisation) of a previously established stable, singular identity and the forging of new affective connections, creating assemblages by 'taking into the existing self new elements introduced with the new relationship[s]'.[60] Nina's becoming-swan proceeds through an incorporation of external elements – the earrings and lipstick that Nina steals from Beth's dressing room, the ecstasy tablet that Lily slips into her drink, a newfound enjoyment of sex prompted by encounters with Tomas and Lily – and the dissolution or transformation of her previous elements, including material objects such as her plush toys and ballerina jewellery box, objects that she once treated with care and invested with childish significance but later destroys and discards, in addition to more abstract traits such as passivity, frigidity, fearfulness, and subjugation to her mother.

Much like Ginger's transformation, alongside these material and physical changes that Nina experiences, her relationships change form, either shattering an abusive power dynamic as in the case of her mother; becoming sexual and then violently competitive in the case of Lily; or assertively self-assured as she is with Tomas toward the end of the film. In particular, the changes within Nina's relationship to her mother – the most centrally important relationship in her life – illustrate the continuity between abjection and Deleuzian becoming-animal. Following Kristeva's conceptualisation of maternal abjection, Creed writes that in horror films, 'the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine', a figure that keeps her child locked in a too-close dyadic relationship with troubled access to the symbolic.[61] Nina's life is so controlled by her mother that she hardly seems to exist outside of her mother's clutches. She barely speaks, and when she does it is only ever responding to others using a quiet, gentle, childish voice, never asserting her own wants or needs. There is almost no separation between the two women; Nina is nearly swallowed up by her mother. This is particularly apparent in the domestic space of their apartment, where Nina is always looking over her shoulder, anticipating her mother's presence. If Nina is in the frame, her mother either passes in front of the camera, is framed beside or behind her or reflected in a mirror, or else her voice can be heard offscreen. Their bedrooms are directly across the hall from each other, and her mother sits and watches while Nina rehearses at home, mends her ballet slippers, and even sometimes while she sleeps. Nina has so little separation from her mother that she repeatedly (and nervously) wedges

[59] Bignall, p. 131.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 12.

objects in front of the closed doors of her bedroom and bathroom to steal a moment or two of privacy.

Instead of attempting to separate 'the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies', as Creed notes that many horror films do, *Black Swan* offers Nina's relational, open-ended becoming-swan in place of the (re)establishment of symbolic stability and order.[62] Just as Ginger swerves around the conventional experiences of puberty in her lycanthropic transformation, Nina separates from her mother's control, not in order to align herself with normative adult femininity, but to forge an entirely different path through her becoming-swan. The film does not attempt to neutralise the abject amorphousness of this maternal bond, but reconfigures and reimagines its terms through Nina's becoming, in what Bignall calls the 'destructive-creative processes of transformation'.[63] Nina pulls away from her mother, transposing the too-closeness of their bond into sexual ecstasy in her relationships with Tomas and Lily, and into a bodily metamorphosis in her relationship to her role as Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*. In Nina's becoming-swan, the abject feminine closeness between Nina and her mother, the amorphous blurring of the two women's subjectivities, is refashioned into a generative multiplicity. The parts of Nina that were defined by her mother's control and manipulation are shattered and swept away, replaced with newfound self-sufficiency, perhaps even self-obsession, incorporating the sexual energy between herself, Tomas, and Lily, swan-like physical characteristics, and a thrilling sense of defiance and abandon in her dancing.

One of the key moments of Nina's becoming takes place during a sexual encounter with Lily, wherein the previously established contrasts between the women provide a point of departure to trace and develop their multiplicitous relation. The breakdown of this previously established opposition, symbolised by their costumes and hairstyles – Nina is always dressed in pink and white, her hair pulled back in a tight bun, whereas Lily always wears black, her hair loose and tousled – outward demeanor, and approach to ballet (succinctly encapsulated in Lily's observation to Nina: 'You really need to relax'), suggests the radical potential promised by the process of becoming-animal. Lily loosens Nina up, encouraging her to share the details of her relationship with Tomas, making jokes, offering her drugs, and sharing a cigarette with her in the dance studio. By the time Lily shows up at Nina's door to apologise for interfering

[62] Creed, p. 14. Some examples of films that do this include *Psycho*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1960); *Carrie*, dir. by Brian De Palma (United Artists, 1976); and *The Brood*, dir. by David Cronenberg (New World Pictures, 1979). Creed suggests that such a separation might not even be possible, a position that this film elaborates via Nina's becoming-animal.
[63] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 125.

in her rehearsal process by discussing her performance with Tomas behind her back, it is clear that this new relationship plays an important role in Nina's becoming-swan. Channelling Lily's independence and laid-back confidence, Nina is emboldened to go out for drinks and dancing despite her mother's protestations, to drink alcohol and take ecstasy, and to engage in passionate sex with Lily in her locked bedroom after slamming the door in her mother's face. Bignall writes that during this encounter, Nina and Lily 'share a mutual becoming-swan', as Lily's swan-wing tattoo seems to fuse into her body and come to life, and Nina's eyes turn swan-red and she sprouts tiny white feathers along her arms.[64] These aesthetic shifts, particularly the way that Lily's tattoo becomes animated, signal the difference between symbolic representations and the visceral bodily alterations of becoming-animal.

The boundaries between the two women blur and break down throughout this encounter as their bodies intertwine, Nina's face periodically morphs into Lily's, and Lily calls Nina 'sweet girl', a nickname given to Nina by her mother. Bignall characterises this encounter as enacting 'molecular' change, described by Deleuze and Guattari as the process through which animals 'continually transform themselves into each other, [and] cross over into each other' through sustained affective proximity.[65] For the first time in the film, Nina's becoming is physically shared, her swan-like characteristics crossing over to Lily's body as well. The encounter additionally reflects Deleuze and Guattari's contention that becoming is a process of desire, producing 'a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings', positing a form of existence that does not proceed by filiation, genealogy, or easily legible genders or sexualities, but rather, ever-expanding chains of multiplicity, suggesting the queer potentiality of this process.[66] Parts of Nina combine with parts of Lily as they blend and morph into each other, sweeping away their previously established selves and entering into a multiplicitous assemblage that is both destabilising and transformative.[67]

Beyond Nina and Lily's relationship, the entire film is structured by a symbolic black-swan/white-swan dichotomy, relentlessly evoked through dialogue, costumes, décor, and the overarching *Swan Lake* narrative. Written in 1876 by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Swan Lake* tells the story of Odette, a beautiful young maiden who is cursed by the evil wizard Rothbart and turned into a white swan. Odette meets young Prince Siegfried in the forest and they fall in love. Only with the Prince's proclamation of eternal devotion can Odette be permanently

[64] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 124.
[65] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 249.
[66] Deleuze and Guattari, p. 278.
[67] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 132.

transformed back into a girl. At the last minute, her evil twin, Odile, the black swan, tricks and seduces the Prince into falling in love with her, thus leaving Odette cast aside and alone. Rather than live the rest of her life as a swan, Odette commits suicide by throwing herself into the lake. In Nina and Lily's sexual encounter, these binary black/white, Odile/Odette dichotomies are deterritorialised through the formation of a queer multiplicity and thus Nina, becoming-multiple and becoming-swan, is able to experience sexual ecstasy ('letting go') for possibly the first time in her life. The overarching narrative structure that *Swan Lake* provides the film is (temporarily) shattered by this hallucinatory and ecstatic encounter that brings Nina and Lily's relationship to a new level of intimacy as they momentarily become boundaryless.[68]

Nina's newly formed external relations are accompanied by and interlaced with physical metamorphoses, wherein her body increasingly traverses the boundaries between human and swan through its molecular incorporation of animalistic qualities. At various times, her eyes turn red (like those of a black swan), she finds black feathers piercing through the rash on her skin, her legs snap backwards like bird's legs, her neck stretches out and becomes an S-shaped swan's neck, and her toes become webbed. During the opening night performance of *Swan Lake*, Nina undergoes the most dramatic and all-encompassing bodily metamorphoses in the entire film: as she *fouettés* across the stage as the Black Swan, black feathers sprout out of her skin and up her arms, until eventually she has two large black swan wings. Nina's becoming-swan reaches new heights as one quarter of her human form is entirely swept away and reconfigured as a black swan, at the same time as she reaches the apex of her performance, dancing with passion and abandon as she never has before, eliciting thunderous applause from the audience and piles of flowers thrown at her feet.

In this opening-night performance, Nina emphatically proves that she can embody both the delicate fearfulness of Odette and the exhilarating sensuality of Odile. This triumphant performance goes beyond professional achievement, however, and is more importantly a demonstration of Nina's confident inhabitation of the multiplicity of becoming, moving between her human form and that of a black swan *and* a white swan. During Nina's tearful final dance as Odette, delicate white feathers sprout up and down her arms as she glides and spins across the stage, in a much more subdued version of her Black Swan transformation, additionally evoking her earlier ecstatic encounter with Lily. The film stages a final stark and jarring confrontation with abjection as Nina approaches the climax of her performance, her artistic triumph marred by a gaping wound in her stomach, the result of (accidental) self-

[68] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 124.

mutilation in a hallucinatory moment of madness between performances. In the throes of abjection, Nina ascends to the top of a platform before the final moments of her performance, gazing at the audience, her mother, and her fellow performers, wavering between what Kristeva articulates as 'the *fading away* of all meaning and all humanity, burnt as by the flames of a conflagration, and the *ecstasy* of an ego that, having lost its Other and its objects, reaches, at the precise moment of this suicide, the height of harmony with the promised land'.[69] Nina gracefully leaps off of the platform, and just before the film ends, calmly states to Tomas: 'I felt it. Perfect. It was perfect.' Perhaps Nina takes her becoming too far, past the point of bodily legibility, but this final ecstatic confrontation with abjection leaves open the possibility that this might be 'the start of new life, of new significance' for Nina, in an echo of Ginger and Brigitte's promise to sustain their sisterly bond even after their physical deaths.[70] Although both films end with their protagonists lying in pools of blood, the alchemical forces of abjection driving both Nina's and Ginger's respective transformations leave open the possibility that such an outcome is not fatal or final, but a place from which to take off in an unexpected line of flight.

Conclusion(s)

In a brief essay on Deleuze and spectatorship, Richard Rushton articulates the shared investments of Deleuzian philosophy and psychoanalytic film theory, or what he refers to as '*Screen* Theory' after the British journal associated with structuralist theory in the 1970s and 80s. He writes: 'If the project of *Screen* Theory was one of transforming subjectivities so that they would no longer be subjects, then Deleuze's cinematic philosophy is from the beginning one which tries to go beyond subjectivity.'[71] Referring to later works by scholars such as Steven Shaviro and Laura Marks, he points out that 'much of the work on Deleuze that has purported to redirect the debates that informed *Screen* Theory are not really repositioning such debates', but are instead just replaying them.[72] Following Rushton's line of thinking, this essay suggests the significance of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Deleuzian philosophy through a consideration of the boundaries and limit points of horror cinema. While neither *Ginger Snaps* nor *Black Swan* ends happily in any traditional sense, their generic ambiguity and envisionings

[69] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 18.
[70] Kristeva, p. 15, emphasis in original.
[71] Rushton, 'Deleuzian Spectatorship,' p. 49.
[72] Rushton, p. 46.

of abject becomings produce an open-endedness that suggests possibilities for new lines of thinking about subjectivity, species, and categorical boundaries.

The relationship between these critical frameworks raises a number of questions: what new epistemological investments and orientations might arise from their synthesis? Could cinematic engagements with the radically destabilising experiences of abjection and becoming extend the possibilities of representational signification? Beyond film, how might this relationship materially contribute to shifting conceptualisations of boundaries between genders, species, and bodies? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide definitive answers to such questions, I have worked to demonstrate how contemporary horror cinema engages Deleuzian philosophy, envisioning the process of becoming-animal as a 'line of flight' with the potential to reconfigure or expand rigid psychoanalytic structures that frame abjection as an endpoint or ultimate limit. The realm of horror that both Nina and Ginger inhabit is ultimately inhospitable to their attempts to radically reconfigure identity and embodied existence, yet it seems that as long as there are structures and categories restricting such boundaryless expressions, there will be attempts to leave those structures behind and rhizomatically exceed all notions of woman and animal, ballerina and swan, teenager and werewolf.

Ambivalent Spiritualities: Disembodied and Corporeal Monstrosity in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly*

Madeline Potter

Introduction

In a study of the 'Death and the Maiden' motif in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's fiction, Alison Milbank argues that the writer's theology rejects the 'extreme idealism' of Emanuel Swedenborg, while at the same time avoiding stark materialism.[1] I would argue, however, that in the collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), the narrative wavers between what can appear to be materialism, and Swedenborgian idealism, exploring an ecumenical space of in-betweenness, where the spiritual is intertwined with the material. Building on Milbank's argument that Le Fanu's fiction rejects both the extremes of idealism and materialism, I argue that the apparent opposition between materialism and disembodied idealism is tentatively resolved in Le Fanu's fictional space of in-betweenness, where the two grow intertwined in ways that posit the material as a necessary stepping stone for theological and spiritual enlightenment. While the material is part of an imperfect, fallen realm, it is – given these limitations – part and parcel of an occult-like process of uncovering spiritual knowledge, or at least its possibility. This space of in-betweenness presents, at a surface level, the possibility of rejecting the supernatural in his stories 'Green Tea' (originally published in 1869), 'The Familiar' (1872), 'Mr Justice Harbottle' (1872), and 'Carmilla' (first serialised 1871-72); but ultimately, such readings are negated. This is largely due to the stories' presenting of a realisation that there is something out there, but that it is impossible to understand what it is, and what it ultimately adds up to; this is a mechanism particularly manifest in the collection *In a Glass Darkly*, where Le Fanu places his readers at times tantalisingly close to a theological epiphany, only to let them fall back onto the material.

This is reaffirmed by how the monstrous figures that appear throughout the collection slip through various degrees of materiality. 'Green Tea', 'The Familiar', and 'Mr Justice Harbottle' are often read as ghost stories, but their inclusion in the collection alongside the vampire tale 'Carmilla', all woven together by Dr Hesselius' framing narrative, indicates that

[1] Alison Milbank, 'Death and the Maiden: Theology, Gender, and the Grotesque in Le Fanu's Fiction', in *Inspiring a Mysterious Terror: 200 Years of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu*, ed. by Jarlath Killeen and Valeria Cavalli (Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 177-96 (p. 182).

they can be read more broadly, in Swedenborgian terms, as material manifestations of a metaphysical reality, rather than simply as ghosts. As Jarlath Killeen argues, Le Fanu's stories are caught within a hesitation as to 'the "correct" explanation for the mysterious spectres who populate his stories' and as to 'whether [they] are actually spectres at all, and not just projections of a guilty conscience'.[2] The spectres' materiality, derived from Swedenborgian correspondence, which outlines the existing relationship between matter and an inner truth concealed within, I demonstrate, tips the balance in favour of them being real.

Within this space of hesitation and in-betweenness, this essay argues, *In a Glass Darkly* discovers its own brand of the explained supernatural, one which we can examine and understand through the prism of the natural – logically, scientifically, and medically. This implies that the supernatural is both real and explainable through recourse to reason and science. This is consistent with occult and esoteric theologies and currents gaining popularity during the nineteenth century, which construe the supernatural as often concealed within the natural, rather than existing in opposition to, or outside of it. Through his use of Swedenborgianism, however, Le Fanu makes scientific, medical language central to his explorations of the supernatural, leading to a double effect. He first presents the idea that we cannot conceive of the spiritual without the support of material images; then, after asserting the logic and rationalism of science, he makes manifest its limitations, leaving our perception of the material world impoverished, and striving for a never-achieved completeness. This duality makes the rejection of the supernatural impossible, binding medical discourse to theology.

Indeed, recent criticism in the field of gothic literature has explicated the genre's theological dimensions, questioning perceptions of it as a sceptical mode. Jonathan Greenaway's *Theology, Horror, and Fiction* considers the 'theological antagonism' running through nineteenth-century gothic fiction not as opposed to religion, but instead as 'a spur for theology to re-evaluate and reconsider key doctrinal and theological ideas in creative […] ways'.[3] Sam Hirst's *Theology in the Early British and Irish Gothic* further challenges the idea of the gothic as a 'secular mode', contextualising the early gothic against the backdrop of 'the complexity of contemporary discourse and the rival claims of overlapping and antagonistic theologies'.[4] In the context of this critical turn, recent theological readings of Le Fanu's fiction

[2] Jarlath Killeen, 'Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Ireland', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Steam Age Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Palgrave, 2021), pp. 263-80 (p. 267).
[3] Jonathan Greenaway, *Theology, Horror, and Fiction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 2.
[4] Sam Hirst, *Theology in the Early British and Irish Gothic, 1764-1834* (Anthem Press, 2023), p. 2.

have elucidated the ambivalent negation of matter and spirit in his work, questioning medicalised readings of stories such as 'Green Tea' and 'The Familiar'. In *God and the Gothic*, for example, Milbank argues that Le Fanu's stories use the material to think through transcendence.[5] As in his novel *Uncle Silas* (1864), the theological echoes of Swedenborg are clearly heard in *In a Glass Darkly*, which, Milbank explains, explores fears regarding the emergence of an inescapable materialism. Such is the case with Carmilla, for instance, whose vampirism reverses the Swedenborgian idea that '[o]ur full human flourishing is in the afterlife, the celestial real', embodying instead the 'fear that Swedenborgian union of natural and supernatural will fold back upon itself into a mere materialism like that of Poe'.[6] I propose that the fear of stark materialism explored by Milbank is accompanied in Le Fanu's collection by the threat of ignorance. I am referring specifically to a type of metaphysical ignorance instantiated by the revelation that while the supernatural is depicted as inhabiting the natural, and while Le Fanu's characters understand this as the reality of their world, knowledge of the precise nature and truths of the supernatural is textually withheld.

Although Swedenborgian thought is a point of negotiation for Le Fanu's theology, often mediated against radical Calvinism, as Milbank shows, I nonetheless argue that it is fundamental to how Le Fanu builds up the material as a site of supernatural revelation, only to draw his readers back into the stubborn primacy of materialism.[7] My aim is not to construe Le Fanu as unequivocally Swedenborgian in his fiction, but rather to illustrate how this uncanny tension between the material and the spiritual world is anchored in Swedenborg's belief that any spiritual idea needs to find a material form within the world to be perceived and understood while in the world. This in turn means that material objects, as well as bodies, are pervaded by a deeper spiritual truth, which can, in theory, be uncovered. This tenet of Swedenborgian thought underlies Le Fanu's corporeal hauntings in the collection. I begin with a consideration of Swedenborg's thought on the relationship between materiality and spirituality, which I then consider contextually against the backdrop of *In a Glass Darkly*. Although the collection includes previously published material, the narrative framing of the stories as case studies by Dr Hesselius threads them together. I therefore consider the implications of materiality and Swedenborgian thought on the collection as a whole and its narrative progression, exploring how each story stages a move overall from entertaining the possibility of scepticism to its collapse. Importantly, my argument is not merely that this move informs the narrative

[5] Milbank, *God and the Gothic* (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 209-10.
[6] Milbank, *God and the Gothic*, p. 219.
[7] On Le Fanu's negotiation of Calvinism and Swedenborg, see Milbank, *God and the Gothic*, p. 208.

progression of individual stories, but also that it can be threaded through the direction of the collection as a whole. To account for the complications afforded by the non-supernatural story in the volume, 'The Room in the Dragon Volant', I analyse the stories out of sequence, so as to demonstrate topicality and patterns of Swedenborgian engagement, rather than being driven by strict chronology, although, as I argue, the placement of 'Carmilla' at the end of the collection is significant.

The monstrous figures of *In a Glass Darkly* are all tied, more or less distantly, to materiality. In 'Green Tea', Jennings is haunted by a demonic monkey – an animal – while in 'The Familiar', the disembodied presence of the Watcher who haunts Barton eventually materialises in the shape of an owl. Carmilla is a fleshly monster rather than a ghost. In all these instances, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, and between matter and spirit, fades. Le Fanu draws on the discourse of scepticism, but allows the supernatural to grow from it, much like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) also does at the end of the century. Analysing the role of Swedenborgianism in the destabilisation of any clear oppositions between spirit and matter, this essay reconfigures the relationship between the two in Le Fanu's fiction as a symbiotic one, even though what it amounts to is monstrosity and terror.

Swedenborg and Matter

Swedenborg describes enlightenment as a condition where some humans are enabled by God to see the truth. It is impossible, he stresses, for the 'human rational' to grasp truths unless 'enlightened by the Lord'.[8] The Swedenborgian relationship between rationality and spiritual enlightenment is complex: without being actively enlightened by God, human reason cannot arrive to truth. In other words, enlightenment itself, stemming from God, acts upon human reason. Thus, Swedenborg explains, 'the Word can be understood by none but a rational man'.[9] Dr Hesselius confesses in 'Green Tea' that his 'Metaphysical Medicine', as he terms it, is fundamentally influenced by Swedenborg, making explicit the clear parallelism between Swedenborgian enlightenment and his own philosophy and practice of medicine: 'I owe Swedenborg a great deal; you will discover traces of him in the little book on Metaphysical Medicine'.[10] According to Swedenborg, those who have been enlightened 'form […] doctrine' – and those who seek the truth, for its own sake, find themselves examining doctrine 'from the

[8] Emanuel Swedenborg, *Concerning the White Horse and Concerning the Word* (Houghton Mifflin, 1926), p. 11.
[9] Swedenborg, *Concerning the White Horse*, p. 12.
[10] Sheridan Le Fanu, 'Green Tea,' in *In a Glass Darkly* (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 5-40 (p. 16).

Word' to understand its truth value.[11] Dr Hesselius, in his exposition on a spiritual fluid akin to blood, which he describes as circulating through the nervous system, speaks as one who has been enlightened in the Swedenborgian sense. He hopes that this may, in the future, be 'more generally understood', and expresses his wish for truth to be actively pursued and grasped.[12] But Swedenborgian enlightenment, as much as it is concerned with the spiritual, cannot happen without the support of materiality, for, Swedenborg argues, 'spiritual ideas are concealed' within the natural, so long as a person lives in this world. Unlike angels, who perceive things spiritually, human beings do so naturally, existing in what he terms 'the external sense' of the Word.[13] It is impossible to conceive of the spiritual without the support of earthly images, which foster within themselves arcane truths.[14] The fluid that Hesselius describes is spiritual but 'not immaterial': he likens its nature to that of 'light' and 'electricity'.[15] In this, Le Fanu's narrative signifies that spirituality itself has its own materiality, and indeed, within a Swedenborgian framing, that while existing in this world, it *needs* materiality even to be possible as a concept in the human mind.

'Green Tea', Metaphysical Medicine, and Historical Context

'Green Tea' (first serialised in *All the Year Round* in 1869), the first story in the volume, opens up the possibility of sceptical readings, readings that would be in opposition of course to Hesselius's framing narrative, and question his authority. Haunted by a monkey spirit following his excessive consumption of green tea, Rev. Jennings seeks the help of Dr Hesselius, whose case studies, as already mentioned, also provide the narrative framing of the collection as a whole. The narrative swerves rapidly between the natural and the supernatural, both teasing out the idea that the protagonist Jennings is really haunted, and entertaining the possibility of sceptical interpretations. Jennings is a respectable if unremarkable man: 'middle-aged', and 'a little stately, but not at all stiff'.[16] Yet there is something about him – his dressing 'with a natty, old-fashioned, high-church precision' – which subtly anticipates the theological terrors he is about to experience.[17] His high-churchness suggests his flirtation with doctrines and religious practices outside the traditional, broad Protestantism of the Church of England.

[11] Swedenborg, *Concerning the White Horse*, p. 13.
[12] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 8.
[13] Swedenborg, *Concerning the White Horse*, p. 12 and p. 16.
[14] Swedenborg, p. 12.
[15] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 39.
[16] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 6.
[17] Ibid.

Nineteenth-century ghost stories at times play with medical explanations for the apparition – or perceived apparition of ghosts – and engender hermeneutic ambiguity. A case of possible haunting is framed through medical language and optical illusion in Samuel Warren's 'The Spectral Dog' (1830), where a clergyman is followed around by what appears to be a ghostly dog; Gaïd Girard identifies this story as a 'probable source' for 'Green Tea'. The story was part of *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician* (published in *Blackwood's Magazine* between 1830 and 1837), which Girard characterises as 'positively uncanny rather than merely unusual in parts'.[18] Yet Le Fanu moves beyond even the uncanny, and the possibility of reading his tale as explainable through recourse to strictly natural causes is superficial, as it does not go far enough into the story or grapple with its duality between the natural and the supernatural. The sensorial in the story engenders the supernatural, which grows material in ways mimicking the principles of natural perception. Le Fanu uses the sceptical mode to instantiate the slippage towards a newly recovered but monstrous enchantment, carefully prying open levels of disbelief and rationality until readers find themselves plunged into the realisation of a metaphysical reality, which arrives to them in physical forms. 'Green Tea' establishes this precedent, which is then explored by Le Fanu in the collection. The supernatural reaches the characters and readers of Le Fanu's tales incarnate in monstrous figures, whose reality challenges the idea of mere materialism to the point that characters find themselves increasingly confronting the impossibility of denying the existence of the supernatural. Two of the terrifying figures in the collection, the monkey of 'Green Tea' and the owl in 'The Familiar', assume natural shapes (an animal and a bird); even though the monkey is a spirit, its appearance is that of a natural creature of the world. Justice Harbottle is haunted by a grotesque vision of his own human body, while Carmilla appears to Laura under the guise of a human body. This establishes not simply a mirroring relationship between the explicable and the seemingly inexplicable, but indeed one of inter-dependence.

In 'Green Tea', medical reason is the driving force of the supernatural; and the supernatural, in a symmetrical mirrored image, reinforces medical science. It is not that Jennings's vision of a demonic monkey spirit is not natural: it is, indeed, caused by his excessive consumption of green tea. But that does not mean it is a hallucination. There exists, in Dr Hesselius's system of metaphysical medicine, a 'fluid', spiritual in nature, but which, being part of the body's makeup, works in the manner of organic functions: it circulates,

[18] Gaïd Girard, 'Growing a Voice: Le Fanu and the Laboratory of the *Dublin University Magazine*', in *Inspiring a Mysterious Terror*, pp. 155-76 (p. 168).

'through the nerves', in an 'arterial and venous' manner.[19] The inclusion of the medico-clinical description of the fluid indicates a narrative attuned to contemporary medical science, operating within the ethos of the century that Stoker would later describe in *Dracula* as 'scientific, sceptical, matter-of-fact'.[20] It is the century when James Blundell performed the first successful transfusion of human blood. Unsurprisingly, the discourse and practice surrounding transfusion reframes the concept of blood. As Ann Louise Kibbie has noted, the rise of transfusion has helped 'map out a narrative' by which blood is converted into an essentially '"modern" fluid', stripped of the 'semi-magical' traits attributed to it.[21] The scientific grounding of blood as a modern fluid then provides a framing for the spiritual fluid of Hesselius's spiritual fluid. Because it circulates through the human nervous system as blood does through the circulatory system, it can borrow blood's modernised status. In short, this is not a magical or indeed 'semi-magical' fluid, but a scientific, albeit spiritual, one.

Victorian medical discourse then is not steeped in obscurantism and superstition, and Le Fanu, through Dr Hesselius's meticulously scientific explanations, makes sure that the reader knows this. But this scientific enlightenment, this understanding of the natural world, of the organic, indeed scepticism itself, is exactly what harbours the supernatural in the world of the story. Because Dr Hesselius's discourse is scientific *par excellence*, the supernatural can no longer be brushed off as superstition; its manifestations need to be explained otherwise. To Hesselius, the explanation comes in the form of his Swedenborgian metaphysical medicine:

> I may remark, that when I here speak of medical science, I do so, as I hope some day to see it more generally understood, in a much more comprehensive sense than its generally material treatment would warrant. I believe the entire natural world is but the ultimate expression of that spiritual world from which, and in which alone, it has its life. I believe that the essential man is a spirit, that the spirit is an organised substance, but as different in point of material from what we ordinarily understand by matter, as light or electricity is; that the material body is, in the most literal sense, a vesture, and death consequently no interruption of the living man's existence, but simply his extrication from the natural body – a process which commences at the moment of what we term death, and the completion of which, at furthest a few days later, is the resurrection 'in power'.[22]

[19] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', pp. 38-39.
[20] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 238.
[21] Ann Louise Kibbie, *Transfusion: Blood and Sympathy in the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (University of Virginia Press, 2019), p. 6.
[22] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 8.

At this point, the balance between natural and supernatural interpretation is reversed: it is no longer the case, as it was in Warren's 'The Spectral Dog', that the supernatural can simply be attributed to, or explained through the natural, and ultimately exposed as mere illusion. The relationship between spirit and matter has come under scrutiny during the nineteenth century, especially in the context of growing interest in spiritualism, a movement which, as Jen Cadwallader writes, was preoccupied with the 'material aspects of the afterlife'. This tendency, she explains, is portrayed in Victorian stories as 'reductive', and while Le Fanu's novel *All in the Dark* (1866) reflects this attitude towards spiritualism, he is certainly interested in the material manifestation of the afterlife.[23] As Christine Ferguson points out, the mid-nineteenth century was marked by the flourishing of an interest in occultism, spiritualism, and more broadly 'forms of knowledge considered to lie beyond the fold of scientific rationalism or contemporary Judeo-Christian orthodoxy'. Although this 'revival' reached its 'zenith' with the 'foundation of the Theosophical Society' in 1875 (therefore slightly after Le Fanu's death in 1873), Ferguson traces its roots to the 'late eighteenth century', when it was informed by 'anti-clericalism', and pinpoints its momentum around 1848, with the advent of 'Modern Spiritualism'.[24]

Le Fanu's attitude towards spiritualism is most evident in his *All in the Dark*, where we do indeed find it depicted as reductive. He references the 'creaks and cracks with which Bacon, Shakespeare, and Lord Byron communicated their several inspirations in detestable grammar, to all who pleased to consult them'.[25] Aunt Dinah, a character in the novel, is described as falling for this new religion as she 'loved a short-cut', echoing the idea of spiritualist thinking as reductive.[26] At the same time, Le Fanu's interest in Swedenborg demonstrates the heterodox tendencies of his own theological thought, especially when it comes to envisioning the relationship between matter and spirit, and life and afterlife. While not directly involved with occultism, Swedenborg's focus on vision, symbol, and concealment have led to his association with occult and esoteric theologies, and he has also come to be associated with spiritualism. What W. J. McCormack calls Le Fanu's 'mockery of spiritualism in *All in the Dark*' is, consequently, not a disavowal of an exploration of the relationship between spirits, ghosts, and spectres, and their material imprints upon the world.[27] Importantly, although Le Fanu plays on

[23] Jen Cadwallader, *Spirits and Spirituality in Victorian Fiction* (Palgrave, 2016), p. 12.
[24] Christine Ferguson, 'Introduction', in *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1974*, ed. by Ferguson and Andrew Radford (Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-9 (pp. 1-2).
[25] Le Fanu, *All in the Dark* (Downey, 1898), p. 5.
[26] Le Fanu, *All in the Dark*, p. 6.
[27] W. J. McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu* (Sutton Publishing, 1997), p. 242.

the intricate duality between nature and preternature, between science and religion, he does not 'attempt to reconcile' them, as Cadwallader argues; rather, '[c]haracters following the lights of either system reach a point beyond which those lights cannot shine, an unknowable darkness where all meaning resides'.[28] This 'unknowable darkness' is articulated theologically through a Swedenborgian framework. This is because Le Fanu uses material images to suggest, in Swedenborgian fashion, that a transcendental reality is hidden within – and yet this transcendence remains clouded in an 'unknowable darkness'.

Ultimately, because understanding is withheld, Le Fanu's writing manifests the idea, which Milbank pinpoints as central to his work, that real 'flourishing' only happens in death.[29] Prayer is useless to Jennings as he is tormented by the monkey, and the story frames his death, albeit horrific, as the only real possible release. Of course, the implication that Jennings is likely damned suggests that flourishing does not automatically bring with itself salvation, but rather that it is framed epistemologically, as a penetration of the 'unknowable darkness'. It is only by passing through the threshold of death that the unknowable can become known, as Jennings's own death, which emerges as a narrative necessity, demonstrates. This is not only at play in 'Green Tea' but throughout the collection. For example, in a similar vein, Barton's eventual demise in 'The Familiar' is precipitated by his intimation of knowledge, expressed by his conviction that there is a 'dreadful God' – the flourishing of this knowledge of the precise nature of God remains, however, beyond death.[30]

Yet this vision of the beyond also paints materiality, science, and naturalistic understanding in a new, ephemeral light, highlighting their dire limitations. Ultimately, while Hesselius can explain *how* green tea causes Jennings to see the monkey, he cannot explain *why*, nor finally treat the vision; and, as Jenning's death (that is caused by his haunting) tells us, it is the *why* that the text engenders. This 'unknowable darkness', then, moves beyond spiritualist endeavours to frame the supernatural through the language of the material, in attempts to assuage the doubts of some 'Christians who wanted greater proofs of the divine', as Cadwallader explains, though, it must be noted, the stories do also encourage a certain amount of doubt, or at least uncertainty and ambivalence.[31]

[28] Cadwallader, *Spirits and Spirituality*, p. 24.
[29] Milbank, *God and the Gothic*, p. 219.
[30] Le Fanu, 'The Familiar', in *In a Glass Darkly*, pp. 41-82 (p. 60).
[31] Cadwallader, *Spirits and Spirituality*, p. 12.

Dr Hesselius's Swedenborgian Vision in 'Green Tea'

Rather than simply using the material to locate the supernatural, 'Green Tea' recalibrates the relationship between nature and the supernatural: it is now the natural which can only make sense through the supernatural rather than vice versa, as the dynamics shifts. Hesselius's discourse about medicine and the primacy of spirit over matter exposes the natural as a mere illusory reflection. To Girard, Hesselius's discourse 'is typical of [that] of spiritualist mesmerists in their attempt to locate spirit and materialize it'.[32] Yet Hesselius moves beyond mere attempts, uncovering a clear theological vision of spirit and matter, through Swedenborgian correspondence, which entails a relationship between the spiritual and the material realms. And rather than simply locate spirit, it operates on the assumption that spirit governs all matter. To return to Hesselius's vision for medical science expressed in the quotation I introduced in the previous section: he makes it clear that humans are primarily spirits, that 'the material body is […] a vesture', and that 'the entire natural world is but the ultimate expression of [the] spiritual world', thus demonstrating Swedenborgian concealment of spiritual truth within matter at play.[33]

The mystery presented by Le Fanu's collection derives from the arcane theology of the supernatural, which is visible, in various forms and to various people, within the boundaries of the natural world. This knowledge enlightens in the same way that medical science enlightened through its discoveries. If, prior to the ground-breaking discoveries known by nineteenth-century medicine, doctors operated within the bounds of clouded knowledge, Le Fanu's stories suggest that those who practice medicine strictly within the limits of their – albeit significant – material knowledge are similarly restricted, as indicated by Hesselius's affirmation that 'medical science' might one day be understood in a 'more comprehensive sense than its generally material treatment would warrant'.[34] As Cadwallader points out, science leads to the same darkness as religion in Le Fanu's work.[35] Such occlusion is explainable through Swedenborg's concept of enlightenment – or, in this case, lack thereof. Killeen argues that the '[e]pistemological darkness' – which turns out to be 'metaphysical' – of Le Fanu's ghost stories is 'at times' 'punctured'.[36] The term 'punctured' encapsulates the struggle for theological vision perfectly: it provides the occasional 'glimpse', as Killeen puts it, into metaphysical

[32] Girard, 'Growing a Voice', p. 172.
[33] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 8.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Cadwallader, *Spirits and Spirituality*, p. 24.
[36] Killeen, 'Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Ireland', pp. 270-71.

reality, but the veil is never thoroughly lifted.[37] There is a double Swedenborgian system underlying this: on the one hand, the idea that spiritual images need earthly ones to be conceived of; on the other hand, divine enlightenment.

Were truth completely immaterial, we would not be able to conceive of it; we need the prop of the natural to help us uncover its existence and perceive it. This is the picture Hesselius is facing when talking about the spiritual fluid he describes. To explain its nature, he needs to employ the language of the bodily and the organic, using the metaphor of the heart. Hesselius's description is therefore Swedenborgian in its turn to the material to convey the spiritual so that it can be understood by the human mind. 'Of this system', Hesselius explains, 'the brain is the heart', drawing on anatomical understanding, and doubling the emphasis on the material through the mention of both 'brain' and 'heart'.[38] To understand the fluid's circulation to and from the brain, we need medical knowledge of the heart's function, as a bodily organ: how it circulates blood through the body, and how it receives and pumps venous and arterial blood. Indeed, the mysterious fluid is characterised by 'a circulation arterial and venous in its mechanism', Hesselius's syntax suggesting that knowledge of the circulation of blood is essential in understanding this system.[39] Le Fanu here taps into the metaphorical meaning of 'heart' as much as the literal; he knows that it is impossible to ignore the backdrop of the heart's metaphorical signification, which, as Desmond Sheridan points out, has been used, independently and universally, since the earliest forms of writing.[40] Despite his emphasis on the medical function of the heart, however, Le Fanu uses it metaphorically: the brain is for the spiritual fluid what the heart is for blood. The brain is *like* the heart. Le Fanu therefore replicates, at textual level, the Swedenborgian correspondence between the natural image – the heart – and the hidden image concealed within, here both its function, mimicked by the brain, and its metaphorical association with truth, assent, and spirituality.

This fluid, Hesselius qualifies, we share with spirits, and 'disembodied spirits may operate' on it in cases when its equilibrium has been 'disturbed' by various 'abuses', such as excessive consumption of green tea.[41] Hesselius thus incorporates the spiritual within the medical: the explanation is both perfectly natural and perfectly supernatural. The monkey's appearance, which starts plaguing Jennings after his excessive consumption of green tea, and

[37] Killeen, p. 271.
[38] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 39.
[39] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', pp. 38-39.
[40] Desmond Sheridan, 'The Heart, A Constant and Universal Metaphor', *European Heart Journal*, 39.37 (1 October 2018), pp. 3407-09 (p. 3407), doi:10.1093/eurheartj/ehy491.
[41] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 39.

which eventually leads to his despair and suicide, can be explained naturally, but only inasmuch as the natural bears inside itself deeper, spiritual realities. As William Hughes argues, it cannot be explained through the '*mere* materialist'.[42] In Warren's *Passages* (1837), Hughes argues, organic processes, such as digestion, can elucidate the appearance of the ghost. As Hughes further notes, the same mechanism of explaining hauntings through digestion informs Scrooge's reaction when, in Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol' (1843), he is confronted by Marley's ghost.[43] There, however, ghosts are real, and the bodily explanation useless. If Dickens and Warren sit at opposite ends of the spectrum, Le Fanu folds the poles upon each other, providing a medical, almost taxonomical, account of the supernatural that is affirmed by science itself. Killeen argues that Tzvetan Todorov's account of fantasy as an either-or choice between natural and supernatural explanations is impossible in Le Fanu: his 'stories […] refuse to decide between the different explanations for the events of the plot'.[44] In a sense, this very refusal to decide brings the two possibilities together, homogenising them, and overcoming the apparent dichotomy. To use Todorov's framing, the 'laws of the world […] remain what they are', but at the same time, 'the event has indeed taken place'.[45] Swedenborgian theology renders the fantastical part of the earthly, binding it to the 'laws of this same familiar world'.[46]

This also means that they are manifestations of a deeper reality and spiritual meaning, which a Swedenborgian reading can once again help elucidate in conjunction with Hesselius's discourse. There is, Hesselius affirms with the physician's precision, a 'world of spirits' where evil spirits coming from hell dwell. This realm 'is in the midst between heaven and hell'; while wicked spirits inhabit it, they exit their hellish state of 'infernal torment' and exist instead 'in every thought and affection of the man'.[47] Swedenborg's theology affirms the persistence of the correlation between literal and inner meanings within the spirit world: spirits take on symbolic forms, which are themselves rooted in natural, earthly images. Swedenborg contends that those spirits attending only to the literal meaning of things are represented as an ugly old woman; those which discern the inner meaning as a beautiful young woman.[48] Some spirits, as shown in 'Green Tea', take the form of a monkey. That the monkey tormenting Jennings is a hellish spirit is evident: it plagues him, prevents him from praying, and ultimately drives him

[42] William Hughes, 'The Origins and Implications of J. S. Le Fanu's "Green Tea"', in *Irish Studies Review*, 13:1 (2005), pp. 45-54 (p. 50), doi:10.1080/0967088052000319508.
[43] Hughes, 'The Origins and Implications', pp. 50-51.
[44] Killeen, 'Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Ireland', p. 269.
[45] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 25.
[46] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 25.
[47] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 14.
[48] Swedenborg, *Concerning the White Horse*, p. 21.

to suicide. But significantly, the spirit needs to take on a material form for it to be perceived by its victim. It might be disembodied, and able to act upon Jennings's spiritual fluid due to his habit of drinking green tea; but its appearance to Jennings is in the form of a monkey's body, for in the Swedenborgian worldview, essentially all mental images are borne through the natural.[49] Because less enlightened spirits are less attractive within a Swedeborgian system, it is arguably significant that the spirit tormenting Jennings appears not as a human, but as a monkey – a proto-human, and especially so in the wake of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. The apparition, then, can be read as foreshadowing Jennings's damnation as a type of spiritual regression indicative of his unenlightened state. Describing the overwhelming effect of the monkey's tormenting presence, Jennings anticipates the question of the disembodied spirit's power, stating: 'You will ask, how could a silent immaterial phantom effect that? It was thus, whenever I meditated praying; It was always before me, and nearer and nearer.'[50] He explains:

> There is in its motion an indefinable power to dissipate thought, and to contract one's attention to that monotony, till the ideas shrink, as it were, to a point, and at last to nothing – and unless I had started up, and shook off the catalepsy I have felt as if my mind were on the point of losing itself.[51]

It is clear, from Jennings's description, that the evil spirit operates at the threshold of the material and the immaterial; its ambivalence consists in its capacity to mimic physicality, springing on the table, as if it were a real monkey.

Yet its grotesquerie arises from the knowledge that it is indeed a spirit, and from its displacement: a spirit normally inhabiting hell should not be there in Jennings's lodgings; nor should an actual monkey. Moreover, there is a mockery of physical form in its movements, which is then channelled onto Jennings's being. Again, the language is that of medicine: he frames the spirit's effect in diagnostic terms through catalepsy, a condition of the nervous system. Jennings's reference to catalepsy indicates the spirit's action upon the spiritual fluid which, as Hesselius reminds us, 'is propagated […] through one class of nerves […] through another', and which he categorises as a 'nervous fluid'.[52] Like the monkey, psychological states are also painted materially. Jennings uses a physical metaphor – 'to shrink' presupposes size,

[49] Swedenborg, p. 12.
[50] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 30.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 39.

recalling primarily physical objects – in conjunction with an evocation of the immateriality of ideas.

Ultimately, however, if this mêlée of embodiment and disembodiment fosters Swedenborgian enlightenment, this is only Hesselius's. Jennings, through the spirit's action, tragically succumbs to theological despair: he can no longer pray. To Richard Haslam, this signifies the activation of Jennings's Calvinistic conscience. His despair, Haslam maintains, does not stem from loss of faith, but from his growing conviction that 'he is a reprobate – predestined (in terms of Calvinistic theology) to damnation rather than salvation'.[53] Jennings's dabbling in the writings of Swedenborg, he adds, is a confirmation of his reprobation: he is attracted to heterodox ideas, or 'paganism', precisely because he is a reprobate.[54] Haslam references the scene in 'Green Tea' where Jennings has highlighted a passage in the writings of Swedenborg about how it is dangerous for 'man to be in a living consort with spirits, unless he be in the good of faith', and reads this as his self-confirmation of his inescapable damnation.[55] Yet the theological substratum of Jennings's condition is pervaded by ambivalence: potentially Calvinistic in its insistence on the centrality of faith, the passage is encountered in a Swedenborgian context, and can thus be read as equally pointing to the openness to truth described by Swedenborg, which leads to an understanding of the Word through enlightenment.[56] In this light, the reference to Jennings's 'high-church precision' can be read as highlighting the fact that this ecumenical openness poses a threat to a strictly Calvinistic framework of faith. This ecumenical openness includes Jennings's interest in the works of Swedenborg. It indicates perhaps a willingness to leave behind the doctrine of justification by faith alone – so central to reformed theology but rejected both by Catholicism, to which high-church Protestantism is drawn, and by Swedenborg, whose works Jennings is attracted to. As this suggests, 'Green Tea' is the story in the collection that most plays on theological enlightenment and apprehension of truth, although no full revelation of it is achieved. Yet it is also the story that most clearly fosters the possibility of reading the supernatural as illusion. What follows in the other stories is an increasing slip of the supernatural into the material.

[53] Richard Haslam, 'Le Fanu's "Green Tea" and Irish Victorian Calvinism', in *Inspiring a Mysterious Terror*, pp. 93-116 (pp. 99-100).
[54] Haslam, 'Le Fanu's "Green Tea"', p. 100.
[55] Haslam, p. 101; and see Le Fanu, 'Green Tea', p. 15.
[56] See Swedenborg, *Concerning the White Horse*, p. 13.

'The Familiar', 'Mr. Justice Harbottle', and the Materialisation of Hauntings

'The Familiar' (first published in 1851, a revision of 1847's 'The Watcher') – the second story in the collection – begins with a disembodied haunting. But unlike Jennings, Captain Barton knows the source of his haunting. He understands that he is being pursued by the Watcher of his old ship, in whose death he was implicated. As he starts receiving mysterious letters signed by 'The Watcher', he understands that he is dealing with a manifestation from beyond the grave:

> Whatever he might think as to the phantom steps which followed him, there could be no possible illusion about the letters he had received; and, to say the least, their immediate sequence upon the mysterious sounds which had haunted him, was an odd coincidence.[57]

Gradually, the source of his terror materialises: the 'phantom steps' acquire a sense of physicality through the letters he receives, which are real, tangible objects of the world. The naturalness with which Barton is 'handed' these letters – these objects – reinforces the idea that the supernatural has penetrated, physically, the natural. Unlike a disembodied spirit, the letters are inescapably, terrifyingly tangible. Barton holds them in his hands; the first letter is placed 'by the postman […] upon the table'.[58] Any possibility of it being a product of Barton's conscience is swiftly dismissed through the mundane physicality of this exchange. Le Fanu dwells in detail on the nature of the letter's handwriting, with its 'tall narrow characters', which are 'sloped backward', conjuring up a clear visual image of the missive.[59] The reference to the 'hand' that wrote the letter almost restores the spirit to its former body in the reader's imagination.

And while we are made privy to Barton's terror, our vantage point as readers complicates the theological tableau of the story. Favouring an Augustinian reading of the Victorian ghost story, in which she includes Le Fanu's fiction, Zoë Lehmann Imfeld argues that the human condition might be inextricably fallen, but it is 'not static'; instead, it 'stands somewhere on a journey of "becoming"'.[60] Imfeld reads 'The Familiar' as embodying a theological vision of being *in medias res*, whereby the immanence of terror raises the possibility of salvation.[61] In being confronted with the ghost of the Watcher – a 'physical' haunting –

[57] Le Fanu, 'The Familiar', pp. 49-50.
[58] Le Fanu, 'The Familiar', p. 47.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology* (Palgrave, 2016), p. 27.
[61] Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story*, p. 130.

Barton is confronted with the reality of immanence, of post-death existence, and therefore with the need for redemption.[62] As Imfeld explains, his 'crisis is essentially an Augustinian one, firstly in his recognition of his own inadequacy in the face of God, and secondly in his recognition of the need for a mediator for grace'.[63] While Barton's crisis is Augustinian, the reader's is Swedenborgian, for the lack of revelation regarding Barton's ultimate eschatological fate draws us into Swedenborgian occlusion. Through Barton's haunting, the reader experiences the ghost's immanence, made materially manifest. But at the end of the story, what happens to Barton? If he has become aware of his own immanence, we are not – we do not know what happens to him after his death; what we witness in the end is just Barton's cold corpse. Barton's final materiality is affirmed through a deconstruction of personhood: he is reduced to a 'rigid gripe'; an 'awful figure'; a nameless 'dead man'.[64] The occlusive effect is cumulative in the collection *In a Glass Darkly*; as Imfeld argues, the characters are in the midst of a religious experience, but the Swedenborgian framework blocks any transcendental revelation, circling back apparently to what Michael Begnal has described as Le Fanu's 'fatalistic nihilism'.[65]

From a theological point of view, it is clear that, as in 'Green Tea', Calvinistic suppositions are again challenged in 'The Familiar'. A tendency to reject the possibility of supernatural forces inhabiting the material has characterised post-Reformation theologies. Yet this is exactly what happens in the story: indeed, as the narrative progresses, the slip towards materiality grows increasingly striking, as the Watcher eventually carries out his revenge through a familiar spirit – an owl. Unlike the monkey, only visible to Jennings, the owl's materiality is visible to everyone. It arrives as the pet of his fiancée, an 'ill-omened bird' that fills Barton with dread.[66] Incarnate in the owl's form, the haunting, which started off as 'phantom steps', has now reached material fullness.[67] After Barton's corpse is discovered, the owl flies out of the room, and Montague (the father of Barton's fiancée) notices that 'there was something else on the bed with him', pointing to 'a deep indenture, as if caused by a heavy pressure, near the foot of the bed'.[68] The stamp of the inextricably physical is clear, made manifest through the language of weight and heaviness.

[62] Imfeld, pp. 129-30.
[63] Imfeld, p. 130.
[64] Le Fanu, 'The Familiar', p. 81.
[65] Michael Begnal, *Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu* (University of Bucknell Press, 1971), p. 71.
[66] Le Fanu, 'The Familiar', p.79.
[67] Le Fanu, 'The Familiar', p.49.
[68] Le Fanu, 'The Familiar', p. 80.

Whether this is the owl's work or whether the Watcher himself materialised remains unclear; but what is clear is that something supernatural has left its physical imprint on the natural world. Jennings's death was by his own hand; Barton's was the product of an external force. Even if we dismissed the owl being a familiar and read it as a simple bird, Barton is still stalked by 'The Watcher' – and hence the story would still contain supernatural elements. Similarly, in 'Mr Justice Harbottle', spirits are seen, walking 'as living men do', causing the floor to vibrate: the physical is once again central to spiritual manifestations.[69] The ghostly in 'Mr Justice Harbottle' treads the threshold between nightmare and reality. In the end, a ghostly doppelgänger condemns the protagonist to death; while suicide and hallucinatory madness are entertained as possibilities, ghosts are seen not simply by the protagonist himself, thus suggesting that they are an objective reality. A scullery maid sees 'a monstrous figure, over a furnace, beating with a mighty hammer the rings and rivets of a chain', and then pointing out to her the corpse of the judge on the floor, anticipating his death.[70] The ghostly is once again corroborated by a witness external to the haunting. In 'The Familiar', the Watcher's ghostly revenge is not witnessed directly; but in 'Mr Justice Harbottle', the scullery maid sees, first-hand, the monstrous spirit materialising, taking us further down the path of material manifestation of spirits. This shows a clear direction of the collection overall, in its staging of a shift away from ambiguity and towards an increasingly clearer physical manifestation of the supernatural, which ultimately culminates with the vampiric body of Carmilla.

While the natural explanation of 'Green Tea' seemed more plausible if improbable, such readings of 'The Familiar' and 'Mr Justice Harbottle' slide further into the domain of implausibility. But even this possibility is denied with Carmilla, a monster both quintessentially natural – in her inescapably bodily form – and supernatural, through her vampiric nature. It is as if, in Swedenborgian terms, readers move away from enlightenment and delve deeper into the material at this point in the collection. We lose track of the inner meaning, and the supernatural grows physical roots. But we know, when reading the story, that there is a supernatural realm in its fictional universe, and indeed one which breaks through the appearance of materiality – we know then that these physical manifestations cannot be explained simply through contemporary science, and it is up to us to decode their meaning. Considered in its entirety then, the collection is pervaded by a shift away from the disembodied

[69] In 1853, Le Fanu published 'An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street', revising it as 'The Haunted House in Westminster' in 1872, and finally re-titling and revising it to its final form in 1872, in the collection: Le Fanu, 'Mr Justice Harbottle', in *In a Glass Darkly*, pp. 83-118 (p. 86).
[70] Le Fanu, 'Mr Justice Harbottle', p. 116.

and towards the physical. Readers of 'Green Tea' might entertain the possibility of a sceptical reading; but by the time we get to 'Carmilla', the possibility of explaining mystery through medical science fades. When the father of Laura, the protagonist, attempts to explain away, rationally, the mysterious illness afflicting locals, the sneering words of the vampire Carmilla – 'natural. Nature' – resound equally at a metatextual level, as if denying not only the scepticism of Laura's father, but readerly beliefs in the collection's natural explanations.[71]

Carmilla's Corporeality

In 'Carmilla', this step-by-step metafictional discovery is paralleled at a fictional level by Laura's discovery and acceptance of Carmilla's real, corporeal monstrosity. Carmilla collapses the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural: the vampire makes material all which is usually classed as mysterious and dismissed as supernatural. Carmilla's actions, words, and most strikingly, her being, reconfigure the natural. This becomes particularly clear in the scene where Carmilla holds the General by his wrist, causing him to drop the axe with which he was attacking her. We are told that 'she dived under his blow, and unscathed, caught him in her tiny grasp by the wrist. He struggled for a moment to release his arm, but his hand opened, the axe fell to the ground, and the girl was gone.'[72] The unnatural – supernatural – strength of the vampire inhabits her 'tiny' human form, reconfiguring the materiality of her body. Once tinged with the physical imprint of the supernatural, the natural world is transformed. It is no longer a space where everything can be understood through science. Laura's own reality (and perception of it) is irretrievably changed, as evidenced by the novella's ending, where Laura is described as often sinking into reveries about Carmilla. Her world can never be free of Carmilla, even after the physical destruction of the vampire, precisely because her mind now understands the existence of the supernatural in a way that had not been open to her before. The world ceases, in this sense, to be the safe world in which a sceptical reading of 'Green Tea' would fit. Now, having thus been monstrously re-enchanted, the natural becomes monstrous. It is a shift we encounter clearly in 'Carmilla'. The contemptuous assertion that '[t]hese monsters used to make my father laugh' prompted by Laura's encounter with a mountebank who carries all sorts of curios, grows into the acknowledgement that '[m]y father recognized […] his perfidious and beautiful guest, in the face now disclosed to view', upon opening Carmilla's grave.[73] As Noël Carroll writes, Laura's father is the embodiment of scepticism,

[71] Le Fanu, 'Carmilla', in *In a Glass Darkly*, pp. 243-319 (p. 270).
[72] Le Fanu, 'Carmilla', p. 312.
[73] Le Fanu, 'Carmilla', p. 268 and p. 315.

'rejecting the superstitions of the peasants'. Indeed, he goes as far as to devise, Carroll adds, 'the improbable naturalistic explanation of Carmilla's somnambulism in order to account for Carmilla's disappearance'.[74]

To explain the seemingly unexplainable through the lens of somnambulism is to explain mystery through the natural. In 1871, the same year that Le Fanu began publishing *Carmilla* in serialised form in *The Dark Blue*, Robert H. Collyer saw the publication of the second edition of his *Mysteries of the Vital Element: In Connexion with Dreams, Somnambulism, Trance, Vital Photography, Faith and Will, Anaesthesia, Nervous Congestion, and Creative Function; Modern Spiritualism Explained*, where he explains somnambulism as a natural phenomenon.[75] Likewise, clinging on to the perceived safety of the natural, Laura's father attempts to explain away, rationally, a mysterious attack on a young girl, construing superstitious belief as a disease, stating that '"[a]ll this […] is strictly referable to natural causes. These poor people infect one another with their superstitions, and so repeat in imagination the images of terror that have infested their neighbours."'[76] 'Infest' clamps together real and imagined causes of disease: the OED defines it as associated with 'persons (e. g. robbers, pirates), animals (e. g. wolves, vermin, insects), diseases or other evils', but also with 'perverse opinions, errors'.[77] There is a perverse irony in his unwittingly literal use of the word, an irony echoed by Carmilla's response to his insistence on 'natural causes':

> 'Creator! *Nature!*' […] 'And this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. All things proceed from Nature – don't they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains? I think so.'[78]

Carmilla's outburst is both mockery and accord: we know, in light of her vampiric condition, that she must be indirectly and ironically chiding, if not taunting, Laura's father for his naïve adherence to the natural, as well as his religion. But the affirmative syntax of her speech, culminating in 'I think so', also signals her agreement. It does all proceed from nature – the disease is indeed natural, even if she herself is its source; for what is more natural than the body, and blood? If Laura's father moves from 'nature' to 'God', in an act of trust, Carmilla collapses the two into each other. This is not 'nature', but 'Nature', its capitalisation and the

[74] Noël Carroll, *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 112.
[75] Robert Collyer, *Mysteries of the Vital Element: In Connexion with Dreams, Somnambulism, Trance, Vital Photography, Faith and Will, Anaesthesia, Nervous Congestion, and Creative Function*; *Modern Spiritualism Explained* (Henry Renshaw, 1871), p. 60.
[76] Le Fanu, 'Carmilla', p. 269.
[77] See the entry 'infest' in *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. d., <https://www.oed.com> [accessed 23 July 2024].
[78] Le Fanu, 'Carmilla', p. 270.

parallelism drawn between itself and 'Creator', suggesting the metaphysical dimension of Nature itself. Carmilla's words paint a sublimely sinister picture of the natural, emphasising the real, organic nature of evil. It counters the tendency of Laura's father to separate that which can be understood and attributed to natural causes from the intangible realm of the beyond, putting his trust in the protection of Providence. Once again, this demonstrates how Le Fanu uses the natural, and the material, to contain, within their tangible forms, a supernatural reality. But rather than the 'Providence' that Laura's father invoked, the supernatural presences we encounter in the volume are sinister and threatening, ultimately making horror itself instrumental in the realisation that there is a world beyond the material – and hence a mechanism of revelation, however limited this revelation might be.

'The Room in the Dragon Volant' and the Supernatural Tendencies of *In a Glass Darkly*

'The Room in the Dragon Volant' (1872), the fourth piece in the collection, disrupts the continuity of the volume: there is no supernatural element. Unlike the other stories, it is a gothic mystery; significantly, the narrator does not toy with possible hauntings or supernatural monsters as he does elsewhere in the volume. We witness a display of gothic atmospherics, without the implied presence of the supernatural. This might seem to threaten the balance of the collection, but it reinforces the supernatural in the other stories by revealing a situation where humans are solely responsible for the plot's horror. The transition, then, is from a disembodied spirit visible to a single person ('Green Tea'), to a disembodied spirit leaving tangible marks on the world ('The Familiar'), and to a danger posed by human plotting ('The Room in the Dragon Volant'). 'Carmilla' follows 'The Room in the Dragon Volant', highlighting the difference between a human threat, and one posed by something that appears human. Carmilla looks, moves, and speaks like a human. Laura is enthralled by her human features, described in terms of luxuriant beauty. She recalls Carmilla's 'slender pretty figure enveloped in the soft silk dressing gown, embroidered with flowers, and lined with thick quilted silk, which her mother had thrown over her feet as she lay upon the ground'.[79] In 'The Room in the Dragon Volant', Richard Beckett is irrevocably, almost fatally, attracted to the Countess. She is dangerous, but only because she is implicated in a plot to murder him by drugging him to catalepsy and subsequently burying him. Laura is also irrevocably, almost fatally, attracted to Carmilla. But Carmilla is dangerous for a different reason: her supernatural, vampiric nature, which is hidden under the guise of a beautiful woman. There is, on the one hand, the

[79] Le Fanu, 'Carmilla', pp. 258-59.

Swedenborgian thread of concealing a deeper, supernatural truth within a tangible image – that of Carmilla. Yet beyond this, there is, inherent in this conjoining, a warning as to the illusory and disingenuous nature of these material images, with horror lurking beneath beauty.

The appearance of a human form brings Le Fanu's Swedenborgian exploration to completion: the inner reality is contained entirely within the earthly image. Yet the inner meaning revealed here is monstrous, pointing not to salvation or truth as envisioned by Swedenborg, but to the reality of demons, their hellish presence within the safety of the world, which has been pruned of its enchantment by scepticism and Calvinism. 'The Room in the Dragon Volant' appears to complicate this matter. Yet the narrative sequence of the tales in the volume creates a contrast between the false appearance of the Countess de St Alyre, and Countess Karnstein, making the latter's perverse falsehood even more striking. The Countess de St Alyre is a human being devising a trick on the protagonist, while Countess Karnstein is a supernatural figure tricking Laura into trusting that they are both alike, and innocent. The placing of 'The Room in the Dragon Volant' right before 'Carmilla' might induce us readers into the false belief – and hope – that Countess Karnstein might, like the Countess de St Alyre, be unmasked for her trickery and hypocrisy, an expectation which Le Fanu dashes as he rips away any naturalistic, non-supernatural readings from the universe of 'Carmilla'. Where the countess in 'The Room in the Dragon Volant' is revealed to be a natural trickster, the expectation that Carmilla might be one too does not deliver, when she is revealed to be a real supernatural vampire.

In a Glass Darkly: Matter and Transcendence in the Collection

Throughout this essay, I have used individual stories to illustrate the broader narrative and theological tendencies of the collection. It is therefore important to consider briefly the title of the collection itself, a title which has indeed been the subject of sustained critical scrutiny. In its misquotation of 1 Corinthians 13:12, Victor Sage maintains, the phrase 'twists St Paul's metaphor […] that we shall see "through a glass darkly", converting "glass" to "mirror" and trapping us on this side of it'.[80] This conversion from 'glass' to 'mirror' by changing 'through' to 'in' implies that rather than seeing through to the afterlife, we instead see a reflection, as all transcendence is trapped within the material. Sage's reading encapsulates Le Fanu's plunging of the supernatural inside the mould of the natural, allowing us to perceive it, in a Swedenborgian manner, through recourse to the earthly. To Milbank, being 'in a glass darkly'

[80] Victor Sage, *Le Fanu's Gothic: The Rhetoric of Darkness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 203.

entails a reflective relationship between humans and spirits, whereby '[t]he human forms a mirror or glass in which the spirit may see himself, through which his or her affection is revealed'.[81] Beyond the biblical reference, the title likely alludes to another source that captures the ambivalent relationship between spiritual reality and material form, and the struggle towards inner truth: Wilkie Collins's novel *No Name* (1862). Pondering over the good and evil residing within each human, Miss Garth is described as '[s]earching, as in a glass darkly', as she looks 'into the two natures' and feels 'her way, doubt by doubt, from one possible truth to another'.[82] Through the voice of Miss Garth, Collins hints at the 'hidden' natures, good and evil, residing within humans, and which manifest themselves through actions. The hiddenness and surfacing of either good or evil has Swedenborgian reverberations, especially in Collins's emphasis on how Magdalen Vanstone might have 'roused the forces of Evil in herself'.[83] From her vantage point, Miss Garth observes, 'as in a glass darkly', the good and evil at play in the Vanstone sisters. And this is the key to the theological coherence of Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly*; like Miss Garth, the reader of the collection observes as if 'in a glass darkly' the forces of Evil 'roused', or invited in, by those who encounter their supernatural sources.

These supernatural encounters in Le Fanu's collection follow a pattern of transgression against the natural order, which opens up a door for monstrous presences to be invited in. The vampire Carmilla is quite literally invited into the *schloss*; Judge Harbottle's own corrupted nature brings about his monstrous doppelgänger; 'The Familiar' is a revenge plot, and hence a cause-effect narrative explored supernaturally; and Jennings, of course, opens his mind up towards malevolent influences through his excessive consumption of green tea. Although Le Fanu's theology is complex and ecumenical, the underlying Swedenborgian theology allows him to explore, in *In a Glass Darkly*, the various stages and forms of enlightenment, placing his characters at different points in the journey described by Imfeld. Yet by showing the limitations of human knowledge – in rejecting or resisting enlightenment – he draws his readers back into the world's materiality, withholding any revelation regarding the nature of the afterlife. Fundamentally, the Swedenborgian framework moves readers from a materiality that fosters scepticism to one that now emerges as limiting, indeed frustrating, due to the knowledge that while it is inhabited by mysterious forces, comprehension is denied.

[81] Milbank, *God and the Gothic*, p. 214.
[82] Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (The Floating Press, 2009), p. 243.
[83] Collins, *No Name*, p. 243.

Deterministic Dollhouse: Metafictional Determinism in Ari Aster's *Hereditary*

Sean Travers

This essay argues that Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) is a filmic example of metafictional determinism, a type of naturalism. The main contribution of this article is to demonstrate how *Hereditary* depicts naturalistic themes in new ways via techniques unique to the medium, ultimately uncovering new formal techniques of naturalism. Naturalism's resurgence post-9/11 and its differences from the literary naturalism of roughly a century earlier have been extensively covered in existing criticism, as have naturalist themes in contemporary texts across a range of media. However, how film does new things *formally* with naturalism has been largely overlooked.

I argue that the characters in *Hereditary* are represented in a similar manner to characters in naturalistic fiction in that they are depicted as having no free will, but with a meta-twist: I read the characters in *Hereditary* as intentionally depicted as characters trapped within a horror film. The characters within *Hereditary* have limited agency over not simply their circumstances but also the genre conventions within which they are entrapped, and are represented as ultimately subject to the whims of the film's omnipotent and sadistic horror director. *Hereditary* presents a fatalistic narrative whereby characters unknowingly work through a predetermined plot, as their horrific fates are signposted to the viewer. I explore how cinematic equivalents of the metafictional-determinist devices found in naturalist fiction are employed in *Hereditary*. These include the film's combination of naturalist themes with supernatural elements; its exploitations of the specific characteristics of the film medium and horror genre to uniquely rework techniques of metafictional determinism; the representation of the text's world as created and determined by the writer; and the intrusion of the text's writer via an autobiographical persona. In doing so, this article frames *Hereditary*'s themes and tropes, including the relevance of the film's miniatures, the nature of inheritance, and familial and intergenerational trauma, via a theoretical application of metafictional determinism.

Naturalism, Horror, and Metafictional Determinism

Before conducting this analysis, it is first necessary to outline this article's definition of terms and the literary contexts for this article's argument. Rehearsing a full genealogy of naturalism

and the reasons behind naturalism's return is beyond the scope of this article and already covered in existing criticism. In summary, however, naturalism is a form of writing that encourages a view of humankind as controlled by deterministic forces including social, hereditary, biological, and environmental, and features characters lacking in free will. Prominent elements of naturalism include characters shaped by fate, and plots focusing on individual and societal decline. A further naturalist theme is a reduction of life to its barest realities by 'peeling away social and cultural conventions to explore the non-contingent humanity/animality that undergirds our existence', meaning that characters are reduced to their biological limits.[1] Naturalism came to prominence in the nineteenth century, and experienced a resurgence in the United States in the period between the destruction of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 and the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016. This period appears deterministic because it reflects the view 'that in neoliberal America individuals' choices are diminished, and that behaviour is thus determined'.[2] Naturalism's resurgence is evident in a diverse range of twenty-first-century American texts including Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008), Philip Meyer's *American Rust* (2009), and Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* (2013). Michael Tavel Clarke observes that 'the work of Cormac McCarthy in particular suggests […] a resurgence of naturalism'.[3] Popular culture and filmic examples of naturalism's return include Shawn Ryan's *The Shield* (2002-08), James Manos Jr.'s *Dexter* (2006-08), Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), Gilligan and Peter Gould's *Better Call Saul* (2015-22), and the more recent horror fiction of Stephen King, such as *The Dark Tower* series (1982-2012).

Naturalism and horror are inextricably bound up with one another. The pessimism that naturalism articulates regarding free will is fundamental to the horror film. Among the primary defining characteristics of the horror film is the characters' lack of choice and control. Bruce F. Kawin says that the goal of horror film is to 'frighten' viewers and 'give us characters in terrible situations'.[4] Kawin observes that horror films access a core set of fears that 'we may share as humans', including 'endangering some less tangible aspect of being or behaviour we value, such as our free will'.[5] This connection between naturalism and the gothic has been

[1] Bill Hardwig, 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and "A World to Come"', *Studies in American Naturalism*, 8.1 (2013), pp. 38-51.
[2] Alan Gibbs, '"Things Happen to You They Happen": Cormac McCarthy, Morality, and Neo-Naturalism', *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 18.1 (2020), pp. 56-77 (p. 58).
[3] Michael Tavel Clarke, 'The New Naturalism: Cormac McCarthy, Frank Norris, and the Question of Postmodernism', *Studies in American Naturalism*, 9.1 (2014), pp. 52-78 (p. 52).
[4] Bruce F. Kawin, *Horror and the Horror Film* (Anthem Press, 2012), p. 5.
[5] Kawin, *Horror*, p. 5.

considered at length by Monika Elbert and Wendy Ryden, who assert that what they call 'Naturalist Gothic' appears to be a contradiction in terms, because the gothic is known for its sensational effects, and emphasises horror and the supernatural. Conversely, naturalism as a mode of representation is defined by extreme realism, and generally works within the laws of probability. However, Elbert and Ryden point out that what unites the gothic and naturalism is a shared pessimism and the perception of a fearful, lingering presence that haunts an impending modernity. In a number of nineteenth-century naturalist works, due to the alienation and despair of the modernist moment, reality is so harsh as to be depicted through gothic tropes.[6] For example, Dian L. Shoos' examination of the intersection between the horror genre and domestic-violence films argues that the latter employ the conventions of the gothic romance to represent male characters' abuse of their wives, with the irrevocable movement towards a final face-to-face confrontation, immersing the viewer in the sense of entrapment and helplessness experienced by the female victim.[7] Similarly, Tony Williams explores the family in the American horror film, and describes the institution as deterministic, one that can cause 'great personal unhappiness', but one which individuals are 'born into and [have] no escape from at a vulnerable age'.[8] From the early twentieth century onwards, then, naturalist texts are essentially gothic because modern realism is gothic.

Considering the horror film in relation to naturalism, specifically metafictional determinism, helps to extend this prior conversation. Metafictional determinism, as asserted above, is a type of naturalist writing. There is a significant difference to be noted between naturalism and metafictional determinism, however. While naturalism implies the wresting away of agency and choice, showing that humans are subject to forces beyond their control, a slightly different philosophy emerges in metafictional determinism, one in which characters, but not the creators of the text, are bereft of agency. This evokes the naturalist writing of Émile Zola, whereby the novelist is 'a scientist or "experimental moralist"' who develops characters 'as figures in a grand experiment to test [their] physical and emotional responses'.[9] According to Alan Gibbs, the neo-naturalist counterfactual form used in contemporary fiction similarly considers 'alternate histories' as 'a form of neo-naturalist experiment', with the naturalist writer constructing 'scenarios and characters and […] let[ting] them play out at will'. Such texts

[6] Monika Elbert and Wendy Ryden, 'Introduction', in *Haunting Realities: Naturalist Gothic and American Realism*, ed. by Elbert and Ryden (University of Alabama Press, 2017), pp. 1-16.
[7] Diane L. Shoos, *Domestic Violence in Hollywood Film: Gaslighting* (Springer, 2017), p. 12.
[8] Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), p. 3.
[9] Donna M. Campbell. 'American Literary Naturalism: Critical Perspectives', *Literature Compass*, 8.8 (2011), pp. 499-513 (p. 501).

'apply variations to history and existing historical traumas as we recognise them', and 'these counterfactual narratives are […] used […] as a means of isolating the ways in which traumas, both structural and historical, are experienced by individuals'.[10]

Where metafictional determinism diverges from such neo-naturalist writing is the inclusion of metafictional themes and techniques. In works of metafictional determinism, 'the course of action is established by an outline early on' in the narrative, and the author will make their 'own presence known in [their] fiction'.[11] This is generally achieved through framing the novels by a 'rough plot outline', foreshadowing future events.[12] The readers know from the beginning of the text that the characters are doomed. For example, Bo Petterson asserts that the opening of Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* (1932) is an example of 'summary' in fiction, and 'a supreme instance of metafictional determinism because of its initial position and the limits it sets to the story'.[13] Heidi Strengell observes similar devices in King's fiction. For example, Strengell highlights the rough plot outlines of future tragedies in *Carrie* (1974).[14] This is also evident in *The Stand* (1978), in which, Strengell argues, King 'delights in flaunting that he possesses more information than the reader'. In works of metafictional determinism, the author may also intrude the narrative via an 'autobiographical persona'. Strengell positions King's appearances in *The Dark Tower* series as exemplifying this intrusion, serving to remind the reader that the narrative is a world 'created and determined by the author Stephen King'.[15]

Metafictional determinism in the contemporary horror film is yet to be explored in existing criticism. I argue that the particular blend of horror, naturalism, and metafiction that Strengell describes above is evident in *Hereditary*, but depicted in new and uniquely cinematic ways.

Hereditary and Naturalism

Aster describes *Hereditary* as containing two halves, beginning as a family tragedy, but gradually becoming a horror film.[16] *Hereditary* centres on the Graham family, Annie (Toni

[10] Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 207-08.
[11] Bo Petterson, *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut: Moral Paradox and Narrative Form* (Abo Akademi University Press, 1994), p. 138.
[12] Heidi Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism* (Popular Press, 2005), p. 246.
[13] Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King*, p. 138.
[14] Strengell, p. 247.
[15] Strengell, p. 250, p. 246, and p. 247.
[16] Mallory Yu, 'Director Ari Aster Says *Hereditary* is a Family Drama at its Core', *NPR*, 11 June 2018 <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/11/618975688/director-ari-aster-says-hereditary-is-a-family-drama-at-its-core?t=1644338625267> [accessed 8 February 2022].

Collette), Steve (Gabriel Byrne), and their two children, Peter (Alex Wolff) and Charlie (Milly Shapiro). Annie's mother, Ellen Leigh (Kathleen Chalfant), dies and is gradually revealed to have been the leader of a demonic cult, who has for years plotted the resurrection of the demon Paimon, using her grandson Peter as a vessel, and the rest of the Grahams as sacrifices. Ellen had initially arranged for Paimon to possess Charlie as a baby; however, Paimon covets a male human body. *Hereditary* depicts the Grahams' varying failed attempts to escape the sinister fate they have inherited as Ellen's scheme plays out. The cult orchestrates the following sequence of events to ensure the possession of Peter: the death of Charlie; the meeting between Annie and the cultist Joan (Ann Dowd); and Joan's manipulation of Annie to perform a ritual that is essential for Paimon's summoning. The ritual results in Steve's death, Annie's temporary possession and suicide, and Peter's attempted suicide having encountered these events via jumping from the Graham's attic window, after which Paimon enters his body.

The Grahams are thus subject both to natural and supernatural forces beyond their control, the demonic cult being employed as a metaphor for the naturalist theme of hereditary, and of biological and environmental forces. The title of the film refers to both the Grahams being products of family circumstances, genetics, and history, and their direct bloodline's ability to resurrect Paimon. Analogous to Williams' observation that the family has long served as a major locus for the modern horror genre, Aster asserts that *Hereditary* 'is a movie about inheritance – the notion of having no choice in who your family is or what's in your blood […] the horror of being born into a situation over which you have no control'.[17] Jasmine Crittenden likewise notes that the supernatural is employed to explore individuals' lack of 'control over [their] own lives' through themes such as apparitions and possession. However, Crittenden adds that the film 'blurs the line' between the natural and the supernatural, stating that, 'depending on the viewer's interpretation, the demon could represent' a range of unstoppable forces including 'unchecked grief, inherited mental illness, the impact of a controlling matriarch or a combination of all three – or, indeed black magic or fate'.[18] It is via this 'blurring', I argue, that *Hereditary* combines naturalist themes with supernatural elements.

In particular, the Grahams are subject to mental illness inherited from Ellen, which can be read in literal terms as a biological determinant, and metaphorically as a supernatural force. The decapitation of Ellen, Annie, and Charlie as a necessary sacrificial offering for Paimon's

[17] Daniel Dercksen, 'Writer-Director Ari Aster's *Hereditary* – A Work of Operatic Horror', *Writing Studio*, 10 June 2018 <https://writingstudio.co.za/writer-director-ari-asters-hereditary-a-work-of-operatic-horror/> [accessed 30 September 2020].
[18] Jasmine Crittenden, 'Inner Dread: Psychology and Fate in *Hereditary*', *Screen Education*, 94 (2019), pp. 22-27 (p. 26).

arrival (Paimon's symbol, the Seal of Paimon, features a man on a horse carrying three severed heads) suggests that the Grahams are subject to hereditary mental illness via the imagery of literally losing their heads. Likewise, when Annie attends a support group for the bereaved, her monologue suggests that her family trauma stems from both mental illness and Ellen's attempts to resurrect Paimon. Annie explains that Ellen had dissociative identity disorder, that Annie's father committed suicide via starvation 'because he had psychotic depression', and that her brother Charles had schizophrenia and hanged himself at sixteen. Charles left behind a note attributing his suicide to Ellen, accusing her of being controlling, manipulative, and 'putting people inside him'. Annie also has a history of psychotic episodes, on one occasion almost burning herself, Peter, and Charlie alive while sleepwalking. This suggests that Annie is as abusive to her children as Ellen had been to Charles, behaviour that is possibly symptomatic of early bipolar disorder. As Donna M. Campbell describes the Zolaesque experimentations of classical naturalism, 'characters […] face an inevitable downward spiral through their hereditary predispositions to […] violence'.[19] At the same time, however, Annie, her father, and Charles may have been trying to prevent Ellen from resurrecting Paimon, jettisoning any potential hosts; through suicide, the family wanted to deprive Paimon of human bodies to occupy. Indeed, Annie says in a dream sequence to Peter, 'I wasn't trying to kill you, I was trying to save you', explaining that her attempted murder of Peter was a way of preventing Paimon's possession of him. Moreover, the passing down of hereditary mental illness, familial abuse, and a literal curse from Ellen suggests intergenerational trauma specifically, meaning the transference of traumatic experiences and/or stressors from one generation to the next. Annie abuses Peter in a similar way to how Ellen abused Annie; Peter repeats Charles' suicide by leaping from the window; while the image of the decapitated Ellen, Annie, and Charlie shows three generations of Graham women as subject to the same traumatic fate.

Charlie's unusual appearance and behaviour are also indicative of forces stemming from either Paimon's possession or a developmental disability, which is again evocative of the naturalist tradition of characters doomed by their biological limits. The actress Milly Shapiro suffers from a rare genetic disorder called cleidocranial dysostosis.[20] Charlie also displays an extreme insouciance and lack of emotion, which can be read as Paimon's moral ineptitude that is interpreted as mental illness by observers; indeed, it is suggested that Paimon has possessed Charlie since she was an infant. Charlie barely speaks, instead making clicking sounds with

[19] Campbell, 'American Literary Naturalism', p. 501.
[20] Milly Shapiro (@millyshapiro), 'It was such an honor', Instagram, 8 March 2019 <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuuiPMxnnvN/?hl=en> [accessed 26 September 2026].

her tongue. This noise is either a symptom of her disability or Paimon's name, as Peter makes the same noise when he becomes possessed by Paimon. That Peter exhibits similar behaviour further suggests the hereditary nature of Charlie's condition. Additionally, Charlie partakes in unusual activities such as beheading a bird, which she uses as part of one of her homemade sculptures. This behaviour may be symptomatic of her disability or of Paimon's possession, as her sculptures match those featured at the altar in the Grahams' treehouse at the end of the film when Paimon is resurrected.

In this representation of Charlie, we get another dual metaphor whereby the illness can be attributed to both hereditary conditions and supernatural forces. These metaphors are relevant to metafictional determinism. Strengell observes that metafictional determinism such as King's combines horror with naturalism thematically. They note that 'a deterministic view of humankind […] links the Gothic and literary naturalism in King's fiction', adding that 'in Gothic fiction, fate rules human beings, and they are driven by their instincts'. Strengell asserts that King 'examines naturalistic themes by means of horror' and 'supernatural elements', with the gothic providing the 'background' of the narrative and naturalism lending the 'worldview'.[21] They further remark that *The Shining* (1977), for example, contains 'the supernatural motif of the haunted hotel' and that such 'horror elements [in] the story thematise the disintegration of the Torrance family'.[22] Likewise, the horror in *Hereditary* can be taken as stemming from either natural or supernatural sources.

Rough Plot Outlines

The natural and supernatural forces in *Hereditary* also double as metafictional references to the Grahams as characters within a horror film who are subject to the conventions of the genre and the control of a sadistic horror director. According to Aster, 'we are with the family in their ignorance […] but then there's […] this more sadistic, knowing perspective […]. The film itself knows what's happening […] we riddled the film with […] clues as to where we're going.'[23] In the film itself, this notion of rough plot outlines is evoked through dialogue. Annie's description of her family trauma at the bereavement group foretells the fate of the Grahams: Annie's description of Charles' suicide foreshadows that of Peter. Peter, like his uncle Charles, attempts to commit suicide so as to escape Ellen's cult, while Annie's suicide is similar in

[21] Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King*, pp. 12-13.
[22] Strengell, pp. 23-24.
[23] David Fear, '*Hereditary*: Inside the Making of a Modern Horror Classic', *Rolling Stone*, 12 June 2018 <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/hereditary-inside-the-making-of-a-modern-horror-classic-629141/> [accessed 10 July 2020].

appearance to a hanging, which is how Charles' killed himself. Annie, when possessed, levitates towards the attic ceiling and saws off her head with piano strings. These events are also foreshadowed in the horror film watched by Peter and his friends at the party that he and Charlie attend earlier in the film, in which an individual is shown being beheaded. *Hereditary*'s plot and central themes are likewise foretold via the lecture from Peter's teacher (Morgan Lund), who discusses Greek mythology, specifically the different legends of Hercules (or Heracles), who kills his children having been driven insane. Sophocles' play *The Women of Trachis* (c.450-425 BC) is also discussed, in which Heracles' death is foretold by an oracle, which dooms him to his fate. Peter's teacher ponders whether it is more tragic when a character causes their own downfall due to a fatal flaw or when their fate is predetermined. A student replies that the latter is 'more tragic, because if it's all just inevitable, that means the characters […] never had hope […] they're all just pawns in this horrible, helpless machine'.

Hereditary is naturalist in this latter sense, then, as Ellen's cult has orchestrated a number of different scenarios that will lead to Peter's possession, echoing the Zolaesque concept of the novelist as a scientist or experimental moralist, whereby characters are depicted as figures in a grand experiment to test their physical and emotional responses. Aster says that the cult's scheme is 'absolutely inevitable', and that if Annie had not performed the ritual, it 'would've happened anyway' because '[w]e're seeing one of the ways [the scheme] could play out'.[24] Aster asserts that any attempt by Annie to escape her fate is 'an empty gesture. Ultimately it's not her choice to […] There is a malicious logic at play.'[25] For instance, while Joan (the cultist who manipulates Annie into performing the summoning ritual for Paimon) meets Annie at the bereavement group, a shot of the Grahams' mail slot shows a pamphlet advertising a psychic medium, evidencing that Joan had originally tried to reach Annie in this way. This meeting, then, was going to take place no matter what because the cult is so powerful and has an extensive reach.

The strategy of plot outlines is also achieved visually. In *Hereditary* we see, as Gibbs says of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), an 'indeterminate bleeding between initially separate discursive layers'.[26] Analogously, when discussing Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film version of King's *The Shining*, Elisa Pezzotta states that the extradiegesis is recalled

[24] Jenelle Riley, '*Hereditary* Filmmaker Ari Aster Answers Burning Questions', *Variety*, 11 June 2018 <https://variety.com/2018/film/awards/hereditary-ari-aster-answers-burning-questions-1202841448/> [accessed 10 July 2020].
[25] Riley, '*Hereditary* Filmmaker', n. p.
[26] Gibbs, *Trauma*, p. 108.

through 'the evocation of the making of the film'.[27] In other words, there are metafictional references in the film to its production and behind-the-scenes content; in *The Shining*, for example, we see miniature models of the hotel that are in fact part of the film's set-design process.[28] I argue that in Aster's film, the plot outlines are likewise achieved in the way the extradiegesis is recalled through the evocation of the making of *Hereditary*. This includes the incorporation of miniature models of narratively significant props and film sets into scenes. Annie is a miniaturist artist, and her dioramas are miniature models of all the key locations in the film, including the Graham house, the nearby highway where Charlie dies, Peter's school where he will get possessed by Paimon, and the hospice where Ellen resided before her death. Annie's dioramas are detailed reproductions of the traumatic events in her life, and failed attempts to exercise power over these events. Bernice Murphy notes that it is 'as if, by recreating these sites externally, Annie can safely work though her obvious internal conflicts'.[29]

Dioramas and miniatures are also used by other characters and outline future scenes. As noted, Charlie's bird sculpture resembles that which appears in the treehouse in the final scene: after she is decapitated in a car accident orchestrated by the cult, Charlie's rotting head is placed atop a wooden statue that is holding a staff; her head is also crowned, and a bird cage hangs beside her. In this same scene, Peter possessed by Paimon is crowned by the cult and the crown itself resembles Charlie's bird sculpture. Charlie's drawings also foretell these events, in particular her sketch of a crowned bird and that of Peter with his eyes crossed out, while the cult possesses a photograph of Peter with holes punched through the eyes, which Peter finds in the Grahams' attic. That Peter's eyes are removed in the photograph and Charlie's drawing further foreshadows Peter's possession, as eyes are traditionally considered representative of the soul, and also references Sophocles' Oedipus, another character from Greek mythology who unwittingly fulfils a prophecy. Moreover, a miniature model of the final treehouse scene is visible in Joan's apartment. Joan's diorama features a crowned, bird-headed miniature with a number of smaller figures crouched before it. The diorama is surrounded by candles, sits atop a cluster of small tree branches, and again features an eyeless photograph of Peter at the centre. In the treehouse scene, the crowned Peter/Paimon stands before the cult members, who kneel before him in a similar manner to Joan's crouched figures and the group is surrounded by candles, while the headless bodies of Ellen and Annie are positioned in the same kneeling pose.

[27] Elisa Pezzotta, *Stanley Kubrick: Adapting the Sublime* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p. 142.
[28] Sean Travers, *Trauma in American Popular Culture and Cult Texts, 1980-2020* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 57.
[29] Bernice M. Murphy, '*Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects*', *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 17 (2018), pp. 179-85 (p. 185).

Miniatures are a frequent trope in horror and horror-adjacent texts.[30] However, the incorporation of miniatures is especially apt for a metafictional deterministic horror such as *Hereditary*, in which lack of agency and the illusion of control are themes. For instance, Aviva Briefel says that 'dollhouses are akin to smallscale worlds over which one has some control'.[31] Similarly, Dagmar Motcyka Weston notes the history of the use of miniatures in establishing personal and religious control: 'The size of a doll's house provides us with a marvellous power to see and control the life within. […] In medieval representation of the creation, God is sometimes portrayed as the great designer.'[32] In using miniatures in this way in *Hereditary*, Aster achieves a new cinematic way of depicting the metafictional determinist trope of the rough plot outline.

Certain scenes in *Hereditary* also appear like flashforwards. As Pezzotta says of *The Shining*, the diegetic world is also 'evoked in the diegesis itself through the presence of scenes that recall previous scenes' and 'foretell subsequent events'.[33] The latter scenes 'work like flashforwards', which 'announce events that are to follow', or can be interpreted in terms of 'cross-references and repetitions' between scenes.[34] Similar techniques can be found in *Hereditary*, which I interpret as a specifically cinematic variation of the rough plot outline, which determines characters' fates in naturalist texts. Such scenes signal the presence of Aster as an omnipotent director in a similar vein to the characteristic of metafictional determinism of the author making 'his own presence known in his fiction'.[35] That is, the way in which a number of sequences mirror one another in *Hereditary* underscores that the Grahams are trapped in a predetermined chain of events devised by Aster. In doing so, Aster marries the feminist naturalistic trope of characters trapped in circular narratives of familial stasis (such as how the protagonist in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) falls prey to the same fate as her mother) with gothic repetitious narratives, where progress and escape are constantly thwarted for female protagonists (such as Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892)).

[30] Examples include Shirley Jackson's *The Sundial* (1958), Stephen King's miniseries *Rose Red* (2002), Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby* (2003), Marti Noxon's and Jean-Marc Vallée's series *Sharp Objects* (2018) based on Gillian Flynn's 2006 novel of the same name, and Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020).
[31] Aviva Briefel, 'The Terror of Very Small Worlds: Hereditary and the Miniature Scales of Horror', *Discourse*, 44.3 (2022), pp. 314-27 (p. 314).
[32] Dagmar Motycka Weston, '"Worlds in Miniature": Some Reflections on Scale and the Microcosmic Meaning of Cabinets of Curiosities', *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 13.1 (2009), pp. 37-48 (abstract).
[33] Pezzotta, *Stanley Kubrick*, p. 142.
[34] Ibid.; and Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (Routledge, 1981), p. 56.
[35] Petterson, *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 138.

For instance, the cultists present at the beginning of the film appear later when Peter is possessed, and they exhibit almost identical gestures and facial expressions to those in the earlier scenes. These cultists include the man at the funeral who smiles at Charlie, who later emerges nude from a darkened room when Peter is pursued by the possessed Annie, and who exhibits the same pose and smiling expression. Likewise, the woman who waves at Charlie through the school gates as she decapitates the bird is present in the attic and waves in a similar manner at Peter. Furthermore, when Peter is briefly possessed at school, Paimon compels Peter to slam his head against his desk and raise his arm, contorting Peter's hand into an unusual position. This sequence parallels the later imagery of Annie banging her head against the attic door when possessed, while Peter's hand gesture is a similar shape to that of the sculpted hand at the end of the staff held by the Charlie-sculpture. The sequence of Annie repetitively banging her head also parallels the earlier close-up of the nuts being chopped for the cake that Charlie consumes at the party, in terms of sound, movement, and their combined rhythm. Similarly, David Church observes that Charlie's decapitation echoes the earlier scene where the bird strikes her classroom window and her subsequent beheading of the bird, and is an early intimation that 'Charlie's tragic death has been predestined all along'.[36] The entire film is a series of tightly interrelated images that echo off one another and bind the characters in a web of meaning and foreshadowing that they cannot escape.

Aster the World Creator

In this way, *Hereditary* continuously reminds the viewer that the world of the film and its characters are created and determined by an omnipotent director. Aster asserts that Annie's 'miniature figures and dollhouses' are 'a perfect metaphor for the situation'; the characters are 'dolls in a dollhouse being manipulated by outside forces'.[37] Further, Aster employs various techniques to make the Grahams appear like figures in one of Annie's dioramas, rendering them as doll-like beings that are controlled and manipulated by a larger outside force. This dramatises the naturalist theme of the non-contingent humanity/animality that undergirds human existence, as the Grahams are dehumanised and reduced to their movement. *Hereditary* opens with a shot of the Graham treehouse outside a window in a miniaturist's studio. The camera pans to a miniature of the Graham house with the front wall removed, and zooms in on a replica of Peter's bedroom. This shot transitions into a shot of Peter's actual bedroom, with

[36] David Church, *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), p. 90.
[37] Riley, '*Hereditary* Filmmaker', n. p.

Peter sleeping in his bed and Steve entering to wake him. This dollhouse aesthetic is achieved throughout the film. The Graham house was built and shot on a soundstage, so the crew could remove walls and film the actors from further away than would be possible if shooting in an actual house, enabling them to pull out and get wider shots. As with the 'sadistic, knowing perspective' described by Aster (above), this filming technique can be read as a cinematic approach to the naturalist, objective representation of violence and tragedy.

Campbell says of naturalist texts that 'what is shocking is not […] [the] violence […] but the naturalistic story's casual acceptance of violence […] as an ordinary part of life'.[38] Annie's dioramas further evoke this objective, naturalistic perspective when Steve chastises her for recreating a miniature of Charlie's death, to which Annie replies: 'it's a neutral view of the accident'. The diorama depicts the accident exactly as it was shown in the film; Charlie is not emphasised in the diorama and is merely an object among many, including the car and the post. Annie's neutrality links with the overall mechanical pacing of the film. Indeed, Church notes that 'Aster affectively conveys the "mechanical" feeling of inevitably unfolding events via his predominant use of slow camera movements, as if largely indifferent of the raw human emotions on display'.[39] Church adds that Aster employs long and wide shots, rather than jump scares, to reveal horrific content, such as Annie's levitation and the coven members standing outside the house (to ensure that their plan to manipulate Annie into resurrecting Paimon plays out as intended). In a number of scenes, such as Charlie's burial, the camera sinks as if below the ground, to make the Grahams appear as though inside a terrarium. Similarly, the day-to-night transitions in the establishing long shots of the Graham house at the beginning are filmed in jump cuts, the house taking on the appearance of a dollhouse in a life-sized room in which someone turns off a light switch. An analogous day-to-night transition sequence frames Peter as a doll; a shot of Peter sitting on his bed at night jump cuts to one of him sitting in the same position at his school desk the next day. Likewise, Ellen, Annie, and Charlie are all reduced to life-sized, doll-like figures belonging to the cult: Ellen and Annie's beheaded corpses are positioned by the cult as kneeling before Paimon, and Charlie's head is made into part of a sculpture. Church notes that this closing long shot is rendered 'as yet another miniature tableau'.[40] These techniques again render the Grahams as doll-like figures bereft of agency and moved around by larger forces.

[38] Campbell, 'American Literary Naturalism', p. 501.
[39] Church, *Post-Horror*, p. 90.
[40] Church, *Post-Horror*, p. 90.

A further metafictional deterministic trope employed by Aster in *Hereditary* is his overt evocation of multiple horror tropes and references to other horror films, positioning the Grahams as characters within a horror film and subject to the disturbing conventions of the genre. As noted previously, Aster was influenced by a range of iconic horror films, including Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), with the close-up of Annie's wide-eyed expression as she saws off her head being identical to that of Carrie (Sissy Spacek) when she massacres her fellow students at the prom; and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) when the candle flame shoots upwards during Annie's ritual (in *The Exorcist*, Chris searches the attic with a candle for light, and the candle's flame inexplicably erupts and startles her). Kubrick's *The Shining* is also referenced via the slow zoom on the miniature Graham house, and Annie's silent scream as Steve dies (a reference to Danny's silent scream when Jack encounters the woman in Room 237). Church interprets such references, echoing the film's themes of inheritance: 'repressed traits are resurfacing within the Graham family […] much like *Hereditary*'s own relationship to its textual predecessors in both art and horror cinema'.[41]

The Grahams also appear to inhabit a host of varying roles, as though compelled by Aster to try out different clichéd horror personas and tropes. Charlie evokes the trope of the evil child; Peter can be likened to the trope of the 'final girl', as he exaggeratingly cries and screams throughout the film and is, in a sense, the sole survivor of the Grahams; while Annie's climbing of the walls of the house, levitation, and inhumanly fast head-banging against the attic door resemble demonic movie monsters popular in the zombie and possession sub-genres, such as Andy Muschietti's *It Chapter Two* (2019), Danny and Michael Philippou's *Talk to Me* (2022), and Parker Finn's *Smile* (2022). Possession is also an apt metaphor for deterministic forces, as an individual is literally controlled by an external agent. However, this theme is likewise significant to reading *Hereditary* in terms of metafictional determinism, as possession is a horror trope that renders the Grahams as horror-film characters whose actions are at the mercy of Aster. The Grahams, then, are literally possessed both by Aster and by the tropes and conventions that he wields.

Aster's Autobiographical Persona

Indeed, the director makes his own presence known in *Hereditary*, with the cult and Paimon being possible avatars for Aster. Just as Aster does in writing the film, Paimon and the cult members devise a specific chain of events that lead to Peter's possession. That the cult has

[41] Church, p. 88.

orchestrated a number of scenarios that will lead to Peter's possession adds a further, metafictional dimension to this tradition, as the different scenarios can be likened to the narrative possibilities considered by Aster, and the various outcomes to which he can subject his characters, as John Barth does in 'Lost in the Funhouse' (1968). The cult as a metaphor for Aster is also evident in Charlie's death. When Peter and Charlie go to a party, Charlie has an allergic reaction to a cake and Peter attempts to drive her to the hospital. Charlie puts her head out of the window as Peter swerves the car to avoid an animal carcass that was placed on the highway by the cult, and his sister is decapitated by a nearby utility post. This scene was preceded by a close-up of the post with Paimon's symbol carved into it as Peter and Charlie drive to the party, further establishing the cult's involvement in the event. Equally significant in terms of metafictional determinism is that fact that Aster highlights this scene as telling the viewer that they 'are no longer in control of' the narrative; they are 'in the filmmaker's hands'.[42]

The viewer is initially likely to believe that Charlie will be the film's villain due to her unique appearance and behaviour, with *Hereditary*'s initial sequences encouraging the viewer in the belief that an antagonistic Charlie will be the centre around which the narrative turns. Such scenes include Charlie's decapitation of the bird, the cultist smiling at Charlie, and Charlie staring at Ellen's corpse as though in a trance, which Crittenden notes conveys 'a creeping feeling that Ellen's influence will weigh heavily for generations to come'.[43] However, such scenes are a false lead. Murphy likewise observes that '[t]he extent to which Charlie's alarming behaviour is focused upon during the opening scenes' leads viewers to believe that *Hereditary* 'was going to be yet another entry in the "evil child" canon'.[44] Consequently, 'when she is killed off less than half an hour into the film's running time, it comes as a complete surprise', this subversion of tropes reminding the viewer that the film is a fictional world controlled by Aster.[45]

Moreover, Paimon, when not possessing one of the Grahams, is depicted as a shimmering blue light that waves across the film's sets. Paimon's light guides the Grahams to particular locations, just as Aster as director determines their movements. For example, Annie's paint bottle mysteriously spills on a piece of paper containing Joan's phone number, guiding Annie to contact Joan. The bottle in the foreground of the scene clearly falls over before Annie reaches for it, and Paimon's light is visible outside of the window behind Annie. The same light

[42] Jordan Crucchiola, 'Explaining the End of *Hereditary*', *Vulture*, 11 June 2018 <https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/explaining-the-end-of-hereditary.html> [accessed 10 July 2020].
[43] Crittenden, 'Inner Dread', p. 25.
[44] Murphy, '*Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects*', p. 180.
[45] Ibid.

flashes into Charlie's bedroom and leads her to the field where Ellen's corpse is being prepared by the cultists. In this scene, footprints are visible in the overhead shot of Charlie walking towards the field. While the footprints most likely belong to the cultists, the image of Charlie following footsteps suggests Aster's mapping out of his characters' movement, the employment of a map-like, overhead shot further underscoring this idea. Paimon's light also guides Peter to look at his reflection in class, which smiles back at him, frightening Peter to the extent that he returns home. The same light later guides Peter back to the classroom where he is momentarily possessed by Paimon.

Similarly, Ellen's cultists are also visible in the background of certain scenes. While this suggests the cult's orchestration of events, it simultaneously positions the cultists as similar to film-crew members who are accidently caught on camera. The cultists can be briefly seen surrounding the Graham house in the night-time shot of the dwelling. Certain cultists who appear in the final treehouse scene can be spotted posing as members of Annie's bereavement group, as well as at the party that Peter and Charlie attend (which suggests the cult's responsibility for putting the nuts into the cake). Additionally, a cultist can be faintly made out standing behind Peter in the attic before Annie's suicide; and when the Grahams return home from Ellen's funeral, footsteps and a door closing can be heard. This is most likely the cultists placing Ellen's desecrated corpse in the attic, but at the same time evokes a film crew arranging the set. Furthermore, there are scenes that show the Grahams from the first-person perspective of the cult members who surround the house, likening the cult's perspective to that of Aster the horror director peering through the camera. Aster remarks that viewers are supposed 'to feel […] there are people on the periphery that are watching this family and are hovering just outside'.[46] Indeed, a plume of mist in the air is visible in the foreground of the shot outside Peter's bedroom window at night, suggesting the breath of one of the cultists.

In this way, *Hereditary*'s formal techniques and imagery can be likened to Aster mapping out the narrative. Paimon's symbol is visible in locations where pivotal narrative events occur. In addition to the post that decapitates Charlie, this symbol appears on the Graham's attic wall when Annie discovers Ellen's decapitated corpse and realises her family is at the mercy of the cult. The cult drew these symbols, indicating their hand in these events, but these drawings simultaneously render the world of *Hereditary* as a film-set map in which Aster marks significant set pieces. Annie also unknowingly wears this symbol on a necklace, positioning her, too, as a part of Aster's storyboard, while the writing scratched into the walls

[46] Crucchiola, 'Explaining the End', n. p.

of the Graham house appear like notes written by Aster as he plans the narrative. The camera zooms into the following etchings: 'satony', 'liftoach', 'pandemonium', and 'zazas'. *Satony* is a word used in necromancy, *liftoach* is Hebrew for 'open', pandemonium means chaos or the term for capital of Hell used in Paradise Lost, and *zazas* refers to a demon who is frequently conjured by Ouija boards. These words foreshadow major events and themes in the film, including the chaos inflicted upon the Grahams, the séance that Joan manipulates Annie into performing, and Paimon's resurrection from hell. Once again, these cinematic techniques emphasise the Grahams as subject to the whims of the film's omnipotent and sadistic horror director, and present new cinematic ways of depicting metafictional determinism.

Conclusion

As all of this suggests, *Hereditary* provides a cinematic representation of metafictional determinism. Aster's film combines naturalist themes with supernatural elements, and exploits the characteristics of the film medium and horror genre to rework techniques of metafictional determinism, including rough plot outlines, the representation of the text's world as created and determined by the writer, and the intrusion of the text's writer via an autobiographical persona. Aster's film is a supreme instance of naturalism's resurgence in horror cinema, and presents a unique subgenre of horror. Further examples, a full examination of which is beyond the scope of this article, include Aster's *Midsommar* (2019), Andre Øvredal's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (2019), Amy Seimetz's *She Dies Tomorrow* (2020), and Natalie Erika James' *Relic* (2020). In addition to running parallel with the wider resurgence of naturalism in culture, the reasons why horror specifically has turned to naturalism can be linked with Ron Breton's analysis of 2010s horror. Breton dubs this decade's horror as 'Grief Horror', and considers these fatalistic narratives as a grief response to the nihilism and extreme violence of the post-9/11 horror cinema of the 2000s, mirroring the psychoanalytic theory of the five stages of grief.[47] Grief, being inextricable from death, can likewise be considered a naturalist theme, as death is an unavoidable life event over which individuals have no control. Considering both the resurgence of naturalism since 9/11 and the theme of grief, the trend of naturalism in 2010s horror is fitting. Ultimately, *Hereditary*'s cinematic engagement with naturalism expands the

[47] Ron Breton, 'The Decade of Grief Horror: Reflecting on Shared Themes in the Horror Movies of the 2010s', *Bloody Disgusting*, 30 July 2021 <https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3675480/decade-grief-horror-reflecting-shared-themes-horror-movies-2010s/> [accessed 8 September 2023].

scope of the latter as a mode of representation and demonstrates, as Campbell asserts, that naturalism has 'never really left' the American cultural landscape.[48]

[48] Campbell, 'American Literary Naturalism', p. 503.

BOOK REVIEWS: LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

***Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben**
(Brill Rodopi, 2020)

Biofiction is, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben note in their edited collection *Neo-Victorian Biofiction*, always implicated in an uneasy exchange between authorial liberty and authenticity. In an era shaped by 'contemporary confessional culture, with its simultaneous promise and violation of intimacy' (p. 18), Kohlke and Gutleben suggest that historical biofiction appeals to a distinctly twenty-first century desire for proximity with famous figures, and one that has been fulfilled across literary genres. Meanwhile, biofiction that is specifically *neo-Victorian*, with all the implications around reflexivity and metafictionality that the term entails, perhaps more than any other form of biographical writing exposes the problems of authenticity in these retellings, as well as their ethical implications. As historical biofiction offers opportunities for 'mediating, remediating, and shaping' contemporary understandings of real-life figures (p. 5), the genre raises important questions around authorial responsibility, and the risks of revisionist or reductionist narratives.

Kohlke and Gutleben's edited collection foregrounds these potential problems in the genre, highlighting the particular ways in which the nineteenth century has been mined for modern retellings. Kohlke and Gutleben's Introduction offers a definitive examination of biofiction within the neo-Victorian critical context, laying out the existing arguments within this critical field. The essays that follow each offer a new strand to this conversation and throughout, analysis is specialised and definitive without becoming obscure. Split into three complimentary sections, the collection traces the neo-Victorian biofictional impulse through a number of theoretical approaches. The first of these sections, 'Truths and Post-Truths', introduces the fundamental question of 'authenticity' with which neo-Victorianism, and particularly biofiction, struggles. The second, 'Forms of Otherness and (Re)Othering', engages particularly with ethical issues around representation and the voyeuristic tendencies of the genre. The final section, 'Afterlives of Fame and Infamy', is concerned with the legacies involved in the creation of biofiction, which aspects of the biofictional subject are retained by future writers and readers, and for what purpose. The collection is comprehensive, looking at

a range of neo-Victorian texts across various media, and each chapter offers a different, insightful analysis of examples of the biofiction genre.

Despite this diversity of perspectives, the collection has been well structured to reveal thematic crossovers between essays. Several chapters in the collection look to the recurring theme of authorship, for example, discussing the representation of Victorian authors and the process of writing in biofiction. Charlotte Boyce's chapter, '"Who in the World am I?": Truth, Identity, and Desire in Biofictional Representations of Lewis Caroll and Alice Liddell', opens the collection, and explores several recent depictions of Lewis Caroll and his relationship with muse, Alice Liddell. Arguing that 'the author-figure is consequently deified through his textual output' (p. 66), Boyce neatly encapsulates the problem of the recurring author figure in neo-Victorian biofiction, exploring whether such depictions are informed more readily by biographical material or by the fictions that these figures have produced. Authorial construction is therefore another key consideration of the chapter, which draws parallels between the diegetic process of authorship and the extra-diegetic process of biography. Emphasising the role of biography as a form that not only documents but actively *shapes* the legacies of its subject, Boyce highlights the ways in which neo-Victorian biofiction self-consciously engages with the subjectivity of historical record.

Jeanne Ellis's chapter, 'The Vivisectionist's Tale: Auto/Biographical Voice and the Queer Fictions of Empire in Ann Harries's *Manly Pursuits*', also looks to the authorial implications of neo-Victorian biofiction. Framing the auto/biographer as vivisectionist, who might choose and remove aspects from their source material, Ellis discusses the relationship between contemporary writers and their Victorian predecessors as a process of rediscovering, reinterrogating, and repurposing. Matthew Croft's essay on George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman papers emphasises the role of the reader in disentangling these kinds of cross-temporal narratives, affirming the link in the genre between authorship and readership in deconstructing the legacies of biofictional subjects.

Spectrality forms another key concern of this collection, with Kohlke and Gutleben reminding readers that the subjects of neo-Victorian biofiction are 'long since dead but conveniently resuscitated' (p. 2). Such language feeds into the idea of writers of biofiction as resurrectionists, not only dissecting and reconstructing the legacies of historical figures as Ellis details, but also invoking them as ghostly presences. Kohlke and Gutleben refer to biofiction's tendency to emphasise the 'spectral presence of past lives' (p. 8), arguing later in their Introduction that, '[c]hannelling the voices of the dead, biofiction itself becomes a kind of creative mediumistic performance' (p. 19). This formal interest in spectrality is also often, as

they note, reflected in a thematic consideration of mediumship, for example in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). Considering the subjects of biofictions as themselves ghostly presences is a trope picked up by Boyce, who quotes (p. 75) Lucie Armitt's reading of the *Alice* books, and her hope that 'these ghosts will speak to me, and through their own mouths. In other words I treat it as history/biography, while knowing it's *only* a novel, pure make-believe.'[1] This idea of biofiction granting the dead a 'voice' also feeds into issues of representation in the genre, its potential for unearthing previously supressed perspectives. In her chapter 'Biofiction Goes Global: Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*, Dickens, and the Lost Child', Catherine Lanone refers to the 'ghostly figure of silenced Tasmanians' (p. 245), suggesting that this spectrality might offer opportunities for the representation of historically marginalised figures, whose haunting presence is a reminder of other characters' complicity in imperial violence.

Complicity is often turned on the reader in biofiction, as subjects are self-consciously displayed for the consumption of a modern readership. In her essay, 'Us and Them? Joseph Merrick in Neo-Victorian Children's Fiction', Helen Davies begins to delve deeper into the collection's earlier considerations around the ethics of fictionalisation. Her critique of narratives that, rather than reimagining 'agency for the disempowered', actually offer 'revisionary portrayals' of subjects with unusual and/or disabled bodies (p. 168), focuses on Joseph Merrick and the ableist language often employed in biofictional depictions. By focusing on children's fiction in particular, Davies exposes the pervasiveness of this language, the ways even seemingly benign representations of historical figures can become spectacle.

Children's literature is one of several under-investigated areas of biofiction that the collection aims to highlight, and a number of chapters look at biofiction across textual and non-textual forms. Marc Napolitano, for example, frames a discussion of biofiction within a non-prosaic medium, looking at how musical performances reinscribe the mythology surrounding the Lizzie Borden murders. In many of these performances, Napolitano points out, 'the idea of Lizzie as a silent sufferer, who finds her "voice" through singing and, eventually, through violent self-assertion, is central' (p. 370). However, as Davies argues in relation to stories about Joseph Merrick, Napolitano stresses here that the reader/watcher of these performances becomes uneasily implicated in an act of narrative manipulation. Lucy Smith's 'Julia Margaret Cameron and Archival Imagination: Materiality and Subjectivity in Biofictions of a Victorian Photographer' looks to the creation of biofictional prose from historical photography,

[1] Lucie Armitt, '"Stranger and Stranger": Alice and Dodgson in *Katie Roiphe's Still She Haunts Me*', *Women: A Cultural Review* 15.2 (2004), 167-79 (p. 169, emphasis in original).

highlighting the difficulties of reimagining the single moment of a photograph. Sylvia Mieszkowski, meanwhile, applies an analytical method from film production and photography to prosaic biofiction, installing texts in an arrangement of 'cross-lighting' (p. 267). Focusing on biofictions of Richard Francis Burton, Mieszkowski suggests that Burton's own writings can provide the 'key light' for the scene that is his life, with later biofictions operating as 'fill lights' which 'alleviate shadows cast by the main light' (p. 272). Reading these chapters together, it becomes clear that biofiction often interrogates its key themes both thematically and formally, looking to nineteenth-century culture and technology as framing devices for its narratives. As Mieszkowski highlights, understanding neo-Victorian biofiction within its dual temporal contexts illuminates new perspectives on the genre's continuing relevance, as well as its historical authenticity.

In addition to thematic continuities between these chapters, there are also theoretical strands that tie the essays together across the collection. Several essays, for example, approach these ethical questions from within a firmly philosophical framework. Roberta Gefer Wondrich's 'Biofictional Author Figures and Post-Authentic Truths' introduces an analysis of biofiction as being 'appraised in the light of the relationship between literature and the philosophical notions of value and truth' (p. 104), going on to define and examine the concept of the 'post-authentic' in these works. Laura Savu Walker similarly positions her essay, 'The Silence and the Roar: Resonant Encounters with George Eliot', as drawing on a phenomenological reading. Again examining the biofictional representation of authors, Walker considers biofiction to be 'violating the ontological boundaries between the real and the fictional' (p. 150), addressing the fundamental liminality of the genre of biofiction.

This collection thus offers a rich and varied approach to neo-Victorian biofiction, drawing together a number of recurring concerns of the genre. These chapters highlight the breadth of neo-Victorian biofiction, considering texts across the generic spectrum. The collection is also structured so as to reveal points of connection between various forms of media and theoretical approaches, particularly through the section headings, which neatly encapsulate three key concerns of the genre. This text will be a welcome intervention in neo-Victorian Studies, and of significant interest to scholars researching biofiction more broadly.

Rosalind Crocker

***Shirley Jackson: A Companion*, ed. by Kristopher Woofter**
(Peter Lang, 2021)

It was once *de rigueur* to start every critical piece about Shirley Jackson (1916-65) with the then sad truth that Jackson was not given her critical due and deserved greater attention. Happily, this is no longer the case, and the edited collection *Shirley Jackson: A Companion* joins other recent critical work signalling this change in Jackson's literary status. As editor Kristopher Woofter states in the Introduction to this collection, the 'primary objective is to offer a comprehensive critical engagement of Jackson's work, inclusive of those texts that have received less scholarly attention' (p. 11). It is therefore heartening that the collection opens with Jackson biographer Ruth Franklin drawing attention to Jackson's academic work, particularly an essay she wrote for college about Ernest Hemingway. Jackson criticism has yet to adequately explore her position as a reader and writer within a wider intellectual community, so Franklin's foregrounding of this element sets the stage for a collection that attempts to take a broad approach to a wide variety of Jackson's writings. It is also heartening that Woofter's Introduction focuses on Jackson's unfinished novel *Come Along With Me* (1968) and its only adaptation, which was produced for the PBS television anthology series American Playhouse in 1982. Both texts could use more critical attention, and this Introduction is a welcome start that also usefully frames the content that follows.

However, though this collection attempts to invite many different perspectives and approaches to Jackson's work, the result is a little uneven. There are some very strong pieces here that add much-needed analysis to the critical landscape, some even approaching what are often well-trod topics in Jackson criticism from completely new directions. For example, houses are a common critical focus, often explored in repetitive ways, but there are some pieces here that reinvigorate this topic. Luke Reid's chapter, 'Romancing the Nostalgic Future: Prophecy, Planning, and Postwar Architecture in *The Sundial*', builds from previous critical work by Darryl Hattenhauer and Richard Pascal to read the apocalyptic imagination in this novel through postwar planning and design, with some discussion of race and class (though Reid could have gone further in discussing both). Dara Downey's chapter, '"No One Can Ever Find Me": Gingerbread Houses in Shirley Jackson's Fiction', covers how Jackson's engagement with gingerbread houses and witch imagery comments on the interplay of private space and public intolerance of non-conforming women in postwar America. Similarly, Rebecca Stone Gordon's chapter on Theodora in *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) shifts the

focus of how critics usually approach characterisation in the novel, because '[t]o center Theo is to queer the text and to highlight how she represents the possibility of a fulfilling life outside dominant cultural norms' (p. 220). Carl H. Sederholm provides a much-needed extension of the existing literature on the intersection of Jackson's work with Stephen King's, an area that still requires further examination, as King has been very vocal about being a Jackson fan (see, for example, his dedication in *Firestarter* (1980) or his discussion of her work in *Danse Macabre* (1981)). However, Sederholm centres King's writing in the discussion, particularly the way King 'brings Jackson into his larger fictional project' (p. 67). It would be useful in general to have more work on the two authors that centres Jackson in the discussion, though any critical exploration of the textual relationship between Jackson and King is welcome.

Some of the strongest entries here cover texts or topics that have not been explored before, such as Daniel Kasper's analysis of editorial authority and the authorial voice in the two posthumously published versions of 'The Honeymoon of Mrs Smith' (1996), including a much-needed close reading of the texts. Kasper also explores class within the stories, a topic that needs more attention in Jackson criticism. The final section of the collection covers adaptations, and Will Dodson's chapter on *Lizzie*, the 1957 film adaptation of *The Bird's Nest* (1954), and Woofter's own discussion of the 1997 Hungarian adaptation of Jackson's short story 'The Bus' (1965) are real standouts. Michelle Kay Hansen's chapter on Jackson's cartoons, which to the best of my knowledge have never been approached critically before, is perhaps the most exciting entry, in my opinion. Hansen explores how Jackson's sparse-yet-lively cartoons betray both a desire for expression and a fragmenting of the self that were common characteristics of the plight of middle-class white women in postwar America. Stephanie Graves's 'Wicked Creature(s): Delirium and Difference in *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*' is the first piece of criticism I know of that focuses primarily on Jackson's 1956 history book for young readers, placing it within its publishing context and showing how Jackson's approach undermines the status quo of both the book series of which it is a part and standard readings of the Salem Witch 'hysteria'.

Graves's chapter also takes a personal approach, which is used sparingly and works well, situating Graves within the audience for the text as she tells of her personal interaction with the book as a young reader. There is another personal essay in this collection, Rebecca Million's 'Living an Aporia: Notes on Shirley Jackson's Home Books and the Impossible-Possible of Motherhood', that is not as effective at bringing the personal into the critical, for two main reasons. The first reason is a lack of enough textual evidence to back up certain claims, for example the assertion that 'it is difficult to locate the subject in Jackson's stories of

family life' (p. 161). Including some quotations from Jackson's writings immediately after might have helped to support this statement, particularly because Jackson herself carefully constructed a narrative 'I' that was intentionally distant from her fictionalised persona. The second reason is that the personal, when applied generally, can be problematically limiting. For example, Million describes the labour of childbirth as 'that moment where the woman is more fully embodied that [*sic*] at any other time in her life' (p. 164), a statement that denies the embodied experiences of many women who choose not to or cannot give birth, as well as people who give birth that are not women. With a more academic framework and more evidence, this essay could have retained the personal focus while better bolstering its own assertions.

There is a plethora of other pieces in this collection, too many to discuss in detail. Some are interesting and useful, while others are less successful at approaching common themes in Jackson criticism in fresh ways, including a few that completely neglect to engage with the existing critical history and attempt to reinvent the wheel. Some chapters lean so heavily on theory that they fail to present enough textual evidence from Jackson's work to support their theses. However, there is such variety here that the high points make the volume worth the attention of any Jackson scholar. Additionally, like other volumes in the Peter Lang *Genre Fiction and Film Companions* series (edited by Simon Bacon), the volume is visually interesting, with full-colour illustrations, including some of Jackson's previously unpublished cartoons, stills from adaptations, and a reproduction of the cover of *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*. A summary of the main topics of each chapter runs down the side of each page for easier searching. In all, this is a welcome addition to Jackson criticism that should be incredibly useful for Jackson scholars, while also offering pieces that general readers would appreciate.

Janice Lynne Deitner

Evert Jan van Leeuwen, *House of Usher*
(Auteur Publishing/Liverpool University Press, 2019)

The 'Devil's Advocates' series from Auteur Publishing, a series of books each focused on a single horror film, gives authors a set of affordances (such as discretion about how to approach talking about the movie), with a set of constraints to match (most obviously, a short length). Evert Jan van Leeuwen's contribution, on the American International Pictures film *House of Usher* (dir. by Roger Corman, 1960), is somewhat lighter on production history than some others in the series. However, the trade-off is that it features more textual analysis than most in the series, including some approaches to the film that I had never considered. On the whole, it is an informative read, but might work best when paired with some of the biographical and oral-history material out there on Corman, to produce a more holistic view of the film, especially with regards to Corman's business practices and the longer arc of his career.[1] That said, there is good material in the book on Edgar Allan Poe and his original story, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), as well as some valuable material that considers the film as a youth movie at the moment of that genre's ascendancy.

Poe's story was first published in 1839, and Corman first read it in high school around 100 years later (p. 11). Van Leeuwen notes that Corman read it alongside pulp science fiction and horror, as did many others his age, and that the sensibilities of Romanticist gothic horror and exciting contemporary genre fiction therefore became entwined for him (p. 11). The ability to work from historical trends in the context of contemporary tastes was a constant for Corman. His cycle (as a producer) of post-*Bonnie and Clyde* gangster pictures for New World Pictures in the 1970s, such as *Big Bad Mama* (dir. by Steve Carver, 1974) and *The Lady in Red* (dir. by Lewis Teague, 1979), are a case in point, where thrillers from the hard-boiled crime genre of the Depression Era are made anew for young audiences with a taste for exploitation cinema.

Towards the end of the book, van Leeuwen shows how *House of Usher* was calculated to appeal to youth audiences, whose interests had come to be served not only by prior Corman films, including the then-recently released beatnik shocker *A Bucket of Blood* (1959), but also by movies featuring young, brooding actors such as Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (dir. by Laszlo Benedek, 1953) and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (dir. by Nicholas Ray, 1955). Beyond the good looks of Mark Damon (as Philip Winthrop) and Myrna Fahey (as Madeline

[1] See Beverly Gray, *Roger Corman: Blood-Sucking Vampires, Flesh-Eating Cockroaches, and Driller Killers* (AZ Ferris Publications, 2013); *Roger Corman: Interviews*, ed. by Constantine Nasr (University Press of Mississippi, 2011); and the documentary *Corman's World: Exploits of a Hollywood Rebel* (dir. by Alex Stapleton, 2011).

Usher), the frustrated situation of Vincent Price's Roderick Usher had its own appeal. Van Leeuwen notes that 'the plot encourages the presumed adolescent audience to sympathise with Price's misfit, despite the increasingly unhinged state of his mind and appearance' (p. 73). Price achieves this not only with his performance, which stresses big gestures and agonised facial expressions (p. 74), but also with the whole set-up of Usher's curse. As van Leeuwen puts it:

> This sense of imprisonment in the family home must have struck a chord with adolescent audiences who were probably at the cinema to get away from their parents. The daily life experienced by Roderick would be the very nightmare future scenario teenagers would be dreading: a life of 24/7 domestic imprisonment brought about by the wrongs of the fathers. In teenage terms Roderick has been grounded indefinitely, which must make him sympathetic. (p. 73)

While Corman's own sympathies with youth issues would only become more extreme and switched-on over the course of the next decade (culminating with the drug-centric narratives of *The Trip* (1967) and *Gas-s-s-s-s* (1970)), he shows himself at this stage to be able to make something as esoteric as a Poe short story relevant to the teens of his day.

Two other areas of van Leeuwen's analysis deserve specific praise: his handling of the plot and its relation to the screenplay (and along with it, his discussion of Richard Matheson's adaptation of Poe's story); and the visual style of the film, which perhaps more than anything accounts for the movie's longevity, and its eventual inclusion on the United States National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. Van Leeuwen deals with the strange plot of Poe's tale early in this book, noting its atypical structure. Instead of horror's usual staging of disruptions to the status quo, he sees Poe's story as structured around 'lengthy introductions leading to the revelation of a horrific or darkly wonderful tableau' (p. 23). In adapting the story, one of the challenges discussed is the narrative externalisation of some of the interior horrors and anguish experienced by Philip and Roderick, which the author shows to be recalibrated to suit filmic monologues and a talking through of experiences (pp. 42-43). Corman also retains Poe's sense of the story as about suppressed familial revelations that come bursting forth, in this case through lush colour cinematography.

Like other books in the 'Devil's Advocates' series, this one makes good use of small frame grabs presented in sequence. In the passages exploring the film's *mise en scène*, these are especially helpful. I particularly liked the contextualisation of visual elements from *House of Usher* next to other Corman films like *War of the Satellites* (1958), or in terms of Romantic art works, such as when van Leeuwen compares the matte paintings in the film to works by Caspar David Friedrich (pp. 45-54). Despite his penchant for showmanship and exploitative

money making, Corman emerges here as an erudite man, able to make visual references to *vanitas* compositions, and to allude to expressionist paintings while also indulging the morbid fantasies of the audience in more directly unsettling ways.

With Corman recently passing away at 98, a work like *House of Usher* seems even more remarkable for its maturity, despite it being made by a director who was then barely in middle age, and who clearly had young audiences in mind at a time when that market was just emerging. Corman continued to chase youth audiences later in his career, though often tried to reconcile it with his literate sensibilities, as in his last film as a director, *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990). Corman was so long lived that his career continued as these audiences steadily fractured into ever more niche fandoms, and as the ritual of teen movie going underwent several revisions, from drive-ins, to multiplexes, to video-store outings, to homebound streaming. Despite this, his legacy will continue to be understood as pioneering for this demographic.

This is a fine contribution to the 'Devil's Advocates' series and, when supplemented with other work on Corman, helps elucidate this key phase in his endlessly fascinating career.

Kevin M. Flanagan

***Horror and Religion: New Literary Approaches to Theology, Race, and Sexuality*, ed. by Eleanor Beal and Jonathan Greenaway**
(University of Wales Press, 2019)

Seeking to revisit the long-standing relationship between horror media and the idea of religious faith – a relationship which has been at times as violent and antagonistic as it has been productive – in *Horror and Religion: New Literary Approaches to Theology, Race, and Sexuality*, Eleanor Beal and Jonathan Greenaway have curated an intensely curious and intriguing collection of essays.

Made up of nine essays, the collection manages, in just over two hundred pages, to confront both the generic conventions of horror as well as the internal machinations of faith from a variety of angles. In their Introduction, the editors open the book with an acknowledgement of the critical scepticism that has fallen over the genre of horror overall, as well as with a nod towards the dearth of theological analyses within horror media. *Horror and Religion* therefore frames the relationship between the horrific and the divine as one of mutual challenge as well as reinforcement. Reaching back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's comments on Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), the editors introduce what might be called the generalised thesis statement of the entire book: to conjure horror, particularly religious horror, is to create a space of 'theological liminality' in which religion is at once given primacy and challenged – simultaneously degraded and given the platform by which it can re-affirm itself.

In exploring this liminal space of celebration and rejection, *Horror and Religion* explores a variety of texts both classic and modern through a number of lenses, with some more successful than others. In the book's second essay, 'The Blood is the Life: An Exploration of the Vampire's Jewish Shadow', Mary Going explores the ghost of anti-Semitism, which, she argues, has shaped the myth of the vampire over time. Referencing work as diverse as 1796's *Marchmont* by Charlotte Smith and 2015's *He Never Died* (dir. by Jason Kawczyk), Going convincingly charts parallels between the development of the vampire in popular Western culture, and the cultural framings that have also become bound up in anti-Semitic tropes. While some of Going's arguments find themselves on more contested ground – particularly with regards to William Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1598), a character who is the subject of endless academic discussion – the majority of the arguments given are well supported. The willingness to engage with the Christian origin of certain anti-Semitic tropes presents a welcome sense of critical self-reflection within the collection. There is often a concern, with explicitly faith-based critiques, of a kind of closed-ranks system of religious

protection; *Horror and Religion* evades this trap elegantly through a critical eye of exactly this kind.

Later in the collection, Simon Marsden gives another excellent example of this fearless confrontation of the limits of faith within the context of horror more broadly. Exploring Nietzschean ideas in the essay 'Horror and the Death of God', Marsden engages with both classical and postmodern presentations of horror in a world that has lost faith. While the chapter engages heavily with Christian scholars such as Thomas J. J. Altizer and the attempt to reclaim Nietzsche's famous proclamation in the name of Christianity itself – something which some may see as a particularly shallow form of recuperation – Marsden reaches perhaps one of the highest peaks in the collection with his discussion of the death of God in postmodern literature. The chapter uses Peter Straub's 1990 novella *Mrs God* as the starting point for an intense analysis of symbolism and metaphor, discussing the moment of 'Feuerbachian reversal' within the novel, and engaging with the idea of a theology that actively rejects 'a hierarchical order ruled by a transcendent deity' (p. 131).

Despite these strengths, however, the collection is not devoid of elements that invite critique, the most prominent of which is the limited range of theological origins discussed. While it is inarguably the case that Christianity is represented well and discussed from a variety of perspectives, the implication of *theology* more broadly teased by the title of the book is left somewhat unsatisfied. Going's aforementioned essay regarding depictions of Jewishness in vampire fiction is the most sustained engagement within the collection with a non-Christian faith, and even that is largely explored in the context of the Christian cultural origins of these portrayals. Understandably, given the general Christian nature of theological literature in the West, this is a challenge that is difficult to overcome for writing of this kind. This is therefore a critique that finds no flaw with the authors or editors of the collection itself, but is instead reflective of the historical background of both literary and theological studies in the West.

Beyond this, *Horror and Religion* is an excellent and exciting addition to both the critical discussion on horror itself, and the wider intersection of the genre with religious scholarship. While criticism can be levied upon the scope of the work, and of course contentious claims are made throughout, the level of theological scholarship on display combined with the intensity of engagement with the horror tradition makes for a uniquely intriguing read, which would not only be of interest to the specialist, but also would make a fantastic introduction to this rich intersection of disciplines. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the collection introduces a number of questions about both of the titular areas of

study that demand further academic engagement, laying the ground for the continued development of the field in productive and challenging ways.

Jay Fraser

***Dark Forces at Work: Essays on Social Dynamics and Cinematic Horrors*, ed. by Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper**
(Lexington Books, 2020)

It has become a truism in the study of horror films that horror is (at least to a large extent) culturally determined, and that the particular horror films produced by a culture can offer deep insights into the anxieties circulating in that specific time and location. Robin Wood's work is usually cited as foundational support for this idea, and particularly his conception of the monster as representing 'the return of the repressed'.[1] The connection between horror films and the socio-political environments from which they emerged has been elaborated upon in such seminal work as Adam Lowenstein's *Shocking Representations* and Linnie Blake's *The Wounds of Nations*.[2]

Miller and Van Riper's edited volume, *Dark Forces at Work: Essays on Social Dynamics and Cinematic Horrors*, offers further discussions on this general principle. This densely packed volume, consisting of nineteen essays ranging over a broad span of topics and approaches, attempts to demonstrate how the connection between works of horror and their cultural locations functions in practice. This is achieved through close readings of a number of horror films and television series, paying close attention to the sociological background that gave birth to them. Most of the essays explore well-known films, though many are likely to be less familiar to readers, such as the Austrian film *In 3 Tagen bist du tot* (dir. by Andreas Prochaska, 2006), the Korean adaptation of *Ringu* (*The Ring Virus*; dir. by Kim Dong-bin, 1999), or the 1980s British home-invasion film *Scream for Help* (dir. by Michael Winner, 1984). While the essays are disparate enough that individual readers are certain to find some more interesting than others, taken as a whole, the volume represents a useful (if somewhat uneven) contribution to our understanding of how horror is connected to its sociological context.

The volume is divided into five parts, with three or four essays in each. The first part, 'National Identity: Haunting the Homeland', is the only one containing essays that discuss non-English language films. The section begins with Rea Amit's essay on various versions of *Ringu*, with a particular focus on *The Ring Virus* and the 'version' *One Missed Call* (dir. by

[1] Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' in *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Wayne State University Press, 2018), pp. 73-110. Intriguingly, this essay has also proved foundational to psychoanalytic criticism of horror films, which is frequently less concerned with the specificities of culture.
[2] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Columbia University Press, 2005); and Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma, and National Identity* (Manchester University Press, 2008).

Miike Takashi, 2003). The essay focuses on the relationship between South Korea and Japan as a background for these films and their reception. In the conclusion, Amit suggests that the issue of the Korean 'comfort women' is still 'looming over' relationships between the two nations (p. 27); however, the essay does not attempt to offer a full exploration of how these films might be read with this history in mind. Michael Fuchs similarly explores issues of national identity in his essay on the German conception of *Heimat* – loosely translated as homeland, but with more 'ideological baggage' (p. 33). Fuchs reads three Austrian films, *In 3 Tagen bist du tot*, *Angriff der Lederhosenzombies* (dir. Dominik Hartl, 2016), and *Blutgletscher* (dir. by Marvin Kren, 2013) in conjunction with the genres they participate in (the slasher, zombie, and ecological horror film, respectively), to argue that each critiques the idea of *Heimat*, 'if not dismantling it altogether' (p. 46). Luisa Hyojin Koo explores *The Wailing* (dir. by Na Hong-jin, 2016) through the lens of national trauma and masculine identity, arguing that the film creates a 'countermemory', which offers 'a more multileveled image of the nation while interrogating the single privileged myth' (p. 61). The section concludes with Allyson Marino's essay on the monstrous bodies of *Penny Dreadful* (2014-16) and how these (usually female) bodies express 'colonial anxiety' (p. 65). The essays pay particular attention to the 'resisting bodies, rebelling bodies', which 'refuse to be disciplined by every institution that has tried to do so' (p. 75). The institutions are all revealed as oppressive and failing.

Part II is entitled 'Market Forces and Their Monsters', consisting of four essays tied together by their focus on economic anxieties. Lindsey Michael Banco's essay offers a fresh exploration of the well-established connection between haunted-house narratives and economics, lifting up numerous examples of responses to the 'economic stagnation' (p. 82) of the 1970s, and the 'predatory Wall Street financiers' (p. 84) of the 2000s and 2010s. Banco builds off classic texts, such as Dale Bailey's *American Nightmare*,[3] but demonstrates how more contemporary films have adapted to the contours of newer economic crises. Banco offers the sharp insight that these newer films and works of literature respond to the 'bewildering nature of twenty-first-century speculative finance' by presenting a 'crisis at the level of knowledge itself' (p. 91). Erika Tiburcio Moreno's essay on rural horror in the 1970s also explores well-trod ground, but without the benefit of demonstrating the trope's development in

[3] Dale Bailey, *American Nightmare: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Culture* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999); examples of scholarship exploring how this formula has been updated for the twenty-first century Great Recession include Elena Oliete-Aldea, 'The Great Recession and Transnational Horror: Sajit Warrier's Crossover Film *Fired* (2010)', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 49.5 (2016), pp. 1163-83; and Emanuelle Wessels, 'A Lesson Concerning Technology: The Affective Economies of Post-Economic Crisis Haunted House Horror in *The Conjuring* and *Insidious*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 32.6 (2015), pp. 511-26.

recent decades. However, she does choose two lesser-known films for her examples, focusing primarily on *Deranged: Confessions of a Necrophile* (dir. by Jeff Gillen and Alan Ormsby, 1974) and *Mother's Day* (dir. by Charles Kaufman, 1980) as her parade examples, with only passing references to stock examples of this subgenre such as *Deliverance* (dir. by John Boorman, 1972) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (dir. by Tobe Hooper, 1974). A. Bowdoin Van Riper's contribution places the first three *Purge* films (2013-16) into conversation with questions of economic anxiety, concluding that the films argue that the 'exploitation, abuse, and even outright murder of the poor and vulnerable by the rich and powerful never *stopped* being part of American life' (p. 127; emphasis in original). The section concludes with Russell Meeuf and Benjamin James's essay on *It Follows* (dir. by David Robert Mitchell, 2014) and *Don't Breathe* (dir. by Fede Álvarez, 2016) as 'Motor City Gothic,' noting that both films centre on the 'spectacle of Detroit's crumbling neighborhoods to tell stories about young, white women who must confront the terrors festering in the dilapidated ruins of the old middle class' (pp. 131-32). The exploration encourages a reading of these films as 'not simply stark visions of economic collapse but a deeply nostalgic musing on the perceived fall of the white middle class' (p. 142). The authors' focus on nostalgia offers a richer reading of these films than has become standard, where the emphasis is only on ruin and decay.

Part III consists of three chapters centred around questions of ideology, including neoliberalism, the oppressive Hollywood system, and religious beliefs. The contribution from Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns, Juan Juvé, and Emiliano Aguilar reads the 1980s British films *Hellraiser* (dir. by Clive Barker, 1987), *Scream for Help* and *Dream Demon* (dir. by Harley Cokliss, 1988) in the context of the Thatcher years, arguing that these three films expose the 'cracks appearing through the neat surface' of British society (p. 159). Brandon Niezgoda provides an overview of the 'Mumblegore' movement, as represented by filmmakers such as Ti West and Adam Wingard. In this movement, Niezgoda sees a repudiation of the Hollywood system, both in its rejection of 'industry norms' and the industry's 'record of abuse' (p. 166), as well as in its privileging of 'incidental, leisurely, and quotidian scenes' over fast-paced action (p. 169). The section's concluding essay, by María Gil Poisa, looks at the role of faith in *The Others* (dir. by Alejandro Amenábar, 2004), arguing that the characters are trapped in their house in the same way that Grace is trapped by her oppressive religious beliefs. While these three essays are interesting on their own, they seem rather loosely affiliated to comprise a section, as they deal with very different themes and filmic traditions.

The four essays that make up the fourth part are all focused on history and memory, drawing from a disparate set of films to explore how horror has continued to wrestle with these

questions. Cynthia J. Miller contributes an essay on the 1992 version of *Candyman* (dir. by Bernard Rose), reading the film as a challenge to the limits of our ability to understand the world. As the film begins, the privileged viewpoint is the 'academic worldview' (p. 206), a world associated with certainty. But this certainty breaks down throughout the film, instead suggesting 'larger systems of knowledge and social identity in tension' (p. 207). Thomas Prasch looks at questions of foreknowledge in *Don't Look Now* (dir. Nicholas Roeg, 1973), and connects these epistemological questions to Roeg's montage techniques. This essay demonstrates neatly how the film's themes, including time, memory, and grief, are represented in the 'dual time' of the montages, where 'one moment [is] purely present and another anticipatory and future-directed' (p. 220). James J. Ward reads Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (1934) as a meditation on memories of 'the long centuries of war, invasion, and conquest that shaped the historical consciousness' of the population of Eastern Europe, including a young Ulmer (p. 229). The essay covers a good deal of ground through close readings of the film's architectural style and production history, then returns to this historical connection in its conclusion. The section concludes with Michael C. Reiff's contribution to the rapidly growing literature on *Get Out* (dir. by Jordan Peele, 2017). While many of the observations have become commonplace in the critical scholarship surrounding the film, Reiff adds something new to the discussion with the attention he pays to the suburban location of the prologue as evoking 'the centuries of dehumanization African-Americans have experienced throughout United States history' (p. 260). He positions the attacked character as representing 'the black men and women who were driven from exclusively white suburbs in the 1950s' (p. 259), lifting up an under-noticed aspect of the film.

This essay leads nicely into the final section, as the volume concludes with the four essays gathered together as 'The Horrors of Place'. Jacqueline Morrill looks at the spaces of Rob Zombie's films as continuing the 'nightmarish parody of an idealized 1950s nuclear family' first critiqued in such films as *Psycho* (dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and the original *Halloween* (dir. by John Carpenter, 1978). Personally, I find Zombie's oeuvre to be unsubtle enough that Morrill's conclusions are rather unsurprising. Alissa Burger explores how the fictional locations Derry and Castle Rock serve as grounds for 'the contested process of returning and remembering' that characterises so much of Stephen King's work (p. 289). Katherine Lizza returns to *It Follows* for another exploration of how the Detroit suburban locations 'blur the line between affluence and poverty' (p. 293). In a subtle shift in emphasis from Meeuf and James's earlier essay, Lizza focuses not on mourning, but on the 'ambiguous' future of both the characters in the film and the city of Detroit as a whole.

Kevin Thomas McKenna bravely attempts to find something new to say about *Psycho*, but largely recycles previous scholarship on the film. Few readers will be surprised at the conclusion that *Psycho* critiques 'suburbanization's alienating violence', while also demonstrating the suburban dream's 'inability to offer protection and stability in privacy' (p. 317).

While I might have preferred a slightly streamlined volume, Miller and van Riper have gathered together an admirable array of essays. All of the essays begin from the foundational observation – made by previous scholars such as Wood, Lowenstein, Blake, and numerous others – that horror is frequently a reflection of (and commentary on) the sociological conditions that produced it. The strength of the volume lies in these essays' determination to demonstrate how this works not as a theoretical construct, but in the concrete examples of the films under discussion. In this goal, the volume succeeds as a useful resource for scholars researching these particular films, as well as scholars looking more generally at the broader sociological questions that horror frequently explores.

Brandon R.Grafius

Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema*
(Routledge, 2020)

In his 2020 book *Gothic Cinema*, Xavier Aldana Reyes offers an expert overview of the gothic in film, with a focus on its connections with gothic literature, its historical development, and what distinguishes it from the broader category of horror. Students beginning their studies of gothic cinema will be well served by this erudite but still highly readable introduction; more advanced students will find much to engage with, as well.

Aldana Reyes begins with an overview chapter that intends to define what, precisely, is meant by the category of 'gothic cinema'. Drawing on Fredric Jameson, Aldana Reyes describes gothic cinema as a 'mode,' suggesting that the term encompasses broader characteristics than is usually indicated by the term 'genre' (p. 14). Aldana Reyes's first task is an attempt to distinguish the gothic from the broader category of horror; they are naturally paired together and frequently collapsed into one another, a situation which Aldana Reyes finds understandable, as both are 'invested in darkness and negative affect' (p. 7). Aldana Reyes introduces this 'popular dyad', under which '[h]orror […] is seen as heavily graphic and explicit', whereas 'the Gothic is subtle and suggestive' (p. 8). So, as generally understood, *The Haunting* (dir. by Robert Wise, 1960) is gothic, whereas *Hostel* (dir. by Eli Roth, 2005) is horror. While this might seem intuitive, Aldana Reyes argues that the dichotomy is not nearly so sharp. Some films that are clearly gothic in nature, such as *Crimson Peak* (dir. by Guillermo del Toro, 2015), are filled with graphic depictions of violence, while many films that clearly fall on the horror side of this divide, like *Paranormal Activity* (dir. by Oren Peli, 2007), are slow-paced and suggestive. For Aldana Reyes, the gothic is 'identifiable at the level of surface' by 'its use of architecture and spaces' (p. 14). These spaces exist as a living past, in some ways standing in conflict to the present world around them. So while *Alien* (dir. by Ridley Scott, 1979) has frequently been read as a gothic film set in space, Aldana Reyes finds this to be an unworkable contradiction. The setting by itself is enough to disqualify *Alien* from the circle of gothic cinema (p. 9). However, Aldana Reyes agrees that many of the films under discussion in this book could be most profitably classified as 'Gothic horror', since until recent decades, 'the Gothic film was […] one of the most popular subgenres of horror cinema' (p. 25). Following on from this helpful discussion on genre, the rest of the book provides an historical overview of particular trends and developments within gothic cinema.

Chapter 1, entitled 'Transitional Origins', explores the silent films that laid the groundwork for the emerging gothic cinema. Aldana Reyes suggests that gothic cinema might

begin with Méliès's 1896 film *Le Manoir du diable*, for its 'various transformations […] all set against a painted backdrop that reproduces the entrance to an ancient castle' (p. 43). Aldana Reyes also proposes Alfred Scott's fifteen-second film from 1895, *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*. However, he finds that offering either of these films as the 'first' examples of the genre must be qualified, as they are more concerned with 'discoveries in cinematic technology' than with establishing a cinematic gothic mode (p. 44). As such, early gothic film should be understood as 'an accidental affair' (p. 46), with the settings and motifs that would come to be associated with the gothic largely being the product of the developing art form's connection to illusionism, a popular style of art that involved tricks of perception. So, for example, these earlier cinematographic tricks could be used in the service of fairy tales (like Méliès 1899 *Cinderella*) or religious films (such as the same director's 1898 *Temptation of St. Anthony*). These films are concerned primarily with exploring what can be done with the camera, with genre as a secondary concern. The gothic offered only one possible setting for the 'trick film.'

The second chapter, 'Monstrous Shadow', finds the gothic emerging as a full-fledged genre in the films of the 1910s and 20s. For Aldana Reyes, the most important development of this period was the 'medium-specific way of shooting the Gothic monster that would have a significant effect on horror cinema from 1923 to 1935', demonstrated by a number of German films that 'drew inspiration from the country's Romantic tradition in literature' (p. 72). Aldana Reyes notes several connections between *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920) and gothic literature, and also discusses the contribution to the developing gothic mode of films such as *The Student of Prague* (dir. by Henrik Galeen, 1926) and *Der Golem* (dir. by Paul Wegener and Henrik Galeen, 1914). The chapter spends an appropriately significant amount of discussion on *Nosferatu* (dir. by F. W. Murnau, 1922), noting Murnau's 'use of depth of field photography, his reliance on low-angle shots for certain horrific scenes and his tension-building editing' (p. 83). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the anthology film, which is frequently associated with the British film tradition, but which, as Aldana Reyes demonstrates, has its origins in German cinema.

Chapter 3, 'Franchise Gothic', moves to American films of the 1930s, which Aldana Reyes argues were 'most foundational in setting up a blueprint for the Gothic in cinema' (p. 98). He notes the shift in marketing between films such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (dir. by Wallace Worsley, 1923), marketed as a prestige historical film, and *Dracula* (dir. by Tod Browning, 1931), positioned explicitly as a horror film (p. 100). The bulk of the chapter consists of readings of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (dir. by James Whale, 1931), as well as the

subsequent franchise entries. The focus here is not only on the developing cinematic techniques that will become standard gothic fare, but also on the films' marketing and reception. Chapter 4 considers 'The Explained Supernatural', beginning with the 'Old Dark House' films of the 1920s and 30s, before moving to the 'Female Gothic' films of the 1940s. For Aldana Reyes, the female gothic becomes an important mode in this period, drawing from 'cinematic traditions as varied as the melodrama (especially the period drama), film noir, romance and horror' (p. 137). Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) was the 'path-opener' (p. 137), leading to heroine-centred films such as *Gaslight* (dir. by Thorold Dickinson, 1940; and dir. by George Cukor, 1944). Aldana Reyes (tentatively) sees this version of the gothic heroine as a possible 'prototype for the "final girl" of the later "slasher" film' (p. 141), as she finds herself struggling alone against a male murderer. Aldana Reyes notes throughout the chapter that this form of heroine develops against the backdrop of continual revisions of gender roles in Western Europe and the United States, largely as a result of the disruptions to the labour force brought about by World War II. This line of reasoning makes for an intriguing counterpoint to the roughly contemporaneous film noirs, which frequently offered a very different portrayal of female power. Both of these cycles, taken together, make it clear that Western Europe and the United States were re-thinking gender at this time; the shifting demands of the war-time and post-war economies make for a logical rationale.

In Chapter 5, Aldana Reyes turns to 'Technicolor Gothic', starting with Hammer's films of the late 1950s and 60s. Along with the addition of colour, Aldana Reyes notes the introduction of more graphic violence, beginning with the scene in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (dir. by Terence Fisher, 1957) in which the monster is shot in the eye. Aldana Reyes refers to this moment as 'one of Gothic cinema's most important, signalling the possibility of bloodier approaches to the source material' (p. 156). It's the first indication that gothic cinema is willing to 'leave behind restraint' (p. 156). These early Hammer films would set the template for gothic cinema of the time, featuring 'period settings and British casts, Manichean fights between good and evil and, above all, alluring colour" (p. 158). These trends would endure through the 60s but began to lose steam in the 70s, as more contemporary-themed horror rose to prominence, such as *The Exorcist* (dir. by William Friedkin, 1973). The chapter also explores Roger Corman's 1960s film adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction, arguing that Corman uses colour in these films to 'explore and connote the warped recesses of the human mind, especially the diseased one' (p. 172). In contrast, Hammer's films of the same period feature a primarily affective use of colour, emphasising 'its potential to shock and disgust' (p. 172). For Aldana Reyes, there's a clear distinction between the psychological depth of Corman's adaptations,

and the Hammer films' focus on surface affects. While this distinction is certainly defensible, it also runs the risk of downplaying the important contribution that shock and disgust can make to thematic complexity.

Chapter 6 turns towards 'Exploitation Gothic'. As Aldana Reyes asserts, '[t]he 1960s and 1970s were defined by the rise of exploitation cinema […] which normally privileged the key ingredients of violence and sex or else openly imitated other successful films' (p. 183). This is first seen in Italian vampire films that took the latent sexual content of the Universal and Hammer pictures and made it explicit, leading to a cycle of films that recycled well-known gothic characters and storylines. However, this also led to the creative output of filmmakers such as Mario Bava, who participated in the 'amplification and exploitation of sensuality and violence' (p. 188) that would become the dominant feature of 60s and 70s gothic cinema, while also demonstrating that this could be accomplished with great skill and thematic depth. Aldana Reyes also sees this as the decade during which the gothic would move out of the mainstream and into the underground, with mainstream horror gradually becoming more modern in tone and setting. As he puts it, '[i]f the Gothic's trappings had once allowed for the exploration of repressed desires, the gradual liberation cinema had undergone since the 1960s would make its aesthetic trimmings unnecessary, even passé' (p. 198). For Aldana Reyes, the gothic was primarily enticing to viewers for its ability to explore these dangerous desires; it became less useful as relaxed censorship rules allowed these desires to be explored in more direct ways.

The book concludes with a chapter that explores 'Late Dispersions', as the gothic becomes a rarer occurrence, frequently relegated to the 'chronotopes of the secluded Gothic castle and the secret-ridden cathedral' (p. 211). But even so, the gothic mode continues to resurface in the cycles of recent decades. Aldana Reyes highlights films centred on cults and witchcraft in particular since, in these films, gothic trappings 'have been recuperated for the anachronistic values of the ideologies and beliefs behind them' (p. 213). Even more than this, Aldana Reyes finds that the generic features of the gothic have become well known enough that the gothic can be 'decoupled' (p. 215) from horror, making its way into period dramas such as *The Elephant Man* (dir. by David Lynch, 1980); the musical comedy *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (dir. by Jim Sharman, 1975); or the hard-to-categorise oeuvre of Tim Burton. Films such as *The Devil's Backbone* (dir. by Guillermo del Toro, 2001) and *The Orphanage* (dir. by J. A. Bayona, 2007), he argues, use the gothic obsession with repressed events of the past to explore our relationship with memory. This 'new Gothic' requires an 'intimate acquaintance with cinematic history' (p. 227), increasingly an expectation of audiences in a wide array of genres. As this book demonstrates, having an understanding of the historical

sweep of gothic cinema puts the viewer in a position to meet these expectations. Gothic cinema is a form that is constantly evolving but also looking backwards in appreciation.

Aldana Reyes has provided an expert introductory textbook. Students and scholars alike will benefit from his discussions of genre and his encyclopaedic knowledge of film, always with a focus on how each particular film participates in the gothic mode, or expands our understanding of this mode. Both novice and expert readers will benefit from the way in which Aldana Reyes gathers together a wide array of films, organising them into a coherent narrative of gothic cinema.

Brandon R. Grafius

Mark Schmitt, *Spectres of Pessimism: A Cultural Logic of the Worst*
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)

Much recent scholarship in horror and the gothic has argued that these literary modes have close connections with pessimistic philosophy, often asserting that this philosophical disposition is a crucial component of these modes. In Thomas Ligotti's non-fiction essay collection *A Conspiracy against the Human Race* (2010), for example, the Lovecraftian author connects the weird fiction of Algernon Blackwood with pessimists such as Albert Camus, arguing that the same hopeless outlook for humanity and the universe permeates their work. And contemporary philosophers such as Eugene Thacker and Graham Harman have organised philosophical treaties around the philosophical principles embedded within the horror genre. Into this world steps Mark Schmitt's *Spectres of Pessimism*, a brief (yet densely packed) handbook that will help scholars of horror and the gothic become conversant with this corner of the philosophical world.

The introductory chapter argues that pessimistic philosophy is key to understanding our current cultural moment. Schmitt sees pessimism as both 'an affective as well as intellectual pattern' (p. 7), leading him to incorporate aspects of the thinking of Sara Ahmed and Thacker to encompass these realms of both thinking and feeling. Schmitt sees pessimism as being, at its root, an attempt to grapple with the 'loss of the future', which, using concepts developed by Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher, makes it a 'fundamentally hauntological concern' (p. 9). However, Schmitt argues that pessimism 'goes one step further than hauntology' in not only grieving for lost futures, but presenting 'the worst possible alternative future' (p. 9). As an example of how pessimism has burrowed into our current cultural moment, Schmitt concludes the Introduction with a reading of Hari Kunzru's novel *Red Pill* (2019), which Schmitt reads as exploring the 'ethical pessimism about the state of the world and the future', as well as a 'politicised celebration of humanity's worst' – pessimism embodied as nihilism (pp. 16-17).

This leads into Chapter 2, centred on the radical utopianism of Antonio Gramsci as a political response to intellectual pessimism. In exploring Gramsci's thought, Schmitt differentiates between 'political pessimism' on the one hand, which can lead to 'stagnant sentiments' and a general inability to act for positive change (p. 29); and on the other, 'intellectual pessimism', which is instead an 'important analytical tool' (p. 30). Schmitt summarises Gramsci's thinking on pessimism, writing: 'It seems, then, that a true hope that can actually serve as an empowering affect that constitutes agency and triggers change cannot be held without a suitable mode of pessimist analysis' (p. 45). Though Schmitt concludes the

chapter without further textual analysis, it seems an obvious next step for scholars to apply this formulation to gothic and horror texts. Indeed, it would be useful to consider whether the pessimism presented in such texts is one of politics or of the intellect.

From this exploration of utopianism and pessimism, Schmitt moves to anti-utopianism and afropessimism in Chapter 3. Schmitt sees pessimism and utopianism as participating in a 'productive dialectic' (p. 51), a dialectic which can be most easily observed in works of afropessimism such as Steve McQueen's 2020 film *Education*. Schmitt looks at the radical utopianism of such thinkers as Mathias Thaler and John Storey, and sees in them an effort to unsettle 'the preconditions of the thinkable', which has the effect of 'offer[ing] ways to consider new possibilities or at least to reframe the present' (p. 54). Schmitt sees the same impulse at work in pessimism, which asks us to consider possibilities outside of the bounds of the present moment and its evolution into the future. Schmitt argues that a similar dialectic is at play in afrofuturism, which takes the current 'historical trauma' as its starting point, but then 'uses it as a precondition for imagining the future otherwise' (p. 60). Afropessimism, on the other hand, 'sees the present and future of Black lives as caught in permanent transhistorical social death' (p. 60). However, Schmitt uses the work of Frank Wilderson III to suggest that afropessimism 'articulates (and thus offers Black people the freedom to articulate) the otherwise unsayable about social relations in cultures marked by white hegemony' (p. 62). In essence, Schmitt sees afrofuturism as focused on imagining a new future, even if it seems impossible from the starting point of the present, while afropessimism focuses on the impossibility of enduring in the present. However, both serve to move us outside of the constrains of the present – afrofuturism by imagining something other, afropessimism by focusing on the impossibility of the currently existing state. In this way, both afrofuturism and afropessimism serve as analytical tools to help us imagine something other than the present moment. Schmitt finds this dialect represented in the short film *Education*, which Schmitt reads as being 'suggestive of a utopian vision of the future born from the restored past' (p. 67) – a utopian vision that is only possible once the utter hopelessness of the present has been fully internalised, so that any notion of incremental progress can be discarded.

Chapter 4 turns to Lee Edelman's 'reproductive pessimism', and connects it with the questions of knowledge of the future asked by the films *Arrival* (dir. by Denis Villeneuve, 2016) and *Irréversible* (dir. by Gaspar Noé, 2002). Schmitt groups together queer pessimism and antinatalist philosophies under this umbrella, arguing that both offer a 'critique of heteronormative reproductive futurism' (p. 78), which asks us to consider whether we can 'mourn the future' (p. 74). While hauntology is not directly invoked in this chapter, this

question seems to make a clear link between reproductive pessimism and the work of scholars such as Derrida and Fisher. The second half of the chapter reads *Arrival* (and the Ted Chiang's 1998 novella on which its based, entitled 'Story of Your Life') and *Irréversible* as two films that disrupt narrative continuity to explore this question of grievable futures (Schmitt also includes a very cogent discussion of the troubling nature of *Irréversible*'s relation to homosexuality). For Schmitt, both *Arrival* and *Irréversible* offer a pessimist perspective: even if we had the ability to 'disrupt the equilibrium of time, it would merely have a temporary effect' (p. 93). Both films suggest that foreknowledge of future tragedies – on the part of the characters, the viewers, or both – only makes salient what pessimism knows already to be true: positive future outcomes have always already been foreclosed.

The book's final chapter looks at contemporary apocalyptic thought through the frame of cosmic pessimism. Schmitt begins with the cosmic pessimism of Ligotti and Thacker, observing that these thinkers participate in a strand of 'existential pessimism' that does not see life as an inherent good, and refuses to find 'appropriations of pessimism for political ends', instead serving as 'pure negation' (p. 100). Schmitt summarises this philosophy as being about 'the notion of extinction as the future horizon that determines possibility in the present', a mode of thinking that has become increasingly common among ecological philosophers as well (p. 107). In the chapter's concluding pages, Schmitt reads Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011) as embracing 'the end of the world as an end to the nihilistic capitalist logic that has hollowed out human relationships and is devastating the planet' (p. 111). Schmitt finds a similar logic in Camille Griffin's film *Silent Night* (2021), which juxtaposes a commonplace political pessimism with a much more deep-seated, cosmic pessimism, in which the impending end of the world is something to be celebrated. In accepting the end of the world, we become free of the impossible burden of having to fix everything – as well as having the opportunity to embrace the knowledge that the universe will continue after humanity has left.

The volume's Conclusion is brief – only four pages plus notes – but asks some significant questions. Schmitt suggests that much of the current landscape of cultural studies embodies a 'future- and hope-oriented disposition' (p. 123), one in which the 'no-saying of pessimism' is an uneasy fit. However, Schmitt suggests that in viewing pessimistic thought as 'that which always resists', we might come to see how pessimism can play a more constructive role in the Humanities. But even here, Schmitt cautions that this kind of thinking might be 'reducing pessimism to its "use value"' (p. 123), which can easily have the effect of domesticating pessimistic thought into a much more palatable form.

This slender, dense volume has much to offer scholars of the gothic in particular, and Cultural Studies more broadly. Schmitt makes a strong case that the history of pessimistic thought should be incorporated into our understanding of what drives popular culture, particularly in its current moment. In the context of Horror Studies, this point has been made before – but probably not often enough and forcefully enough. There's a also strong case to be made that, in addition to the affective responses that the genre attempts to create, a pessimistic worldview is one of the most important features of horror and the gothic. Schmitt's work not only makes this case, but provides the tools that scholars need to approach these questions in their own analyses.

Brandon R. Grafius

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Masks in Horror Cinema: Eyes Without Faces*
(University Wales Press, 2019)

With Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' consideration of the role and meaning of masks in horror cinema, entitled *Masks in Horror Cinema: Eyes Without Faces*, the Horror Studies imprint from University Wales Press adds to an already-impressive line-up of publications. The monograph opens with an anecdotal narrative about the Belarusian director Makinov, who appeared masked during both the promotion and, allegedly, the shooting of his film *Come Out and Play* (2012). Heller-Nicholas uses the story as a way to open a discussion of the symbolism behind masks in horror cinema: 'Whether a publicity stunt or a material manifestation of [Makinov's] aesthetic philosophy, this is a memorable instance of the potency of horror film masks' (p. 1). The argument here is that audiences have a seemingly innate understanding of this symbolism when it is encountered in film (and, arguably, in the case of Makinov, outside of it), yet the study of the meanings that become inscribed on the masked characters in horror has been overlooked, a misstep that Heller-Nicholas here wishes to rectify. In her effort to do so, she covers a wealth of academic and primary sources, and provides a particular framework for analysis, which both serves the book under review here and will benefit future study of the topic.

The monograph is divided into four parts: the first (unnumbered) part, encompassing the opening two chapters, is primarily concerned with setting up the approach used in the publication regarding the study of masks. Heller-Nicholas positions the role of the mask in horror as stemming from shamanistic traditions, but clearly distinguishes her approach from previous discussions of the topic within such a framework. Referring to the concept of shamanic imagination, the author sets out here to decouple the horror mask from too tight a link to pre-existing anthropological perspectives, instead arguing for 'a looser, more elastic [interpretation] that accounts for how the power of masks are broadly conceived' (p. 23). In order to do so, Heller-Nicholas centres her analysis around three core concepts, linked to ritual, power, and transformation, as a way of positioning horror masks within their respective narratives, with a focus on the material aspects of these appearances. Doing so allows for a particular and flexible means of understanding the horror mask *within its context*, an aspect that will prove important for the analysis of case studies provided by Heller-Nicholas. This initial discussion is followed by a thorough examination of the context for horror masks and their appearance pre-1970s, provided in Part 1, which looks to early film as well as performance and literature as fertile ground for examining the rise to prominence of this particular motif.

Heller-Nicholas moves away from a solely Anglophone focus, incorporating references to other European, Latin American, and Asian traditions of performance and film, providing a breadth of examples that is continued throughout the book. When looking at such a wide range of case studies, Heller-Nicholas does not remove these from the national (cinematic) traditions in which they appear. Rather, due to the elasticity of approaching the motif of the mask through the concept of the 'shamanic imagination', examples are framed within their contexts, which, as the author shows, often imbue the presence of the mask with further layers of meaning.

The three concepts of ritual, power, and transformation are carried forward into the case studies found in Parts 2 and 3. The four chapters within these sections are arranged thematically, according to the type of mask and its function within the narrative. The chapters cover skin masks 'that replicate the human face' (p. 90); blank masks, which 'simultaneously erase identity and create spaces to project new meanings onto' (p. 112); animal masks, which 'symbolically transform their wearers into something less-than-human' (p. 129); and repurposed masks, 'objects whose initial intended functions are redeployed in horror to create new cultural meanings' (p. 149). Within these chapters, case studies are arranged in relation to specific themes relevant to the type of mask discussed, including, but not limited to religion, class, and labour; feminine/ masculine identities; and totemism and transformation. Although this covers a lot of ground, Heller-Nicholas manages to bring sufficiently detailed levels of analysis to each type of mask and subsequent theme, and her argument remains convincing throughout.

The same is true for the final category, technological masks, which is separated out in its own part of the monograph. Here, Heller-Nicholas states that she wishes to examine the 'contemporary intersection of technology, transformation, power and ritual', expanding the core concepts by one (p. 169). However, the approach here remains comparable to the one adopted in the second part in its provision of a detailed analysis of a variety of filmic examples from across different cultures. Although each of the elements addressed in Parts 2 and 3 (different masks, themes, and case studies) might be seen as introducing a potential diffusion to the argument, the central pillars established in the early parts of the book provide a robust framework for the analysis that is followed throughout.

To some, the study provided by Heller-Nicholas may appear superficial, as the material covered in the monograph is so wide in scope. Indeed, it cannot be denied that the book covers roughly a century of horror culture and touches on forms beyond cinema, including literature and performance. However, I would argue that this is not to the detriment of the work, but instead adds to its aims of presenting a detailed overview of masks in horror, charting the

context and emergence of the motif beyond the concerns raised by the case studies that are the focal point of Parts 2 and 3. Although the central concepts and the framing that they provide could be articulated more clearly, in addressing the subject matter in this way, Heller-Nicholas has paved the way into this fascinating area of study and the relevant texts (both academic and artistic), thus creating a starting point for future scholarship on the topic.

Madelon Hoedt

Sara Wasson, *Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film, and Medicine*
(Manchester University Press, 2020)

Medical transplantation of tissue from one body to another is a celebrated life-saving achievement; it has also inspired some of the most gruesome and unsettling horror narratives. Joining a number of sociological, medical, anthropological, and philosophical books about organ transplantation – such as Oliver Decker's *Commodified Bodies: Organ Transplantation and the Organ Trade* (2014) and most recently Paul Craddock's *Spare Parts: The Story of Medicine through the History of Transplant Surgery* (2022) – Sara Wasson's *Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film, and Medicine* presents a unique and nuanced combination of rhetorical, cultural, and literary study that confronts the limited ways in which discourse surrounding transplantation has been socially constructed and acceptable. It is deeply thought-provoking in its challenging material and bold analysis.

This book makes a significant contribution to the fields of Health Humanities and Gothic Studies in its complex examination of the enduring experiences of tissue transplantees ('donors') and recipients. Wasson convincingly argues that the language and imagery of the gothic, while complicit in cultural impressions of transplantation, can also help us to access, understand, and, most importantly, witness the complex suffering involved in a situation deeply rooted in the horror of corporeal, economic, and cultural vulnerability. Wasson explores the nuances of problematic oversimplification, which forces transplantation into narratives of benevolence or malice through both well-known texts (like Robin Cook's novel *Coma* (1977) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005)) and many more obscure ones. As she demonstrates in every chapter, these experiences of horror, dread, and unease – gothic experiences – point to larger structures of vulnerability, power, and inequality at the root of relevant health-care debates in the US and UK. Through careful analysis of the networks of bodies transgressing boundaries in history, culture, and medicine, Wasson's important work applies the gothic to reveal narratives of hidden suffering.

As Wasson explains with care in the Introduction, she chooses her terminology with intention, preferring 'tissue transfer' over 'organ transplantation', to indicate inclusion of biological material beyond organs, for example. Through the concept of 'bodies dis(re)membered', she describes the cultural work of the gothic: to remember bodies typically omitted from medical narratives, to acknowledge the haunting incompleteness of these narratives, to problematically mediate and normalise certain narratives and practices, and to emphasise the concept of assemblage and its related processes. While the gothic articulates

anxieties about tissue transfer, it can also introduce speculations about new ways to shape and meet human experience. To demonstrate this, she interweaves critical theory and histories of tissue transfer throughout each chapter, with particular attention to participants often cast aside and the discourses that neglect them.

Throughout the book, Wasson makes her methodology transparent, resulting in a text that is easy to follow and offers a model of careful scholarship. Each chapter focuses on a different figure playing a particular role in the tissue-transfer system. Chapter 1 examines representations of cadaveric harvest, including the inconsistent and varied definitions and determinations of death that enable this system. She uncovers the disturbing philosophical and practical medical, legal, and epistemological conversations about a body's relationship to the machines that keep it 'alive', as well as the unknowns about such an experience and how decisions are made regarding it. This includes a history of the 1968 'Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School to Examine the Definition of Brain Death' and the impact it has had on personhood through actual medical case studies.

In Chapter 2, Wasson turns to fictional representations of organ theft, physically forced or coerced through financial oppression performed by large-scale medical institutions such as hospitals and healthcare corporations. Fictions like Robert Fiveson's film *Parts: The Clonus Horror* (1979) and John Hejinian's novel *Extreme Remedies* (1974) expose these trusted institutions as corporations and capitalist machines that pose insurmountable threats. Cruelty may not be the point of these systems, but it is more than acceptable within them, as their inhumanity preys on and erases the humanity of victims. Similarly, Chapter 3 applies the concept of 'slow violence' to racial marginalisation in global tissue-sale networks, focused on the US, UK, and India. Not restricted to economic vulnerability, this chapter considers the legacy of colonialisation and slavery that inform the way bodies are presented, used, and intentionally forgotten. This chapter combines a history of abuse with the hidden duration of suffering represented in fictions like Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* (1997).

'Donor' bodies are not the sole bodies that suffer. Chapter 4 shifts to tissue recipients and their uncanny experiences of hybridity, invasion, and alienation. This chapter, perhaps more than any other, demonstrates the ways in which the impact of transfer endures beyond the operation, even for participants considered to be 'the lucky ones'. As Wasson explains, the gothic validates the recipient experience as a potentially negative one, full of fear, anxiety, and doubt, despite the additional guilt these feelings might incur. This chapter balances critical theory and philosophy with literature that fictionalises blood transfusions and hand and face transplants. Finally, Chapter 5 looks at a range of dystopian fictions and their powers of

speculation and metaphor as indicative of predatory practices. These worlds create unmistakable hierarchies of lives in ways that indicate hierarchies that may exist outside of fiction. Wasson examines novels like Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* (2007) and Ninni Holmqvist's *The Unit* (2006) that provide a wholistic view of the complex systems of oppression that draw inspiration from our own.

Each chapter highlights the ongoing vulnerability of those involved in tissue transfer performed by corrupt or wilfully ignorant capitalist institutions. The interdisciplinary nature of the book reveals that these gothic fictions are informed by real suffering. The impressive range of theory, history, and fiction also includes works by Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari; and literary and media fictions like Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 'Good Lady Ducayne' (1896), Maurice Renard's *The Hands of Orlac* (1920), Gardner Bowers's 'The Black Hand' (1931), *Les yeux sans visage* (dir. by Georges Franju, 1958), Larry Niven's 'The Jigsaw Man' (1967), *Night of the Living Dead* (dir. by George A. Romero, 1968), Dennis Etchison's 'The Machine Demands a Sacrifice' (1972/1984), Walter Mosley's 'Whispers in the Dark' (2001), and *Dirty Pretty Things* (dir. by Stephen Frears, 2002), among many others. As Wasson writes, 'the concept of a gothic "mode" is valuable shorthand for a specific combination of disturbed emotion, claustrophobic space, and disjointed temporality, a constellation of characteristics which can be especially useful in describing challenging transfer-related experience' (p. 5). Wasson skilfully illustrates that the desperate acknowledgment of the great achievement of transplantation often erases the suffering inherent in it. The gothic serves the Medical Humanities by forcefully calling attention to that suffering.

Wasson shows that the gothic is not just a social-justice tool here, however; it is also complicit in reinforcing the institutions that feed on rhetorics of fear. One of the many strengths of this book is the deep nuanced examination of the versatility of gothic modes for different purposes. When applied to the critical medical humanities, the work the gothic does becomes even more complex, but Wasson beautifully articulates the ways it is a vital and impactful addition to interdisciplinary biopolitical conversations about experiences of embodiment.

Alongside other recent works like Emily Russell's *Transplant Fictions* (2019), the strength of which lies in its breadth, *Transplantation Gothic* is particularly strong in terms of the depth of its analysis and more focused commitment to the work performed by the gothic. This book is provocative and a joy to read. It will appeal to both experts in several expansive fields and their advanced students. While several threads tie all the chapters together as a cohesive whole, each chapter also stands independently with its own endnotes, making it easy to select chapters for teaching purposes. As a good book of critical scholarship should, it

provokes difficult questions without offering easy answers while offering a fascinating array of perspectives from different disciplines.

Laura R. Kremmel

Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*
(Verso, 2021)

The profession of English is in the midst of a rancorous debate about the value of Critique. Should we engage in 'paranoid' reading or 'reparative' reading (the terms, of course, are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's)? Should we 'interrogate' a given text – put it in thumbscrews until it gives up its hidden ideological content? Or should we, as Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes, do our best to extract 'sustenance from the objects of a culture'?[1] Is to practice Critique a form of (as the Marxists say) praxis, or is it an abdication of responsibility altogether?

In her influential book *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski has argued that to confine ourselves to what Paul Ricoeur calls 'a hermeneutics of suspicion' is to ignore the experience actually offered by study of the Humanities, in which 'critical caveats are interspersed with flashes of affinity or sympathy; bursts of romantic hope coexist with the deciphering of ideological subtexts'. For Felski, 'our language for describing and justifying these various activities remains remarkably underdeveloped'.[2]

Tom Boland addresses his book *The Spectacle of Critique* (2019) to anyone who is 'equally frustrated and fatigued by reading weighty critical tomes which describe the complex awfulness of modernity, or seeing critics of all stripes proclaiming the acuteness of the contemporary crisis, all to no avail'.[3] Boland is concerned to chart 'the repetitive and directionless conflict engendered by critique' (any critique of Critique is, of course, itself an instance of critique), which has become, Boland says, merely another capitalist 'spectacle'. Boland writes: 'Beyond seeing Critique as a ridiculous spectacle, a farce or mere illusion, it may be necessary to consider it as a tragedy, to understand our connection to it, how it entices or even tempts us, how we are constituted, at least partially, by Critique – insofar as we are "modern" subjects.'[4]

Patricia Stuelke's recent book *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (2021) argues, *inter alia*, that the 'reparative turn' in recent literary scholarship abjures a responsibility to make plain the operations of an increasingly violent and racist global neoliberal hegemony. For Stuelke, the hermeneutics of suspicion is not dead, merely sleeping – given knockout-drops by a seductive and irresistible twenty-first-century racial capitalism;

[1] Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-52 (p. 150).
[2] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 4.
[3] Tom Boland, *The Spectacle of Critique: From Philosophy to Cacophony* (Routledge, 2019), p. 1.
[4] Boland, *Spectacle*, p. 4.

and critics who reject Critique risk complicity with state violence (here's where the rancour starts to creep in).

All of these interventions address themselves to the tricky matter of Critique's observable failure to effect meaningful structural change. Half a century of Critique, and the free-market fundamentalists are still in power. Indeed, they are somehow more in power than ever. If, as Boland argues, we are ourselves to some degree constituted by critique, is our collective tragedy to be named in the failure of critique to change the world for the better? And how does all of this help us think about horror and the gothic?

You may find yourself pondering these questions as you read Mark Bould's *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*. This is not just because Bould's book is in some ways as pure an example of capital-C Critique as you could hope to find, but also because it is overtly polemical. It's a pamphlet – short, witty, informal, jazzy, hectoring, cogent, and angry. For scholars of the gothic, *The Anthropocene Unconscious* has inarguable relevance, not just because it reads various 'genre' texts closely, but also because it is a book whose informing critical idea is basically the return of the repressed, and if there's one move that the gothic makes compulsively, it's the unearthing of repressed cultural, political, or psychological material. In a sense, Bould's book provokes the reflection that the narrative mode of contemporary reality itself might, in fact, be the gothic.

Bould's title invokes an obvious lineage: we are deep in Fredric Jameson country here. Jameson's 'political unconscious' is, of course, history: the thing that determines text and context whether you notice it or not (hence 'political', hence 'unconscious': as Adam Roberts points out in his short book on Jameson, the title of *The Political Unconscious* (1981) does *not* mean 'the Marxist Freudianism').[5] What is Bould's 'Anthropocene unconscious'? It is the biosphere: the thing that determines everything whether you say it does or not, the repressed that is always already returning.

In the age of the Anthropocene (from *Anthropos*, 'human', and *cene*, 'recent'; the term was perhaps first used by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000), History, in Jameson's sense, must be re-conceived in geological, indeed biospheric terms. Bould's bold move is to assert that 'the Anthropocene *is* the unconscious of the art and literature of our time' (p. 15, emphasis in original). In the early years of the twenty-first century, it has become clear that human beings have altered our species' physical environment irreparably for the worse. How

[5] Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson* (Routledge, 2000), p. 79.

can we *not* think about this, even if we seem, as we often do, to be thinking about something else?

Bould begins by targeting a specific antagonist: Amitav Ghosh, whose *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) is, Bould says, 'the most widely read and highly regarded book on literature and climate change' (p. 2). In that book, Ghosh suggests that there is a lacuna at the heart of our culture. He imagines the 'readers and museum-goers' of a 'substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York, and Bangkok uninhabitable', scrutinising the art and literature of our time. Will they find 'traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance?' Ghosh suggests that they will not, and that the people of the altered future will 'conclude that ours was a time when most art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognising the realities of their plight'.[6]

For Bould, '[t]his is, of course, nonsense' (p. 3). 'Auguries abound' in our contemporary art and literature. Our texts are 'pregnant with catastrophe'. Where Ghosh sees 'near-universal failure', Bould finds '[n]ot silence but expressive aphasia, teeming with tongue-tied questions':

> Must a text show tides rising in a world that is elsewhere parched, must it mash up *Waterworld* (1995) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), to be 'about' climate change? […] Is there no room for the symbolic, the oblique, the estranged? No room to think about the capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal histories, systems and structures that are historically and foreseeably responsible for climate destabilisation, and through which it has, is and will be experienced? No room to consider texts that do not say 'climate change' aloud? To discover what happens if we stop assuming a text is about climate change? (pp. 3-4)

This is Bould's method: he looks for the climate lacunae in a wide range of contemporary texts. In this, he follows Jameson, who in *The Political Unconscious* counselled critics to 'foreground the interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text'.[7] For Bould, 'the Anthropocene' is now unquestionably the most significant of these categories or codes. In Freudian (or indeed, gothic) terms, the Anthropocene is the repressed, returning. 'What if all the stories we tell are stories about the Anthropocene? About climate change?' (p. 17).

The Anthropocene Unconscious therefore examines a heterodox array of contemporary texts, including science-fictional and gothic texts, in search of unconscious material: Critique

[6] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 14.
[7] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Routledge, 2002), p. ix.

in action. He begins with Syfy's cheapo *Sharknado* franchise, which, it turns out, has since 2013 generated a whole ludicrous mythos of its own across six made-for-TV movies. '[T]he [*Sharknado*] franchise', Bould writes, 'enacts – and speaks to – a habituated desensitisation to the ever-present existential threat of anthropogenic climate destabilisation'. But this 'doesn't mean that the franchise is not about climate change' (pp. 26-27).

This is fun; but it's also a little bit too easy (applying the methods of Critique to examples of 'trash' culture is simply Theory 101, no?). Better – though no less fun – is Bould's concluding assessment of the *Fast and the Furious* (2001 – present) franchise (incredibly, there are now twelve of these films, even though neither you nor anyone you know has ever seen one). Here, once again, 'the latent always outweighs the manifest content'; for Bould, the *Fast and the Furious* franchise is something that 'spew[s] from the Anthropocene unconscious':

> Extruded from carbon culture's death drive, all they see is the Earth, scorched, and they cannot look away, cannot think about anything else. They are all distraction and dissimulation, swagger and bluff. But they cannot conceal their terror. They know it is game over. (p. 134)

The argument that unspools between Bould's demolitions of *Sharknado* and *The Fast and the Furious* ranges from Paul Kingsnorth's historical novels of medieval England to Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), with pit-stops at Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1* (2017), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Alan Moore's run on *Swamp Thing* (1984-87), Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016), and the Tom Cruise film *Edge of Tomorrow* (dir. by Doug Liman, 2014), among others. There are various pleasures here, various startling *apercus*. For instance: has it occurred to any other critic of Karl Ove Knausgaard that the landscape of the 1970s childhood and youth exhaustively reconstructed in *My Struggle* (2009-11) 'is ineluctably, if incidentally, that of an accelerating global petroculture: not just the oil rigs and oil tankers glimpsed offshore, but the plastic bags and bottles and gas stations, the journeys by car, bus, train and, increasingly, plane, the groceries and other commodities gathered in from across Europe […] the shifting Scandinavian demographics …' (p. 46), and that these markers are present in the text '[a]s if they have slinked up unnoticed from some abyssal basement' (p. 46). This is Critique at its best: startlingly recontextualising not just Knausgaard's work, but the interpretive categories that we have brought to bear on it, and throwing those categories into crisis.

Hitherto, most of Bould's published work has been on science fiction. In *The Anthropocene Unconscious*, he reveals himself as a critic with a much broader purview (and a

more enjoyably uninhibited prose style). But mere criticism – or mere Critique – is not his mission here. *The Anthropocene Unconscious* wants us not just to think but to *re*think. 'On the one hand', he writes in his closing pages, 'a fast, furious, thanatropic race to destruction, and on the other, a yearning for fullness. In between lies a space in which to imagine the world to come' (p. 141). Bould is explicit about the choice that faces us: 'Ecosocialism or barbarism. Ride or die' (p. 142).

It's a stirring call to action. But it also feels like a vexed conclusion. At one and the same time *The Anthropocene Unconscious* reminds you of the force that Critique at its best can possess – its capacity to compel us to see ourselves historically, bound in time and space, subject to half-hidden ideological pressures – and brings you up sharply against the problem that all those scholars, from Sedgwick to Felski to Boland, have gone to such lengths to articulate: Critique does not appear to be capable of provoking meaningful political action. Can Critique change the world? Bould's gamble – and perhaps it's everyone else's gamble, too, at least inside the academy – is that we have no choice but to say yes. Critique *must* save the world, or try to.

The Anthropocene Unconscious is a kind of final gamble on the value of Critique. Ride or die. It leaves you with the suspicion that we have exited where we entered: seeing more, hoping more, and wondering if seeing and hoping will, in the end, be enough.

Kevin Power

Carys Crossen, *The Nature of the Beast: Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century*
(Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2019)

As Carys Crossen's volume *The Nature of the Beast* makes clear from its premise, for decades, the werewolf has been a neglected area of study among scholars and experts in gothic and horror fiction and within Supernatural Studies more broadly. This volume enters a debate that has risen with the new millennium and has been stimulated by the publication of a notable number of (literary, cinematic, and television) texts. Indeed, there has been a plethora of texts and media that represent a resurgence of popularity for the figure of the human being who transforms into a frightening, hirsute, and voracious creature.

The volume's Introduction brilliantly presents the author's central argument by distinguishing between two different conceptions of the werewolf. The first sees it as an isolated human being whose self is divided – torn between his civilised and bestial natures (the quintessential Freudian 'beast within') – and who finds release only in death. The second is a new representation of the werewolf dating from the late 1980s onwards, in which the divide between the two polarities is less and less marked, and in which the notion of lycanthropic subjectivity begins to emerge. As Crossen summarises, such a subjectivity 'is defined as consciousness: an awareness of self, thoughts, feelings and the possession of memories, and lived experiences. It is also based upon the possession of agency' (p. 10). The male and female werewolves present in stories such as Suzy McKee Charnas's story 'Boobs' (1989), Crossen argues, shape their identities in relation to others and become subjects in society, whether that is the human community or the pack. In this way, they perfectly represent the concept of the fluid, continually evolving self in relation to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of 'multiplicities' in their 2013 work *A Thousand Plateaus*, a concept that serves as the critical basis for the central argument and that is returned to frequently throughout the volume.

The evolving subjectivity of the werewolf and its different forms are examined here via numerous texts, which include stand-alone novels such as Alice Borchart's *The Silver Wolf* (1993), Toby Barlow's *Sharp Teeth* (2008), Glen Duncan's *The Last Werewolf* (2011), Benjamin Percy's *Red Moon* (2013), and the series by Kelley Armstrong (*Women of the Otherworld*, 2001-21), Anne Rice (*Wolf Gift Chronicles*, 2012-13), Carrie Vaughn (*Kitty Norville*, 2005-15), and Rachel Vincent (*Faythe Sanders*, 2007-10). Crossen also explores young-adult works such as Christine Johnson's *Claire de Lune* (2010), Annette Curtis Lause's *Blood and Chocolate* (1997), Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* books (2005-08), J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), and Maggie Stiefvater's *The Wolves of Mercy Falls* (2009-

14). The analysis also covers films such as *The Wolf-Man* (1941) and its 2010 remake, *Wolfen* (1981), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), and *Wolf Cop* (2014), as well as TV series, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Being Human* (2008-13), *Bitten* (2014-16), and *Wolfblood* (2012-17).

As this broad range of texts indicates, in the five chapters constituting the book, Crossen examines many aspects and facets of the figure of the werewolf. These include the struggle to come to terms with lycanthropy and the revelation of the existence of such creatures to humanity (Chapter 1); inclusivity and diversity – whether in relation to humans or within the pack (Chapter 2); and the necessity to abide by the law (its effectiveness and the forms of punishment) or to enforce the law – when werewolves assume the roles of vigilantes or police officers and select those who they consider to be evil as their victims (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 focuses on the werewolves' lives in the peaceful but boring suburbs, and in the anonymity-granting and corrupt metropolis – both of which, Crossen demonstrates, are constructed as gendered spaces. The last chapter (Chapter 5) examines the association between lycanthropy and adolescent rebelliousness, impulsiveness, and the struggle to attain a sense of self, along with the issues of being an orphan, of maturity, romance, and sexual awakening. What unites the various chapters – and creates a smooth progression from one chapter to the following one – is the analysis of themes such as the differences between male and female werewolves (including the issues of fertility, pregnancy, and abortion), and that of self-control and self-discipline. The contents and plots of the novels are excellently summarised, and their relevant themes are meticulously discussed and examined.

The Nature of the Beast thus illuminates an under-researched area, continually engaging with the past and current critical debates on the figure of the lycanthrope. The book engages with such recent critical texts as Chantal Bourgault Du Coudray's *The Curse of the Werewolf* (2006), Kimberley McMahon-Coleman's *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture* (2012), Brent A. Stypczynski's *The Modern Literary Werewolf* (2013), and Hannah Priest's *She-Wolf* (2015). Crossen also situates the argument firmly within the genre of the gothic more broadly, via the work of Chris Baldick, Barbara Creed, Andrew Tudor, Linnie Blake, Bill Hughes, and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. She provides readers with the definitions of all the central critical terms employed in the volume, from 'werewolf', 'lycanthrope', 'pack', and 'subjectivity' to 'law', 'nature', 'suburb', and 'adolescent', making use of a large and varied corpus of primary sources (such as Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927) and Angela Carter's short stories). The volume is therefore fully grounded in current academic debates on

the subject, while providing valuable context for readers who might be unfamiliar with the history of and academic discourse around werewolves.

Among the most interesting elements of the book are the comparisons made with the behaviour of wolves in nature (the different hierarchies of their packs, for example); the comparisons with the more popular figure of the vampire; the engagement with Victorian fictional works on ferocious werewolves (especially female werewolves preying on children); and the attention to queer-related and racial issues (such as the exploration of why the majority of werewolves are heterosexual and white). Crossen also establishes some interesting parallels between the lifestyle and habits of werewolves and contemporary events such as the widespread support of the death penalty in the United States during the mid-1990s; the post-9/11 fear of terrorism; the MPs' expenses scandal in the late 2000s in the United Kingdom; and the 2008 recession.

The Nature of the Beast is therefore a welcome addition to the study of what is undoubtedly one of the most popular monsters in our culture.

Antonio Sanna

David Church, *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation*
(Edinburgh University Press, 2021)

Genre-literate fans with a positive disposition towards the horror-film corpus may rankle initially at the title of David Church's book *Post-Horror*. The term 'post-horror' is one of many attempts at putting a name to what has widely been viewed as a new wave in horror filmmaking, one that has generally received plaudits from critics (even those 'horror sceptics').[1] Church provides a sustained investigation of the various appellations that have been ventured: in addition to 'post-horror' we have 'elevated', 'slow', 'quiet', 'indie', 'prestige', and (perhaps most condescendingly) 'smart' horror. Fans and critics alike have attacked these labels as snobbish, denoting little more than horror films that are acceptable to the literati.[2] At the book's opening, Church moves quickly to address these concerns: designations like 'elevated horror', he acknowledges, come 'freighted with elitist biases against the horror genre itself' (p. 3). The initial question demanded by the title and subject matter of Church's book is whether these films *really* have anything in common, besides their approval by cultural gatekeepers.

Church argues convincingly that they do, and seems to adopt 'post horror' as his preferred nomenclature, partly to spare the reader from another idiosyncratic academic coinage, partly because it is the least problematic term available, and partly because it articulates (if imperfectly) what he is trying to assert about the films gathered under its heading. Comparing the 'post' in post-horror to that in 'post-irony', Church suggests that the films constitute a coherent corpus in which 'horror's well-established generic tropes and themes [are] taken as read, but stylistically revamped in such a way as to prioritize (negative) affect differently' (p. 37). The key term here is 'stylistic', for form and style are what, in Church's telling, set post-horror demonstrably apart as a subgenre (or what he calls a 'cycle'). In Chapter 1, he sets out to identify these unifying traits. In some sense these films are linked by what they lack, namely 'graphic violence/gore', the classic jump scare, and the 'unrealistic monsters' that stalk the reels of David Cronberg's *The Fly* (1986) or the *Jeepers Creepers* (2001-22) series (p. 9). More

[1] Aya Tsintziras, for example, describes A24's list of filmic offerings as 'elevated' and 'important', as against simple 'fun slashers like *Friday the 13th*'; Tsintziras, 'Does the Slasher Genre Need to be Elevated?', *GameRant,* 15 June 2022 <https://gamerant.com/should-slasher-horror-genre-be-elevated/> [accessed 26 August 2026].
[2] See for example David Ehrlich, 'The Evils of "Elevated Horror" – IndieWire Critics Survey', *IndieWire,* 25 March 2019 <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/elevated-horror-movies-us-1202053471/>; Lor Gislason, 'Why Elevated Horror is an Unnecessary and Elitist Term', *Horror Obsessive*, 2021 <https://horrorobsessive.com/2021/09/04/why-elevated-horror-is-an-unnecessary-and-elitist-term>; and Erich Asperschlager, 'Genre Neutral: Looking Past 'Post-Horror', *F This Movie*, 12 September 2017 <http://www.fthismovie.net/2017/09/genre-neutral-looking-past-post-horror.html> [all accessed 26 August 2026].

fundamentally, the films under discussion share an inheritance from art-cinema and 'slow film', emphasising minimalism and restraint alongside stylistic features like long shots, and a general emphasis on building tension and dread rather than visceral repulsion or jump-scare terror.

Delineating a genre requires the construction of a canon with a centre and a periphery, and this Church duly supplies: Table 1.1 lists what he takes as the primary and secondary texts, with the former adhering more closely to the stylistic conventions the author has traced out (p. 14). With the cycle defined and defended, Church moves in Chapter 2 to account for some of the conflict between genre fans and formal critics over the post-horror cycle. Division is a recurring theme of the book: much stress is laid upon the disconnect between these films' reception by critics and 'popular' audiences (*The Babadook* (dir. by Jennifer Kent, 2014), for example, has a 98% critical score on review-aggregate website RottenTomatoes.com, but only a 72% audience score).[3] In large part, Church argues, this divide can be attributed to post-horror's reliance upon conventions derived from art-cinema, and its exploration of forms of negative affect (such as grief and dread) beyond the 'usual' visceral fear that is horror's stock in trade.

Each chapter expands upon post-horror's debt to earlier films and film trends, as well as deepening the reader's understanding of its influence outside of the standard horror corpus, and its sometimes-fraught relationship to the genre 'proper'. The third chapter traces the treatment of grief and trauma in post-horror films like *Goodnight Mommy* (dir. by Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala, 2014) and *Hereditary* (dir. by Ari Aster, 2018) to the (generally gynocentric) 'mourning films' of the mid-twentieth century, and highlights the influence of the gothic on both. Chapter 4 is a close reading of *Midsommar* (dir. by Ari Aster, 2019), *Get Out* (dir. by Jordan Peele, 2017), and *The Invitation* (dir. by Karyn Kusama, 2015), and centres on the theme of gaslighting that recurs across all three films. What is missed here is an opportunity to link this form of abuse, which Church describes as 'epistemic violence', to the 'epistemic hesitation' (pp. 104 and 87) that haunts films like *The Witch* (dir. by Robert Eggers, 2015). In those films, the audience is left uncertain as to whether they can trust their surface-level reading (is there really a witch in the woods?). Gaslighting seems a natural escalation of this idea, in that it weaponises such uncertainty against character and viewer alike. Church's interpretation of *Midsommar* is also weakened somewhat by a simplistic reading of Christian's climactic

[3] '*The Babadook*', *RottenTomatoes.com* <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_babadook> [accessed 26 August 2026].

moment of sexual betrayal, which the author glosses over as a more-or-less straightforward act of infidelity. The film, though, stresses that Christian is acting under the influence of both a perverse love spell and psychoactive drugs.[4] Chief among the reasons that the scene is so uncomfortable to watch is Christian's clearly drugged stupor, as he is made to penetrate Maja with little apparent awareness of or pleasure in the act. Given that Church is careful to qualify readings of films like *Midsommar* or *The Witch* as liberatory or feminist, it is odd that he omits this detail, which further implicates the cultic Hårga in their gaslighting and abuse of Dani and her friends to an extent that encompasses overt sexual victimisation. Ultimately, though, this is a minor point, and Church's explorations of the films he treats are generally rich in nuance.

Chapter 5 is in part an attempt at correcting a trend in which, as Karl Schoonover notes, scholars have tended to focus on horror films' use of confined spaces at the expense of ignoring their deployment of vast and vacant landscapes. Turning chiefly towards *Under the Skin* (dir. by Jonathan Glazer, 2013), *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse* (dir. by Lukas Feigelfeld, 2017), and *The Lighthouse* (dir. by Robert Eggers, 2019), Church meditates on these films' long, eerie shots of sublimely massive spaces as evincing the 'limits of the human as a source of both horror and aesthetic contemplation' (p. 144). Joined to this is a consideration of the intersection of landscape and gender: *The Witch, Hagazussa*, and *Gretel & Hansel* (dir. by Osgood Perkins, 2020) all figure the uncultivated forest as a locus of patriarchal anxiety over unbounded fertility, spaces in which abundant female power threatens to assert itself over a structured and delimited masculine order.

The sixth chapter builds upon these themes of landscape and gender by finding, in *It Follows* (dir. by David Robert Mitchell, 2014), an 'ironic critique of monogamy as a monstrous force', set amidst the 'ruin-porn' vistas of a crumbling Detroit (p. 22). In the book's closing section, Church turns to the spiritual-metaphysical concerns of films like *A Dark Song* (dir. by Liam Gavin, 2016), *mother!* (dir. by Darren Aronofsky, 2017), and *A Ghost Story* (dir. by David Lowery, 2017). Of particular interest is his concept of 'ghost time' (as opposed to 'human time'), in which 'months, decades, and even centuries of human history pass fluidly via temporal ellipses', while 'specific (lived) moments' drag on for eternities (p. 226). Although this is not stressed in the book, we might see time here as playing a similar role in *A Ghost Story* as space does in Chapter 5: both function as a vastness that emphasises the cosmic smallness of human life.

[4] There is a degree of 'epistemic hesitation' on display in this scene, as well; it is not at all clear how seriously the audience should take the reality or efficacy of the magic spell on display.

The book's unity is chiefly thematic rather than argumentative: no one thesis is really pursued through all seven chapters. A handful of recurring ideas – the cinematic ancestry of post-horror, the stylistic devices by which it generates affect, the division that it fosters between critics, fans, and popular audiences – hold the work together, although individual scholars will likely find some chapters more useful than others, according to their particular research interests. Some opportunities at stressing the thematic interconnection between chapters are missed: the 'horrors of monogamy' explored in Chapter 6 might have been fruitfully joined to Chapter 4's discussions of *Midsommar* and *Get Out*, for example. Still, Church's prose is lucid, and he wears his considerable scholarship lightly, rendering the book eminently accessible to nonspecialists without sacrificing its utility to academic audiences. Overall, *Post-Horror* constitutes a valuable contribution to the scholarship surrounding this nascent cycle of strange and divisive films.

Alexander J. Zawacki

BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

Catriona Ward, *The Last House on Needless Street* (Viper, 2021)

Catriona Ward's 2021 novel *The Last House on Needless Street* is a contemporary gothic-horror novel, hailed by Stephen King as 'a true nerve-shredder that keeps its mind-blowing secrets to very end'.[1] King went on to say he hadn't read anything as exciting since Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). I would argue that it has more in common with Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) than *Gone Girl*. However, as King's comparison suggests, major plot twists are central to both books.

The book opens with the ominous line: 'Today is the anniversary of Little Girl with Popsicle' (p. 1). For Ted, our protagonist, it is already a bad day. He lives in ramshackle house at the end of Needless Street, with his daughter Lauren and his cat Olivia, who can't bear to be in the same room together. He struggles to keep his life together and his 'mind runs like ants, everywhere' (p. 7). He cannot keep track of time and doesn't remember things that he's done. All the while, Dee, the sister of 'Little Girl with Popsicle', is determined to discover what happened to her sister, and moves into a house near Ted.

The American landscape of *The Last House on Needless Street* is one of run-down houses built on the edge of a forest with oversized trees, lakes full of danger where children go missing, under a sun that scorches. This is the suburban gothic of the mundane. Ted's home is dirty, unkempt, and in bad repair, with plywood over the windows. The house no longer has mirrors, to save Lauren from the horror of seeing herself. Ted, we are told, is fat, with a 'rubber sack' (p. 60) of a belly. He bumps into things because he is not used to the space he takes up in the world. His head is covered in 'shiny pale patches of skull among brown' (p. 60) and he has a bushy red beard. 'The rest of me – well, I try not to think about that at all. There's a smell on me these days, like mushrooms, earthy. My body is turning on me' (p. 61). Ted disgusts himself, yet despite this, he yearns for a companion. At the heart of the gothic is the idea of transformation, where the known mind and the fragility of the self are under threat. It is within the horror novel that we can find exploration of identity, trauma, and how we navigate a world that is at odds with the normative viewpoint. All of these elements are apparent in *The Last House on Needless Street.*

[1] See https://x.com/StephenKing/status/1304119516633464832. Stephen King Tweeted this on 10 September 2020.

Indeed, in the Afterword, Ward explains about how she came to write 'a book about survival, disguised as a book about horror' (p. 364). At first glance, it would appear that the supernatural is at work in the world of Ward's novel, but the horror is one of the mind rather than an otherworldly apparition. By employing supernatural elements, Ward lures the reader into a false reality so that she can tell an entirely different story, one dependent on the supernatural as metaphor for the distressed and traumatised mind. Early on in the novel, Ted references 'pleasant chills' (p. 37), imagining what has happened to a young boy who had disappeared by the lake. This calls to mind the 'pleasing terror' of the gothic tradition. The reader is alerted to the sense of the vicarious pleasure in being frightened at a safe distance.

The reader's sensibilities are triggered by the extremes of the sleek beauty of Olivia the cat, Lauren's deformity, and the revulsion that Ted feels towards himself; the darkness of the refrigerator and the dazzling light outside of it; the vastness of the forest along with the extremes of hot and cold. Lauren has suffered burns so bad that that the skin peels off: 'Kind of like snakeskin, but it smelled bad and I wanted to die with how bad it hurt' (p 196). The book's pattern of incarceration and torture followed by release gives rise to the sublime ecstasy of no longer being contained. Lauren whizzes along on her pink bicycle in the house, her only form of joy. Yet Ted asserts that he is working to keep Lauren safe: 'Killing things is hard, sure, but keeping them, safe and alive is much more difficult. Oh, boy, do I know about that' (p. 13).

Ted has construed a family for himself with Lauren as his daughter, along with the cat, and his dead parents looking on from pictures on the mantel piece. This family unit allows for an exploration of what it means to belong, when belonging is in fact a form of possession. Ted's relationship with his monstrous mother is the root of his trauma. Her cruelty is disguised as life lessons: 'Everything in life is a rehearsal for loss', she tells him. 'Breaking me, then mending me, over and over – that was my mother' (p. 36). He loves her and fears her. Ted's mother worked in a hospital looking after sick children. Cutting and then repairing his flesh was her *modus operandi*. What began as a once-a-month occurrence develops until she spends the whole night sewing him up, repairing minor grazes, opening them up and suturing them, as the novel draws on images of the body and medical tropes to instil horror. She uses a tape recorder to record notes of her operations on Ted, and he acquiesces, knowing that if he puts up a fight, he will end up in a disinfectant bath of vinegar and hot water. His mother calls to mind Adora from Flynn's *Sharp Objects* with her twisted sense of mothering and her penchant for inflicting injury. Both mothers share the underlying pathology of Munchausen syndrome by proxy, and both offspring have scarred bodies, etched with their mother's handiwork. The abuse and

trauma that Ted has experienced manifests in his day-to-day life and the only way to manage the enormity of his pain is to share it out.

Memory and the absence of it are constant concerns for Ted. He makes notes in case he forgets, records messages for himself, and fears the past encroaching on the present: 'The past is close tonight. The membrane of time bulges and strains' (p. 149). The pictures on the mantel piece and the mementoes from childhood in the form of a music-box ballerina and Russian dolls provide visual motifs, evoking sensations and memories to unnerve Ted, alerting the reader to the gothic notion that home is not a place of safety and security. The motif of the Russian dolls is also an obvious symbol of containment. The dolls, one within the other, are prisoners. Furthermore, the novel points to the idea of burying things you don't want to see in the form of the burial sites in the forest. Ted, we are being told, is fearful of the past and the traumas that haunt him.

Perhaps one of the more surprising, yet compelling, aspects of the book is the character of Olivia the cat, with her question-mark tail. Ted's relationship with Olivia is one of love and comfort. We have a real sense of the inner workings of his mind when he is relaxed and soothed by Olivia. The cat represents bodily fluidity, hinting at shape shifting and a quasi-feminine form. Cats have a long association with mysticism, superstition, and witchcraft. Olivia is the object of Ted's affection and the only source of affection he receives in return. Ted is an animal lover, who tends to the birds and is distraught when they are killed. Caring for living creatures and 'keeping' them alive against all odds is important to Ted, hinting at the truth of the story that Ted is not the villain. The idea of the self being threatened by something that is not part of us in terms of identity and non-identity, human and non-human finds voice in Ward's work. The dualistic idea of the body and the mind with the body forced to overcome its physical limitations in order to survive is also central to *The Last House on Needless Street*. As Lauren says, 'But it's not enough to survive. I want to live' (p. 197).

The book opens and closes with the reference to the anniversary of the 'Little Girl with Popsicle' (p. 1 and p. 352), creating a framing device of that echoes the crime-novel structure, yet *The Last House on Needless Street* deals more with the effect of crime on the psyche. By the end of the novel, Ted has come to terms with his identity, recognising the trauma that he has endured and how it has affected him. He speaks of the wrestling within, and of experiencing seismic, nauseous struggles: 'It is not easy to hold everyone in your heart at once' (p. 319). Ward asks her readers to do the same for Ted, Lauren, Oliva, and Dee. This is an unsettling read that sits well within the gothic tradition, with its use of unreliable narrators and fragmentary

narrative. I implore you to read it, to enjoy the uncanny and the oppressive atmosphere of paranoia and deception, and to marvel at how Ward pulls off the ultimate feat of illusion.

Sharon Dempsey

***Promethean Horrors: Classic Tales of Mad Science*, ed. by Xavier Aldana Reyes**
(The British Library, 2019)

The British Library's 'Tales of the Weird' series has recently facilitated the rediscovery of much 'long-lost material from the Library's vaults' (p. 271). The resulting series of anthologies packages tales of horror and the supernatural from previously forgotten authors, alongside more well-known examples of the genre, in attractively designed paperbacks. This mix of classic horror tales with more obscure material makes the series suitable for both newcomers and more seasoned readers of gothic and weird fiction. Each book in the series is introduced and edited by literary experts – in this case, Dr Xavier Aldana Reyes of Manchester Metropolitan University – who provide short forewords to each tale, contextualising the story in reference to the theme of the collection and the author's other works.

Promethean Horrors: Classic Tales of Mad Science will be particularly enjoyable for readers interested in expanding their knowledge of medical-, scientific-, or eco-horror texts, featuring as it does stories from Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. P. Lovecraft, as well as lesser-known tales by L. T. Meade and E. Nesbitt. Aldana Reyes's introduction provides a thoughtful framework for considering the place of the mad-scientist figure in the gothic canon, suggesting that '[w]here other Gothic figures may be born evil, the mad scientist is guilty of being malcontent, of not thinking about the consequences of pushing nature too far' (p. 7). Fittingly, many of the stories in this collection explore the impact of the mad scientist's actions on their loved ones, with predictably tragic outcomes. What emerges from the volume is a sense that the mad scientist's desire to understand more about the world is not an innately evil one; instead, this craving for knowledge often morphs into a ruthless, ambitious drive which leaves no room for moral considerations. This makes him an intriguingly ambivalent figure, and one who reflects the gothic mode's enduring fascination with the heavy costs of scientific advancement.

Promethean Horrors is helpfully arranged, with stories proceeding in chronological order of publication date, from E. T. A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman' (1816) to George Langelaan's 'The Fly' (1957). Some of these stories will already be familiar to readers, but that doesn't stop them from being good old-fashioned horror fun – for example, the high-camp drama of 'The Sandman' begins with the breathily theatrical statement that '[s]omething horrible has crossed my path of life' (p. 15), and proceeds from there directly toward lunacy. Incorporating clockwork automata, castration metaphors, eye snatching, and mesmerism, there are few gothic tales more bonkers than this. However, it bears rereading for being not only a

deeply enjoyable example of the mad-science subgenre, but also at times a genuinely frightening one. Hoffman's tale has an unnerving quality that evokes the sensation of waking from nightmares, when the lines between memory and dream and reality seem very thin. Protagonist Nathaniel's obsession with automaton Olympia also provokes questions about the boundary between human and non-human, inspiring one of the story's most chilling lines: 'God preserve you, brother […] but it seems to me, that you are in an evil way' (p. 46). It is hard to say what exactly is wrong with Nathaniel – 'an evil way' is both nonspecific and foreboding enough to reflect the ethos of Hoffman's story, which is that some people are simply evil, and will spread that evil to others however and whenever they can. Contributing to the story's strange dreamlike quality is the extent to which malevolent inventor Coppelius/Coppola has little by way of stated purpose; he's an evil double, a stealer of eyes, a monster invented to scare children into going to sleep. He does it because he wants to, making him the most delicious kind of gothic villain.

Other mad scientists in this collection are more sensitive to the impact of their experiments on their loved ones; the emotional toll on significant others is given particular attention in Shelley's 'The Mortal Immortal: A Tale' (1833), Nesbit's 'The Five Senses' (1909), and Langelaan's previously mentioned 'The Fly'. All three stories contain rather touching depictions of the mad scientist's core relationship under threat, whether as a result of differing opinions on vivisection as a testing practise (Nesbitt), or of hasty experiments performed by the scientist using their own bodies as test subjects (Shelley and Langelaan). 'The Mortal Immortal' provides a particularly gruelling portrait of a relationship in slow decline, as the mad scientist of the tale, Winzy, accidentally ingests a potion that imparts immortality. He remains youthful while watching his wife slowly decline into old age. Winzy's wife Bertha is so tormented with jealousy and despair at his never-ending youth that she begins to fantasise that all the unfelt years will heap themselves upon Winzy in one fell swoop, so that he might 'awake some morning white-headed, and bowed down with all the marks of advanced years' (p. 70). Perhaps the saddest aspect of this is that Winzy joins in with his wife's fantasies, not knowing what else to do and having lost the ability to connect with her any other way. As always with Shelley, the reader is warned that the leaps and bounds of scientific progress wreak havoc not only on the scientist but on those close to them, if the scientist is clouded by ego or carelessness.

In the wake of such poignant material, it is difficult for a story as remote and grim as 'The Secrets of the Scaffold' by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1883) not to feel a little slow, although that very grimness might linger in the reader's mind for longer than they expect. Both

'Secrets of the Scaffold' and old favourite 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' by Edgar Allan Poe (1845) explore what signs of 'life' might remain after death, although they come to rather different – if similarly viscous – conclusions. A later story, 'The Body Snatcher' by Stevenson (1884), begins as a gruesomely entertaining romp about – what else? – body snatching, but slowly unfolds into a rather more sophisticated narrative about slow and insidious moral corruption, with a nasty twist in the tale. Meade's 'The Blue Laboratory' (1897) injects a welcome jolt of practical, no-nonsense energy into the proceedings, in the form of a story about an English governess working in Russia who discovers that her employer is conducting unethical experiments on the possibility of photographing human thought. Aldana Reyes's introductory note on this story explains that Meade often published mystery and detective stories in *The Strand*, the magazine which carried Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. This provides a useful context for some of governess Madeline's eagle-eyed and forthright qualities. Initially more like an action-adventure story in tone, a sudden, gory shift in Meade's tale places it firmly in the science-fiction horror camp, and highlights the fact, as Aldana Reyes points out, that 'there were many excellent female writers of science fiction working throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who have been unduly forgotten' (p. 163).

The collection finishes with another story in the tragic mode, in the form of Langelaan's 'The Fly'. The plot of the story might be familiar to fans of David Cronenberg's 1986 body-horror masterpiece of the same name, which is itself a remake of Kurt Neumann's earlier film adaptation from 1958. In the original Langelaan story, mad scientist Dr André Delambre (whose name is changed to Seth Brundle in Cronenberg's film) is experimenting with a device intended to disintegrate matter and reintegrate it at a different point in space, rendering other forms of travel obsolete. Unfortunately, when he attempts to transport himself via this method to test its safety and efficacy on human subjects, Delambre accidentally traps a fly in the disintegration chamber with him and emerges a changed man. Langelaan's story differs in some respects from its adaptations – particularly the detail of the physical transformation in the Cronenberg adaptation, which was much praised for its special effects upon release and won an Academy Award for Best Makeup – but the emotional core of the story remains unchanged. Delambre's relationship with his wife is the driving force behind the narrative; she works tirelessly to help him recover, until it becomes clear that no recovery is possible. For this reader, Langelaan's tale is perhaps the most effective version of the emotional arc that structures so many of the mad-scientist stories in this volume: the tragedy of remaining attached to a person who is slowly becoming a monster. It makes a fitting end to a collection that manages to be

entertainingly far-fetched in its plots, and yet affectingly authentic in its depictions of human relationships, successfully showcasing a subgenre that is preoccupied with the personal cost of collective progress.

Rebecca Gibson

FILM REVIEWS

Lies We Tell
dir. by Lisa Mulcahy (2023)

Ireland's literary and heritage establishments have made some attempts in the twenty-first century toward recovering the substantial legacy of the author J. Sheridan Le Fanu. Coinciding with the 2014 bicentenary of the author's birth, commemorations included an act of reverence by the Le Fanu family, which saw the installation of a special memorial plaque on the gravesite at Dublin's Mount Jerome Cemetery. Efforts to shine a spotlight on Le Fanu's work include a collection of homage stories printed in *Dreams of Shadows and Smoke* (2014), a tribute anthology edited by Jim Rockhill and Brian J. Showers, and published by Swan River Press. However, the author has not fully come in from the cold, and has certainly not yet emerged from under the shadow of Bram Stoker. Almost a decade later, Irish gothic cinema paid its own homage to the grandfather of the tradition, whose novel *Uncle Silas* (1864) is still relatively obscure. *Lies We Tell*, directed by Lisa Mulcahy – also known for *The Legend of Longwood* (2014), *Red Rock* (2015), and *Sanctuary: A Witches Tale* (2024) – is 'inspired by' Le Fanu's novel, but pays faithful tribute, not only to its source material, but also to a wider literary phenomenon of sensation and the gothic. *Uncle Silas* was termed a 'sensation' novel in its day, a school of literature that emerged in the early 1860s from other modes and genres, with characteristic strains of gothic and detective fiction, usually located in upper-class domestic settings. For its part, *Uncle Silas* influenced Arthur Conan Doyle's mystery novel *The Firm of Girdlestone* (1890) and even inspired parts of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938). Like its source, *Lies We Tell* contains subtextual meaning that is particularly Irish, this time using a nineteenth-century setting to interrogate modern social and cultural concerns around the legal and bodily rights of women. The film shares much in common with du Maurier's novel, and fits equally as comfortably in the more recently coined 'domestic noir' style of fiction, which has been enjoying a long and enduring comeback since Gillian Flynn's 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, adapted for screen by David Fincher in 2014.

The film's gothic atmosphere is beautifully captured from the beginning scenes, which introduce the heroine Maud Ruthyn (Agnes O'Casey) strolling through paradisial countryside amid moss-choked paths surrounding the grounds of her substantial estate. Her father has just died, leaving Maud an heiress, a more dangerous than desirable position for the newfound

orphan. The 'house' itself is a literal gothic manor (Dublin's Ardgillan Castle), complete with turrets and gothic arches. Among these wild and beautiful woodlands, Maud lays a wreath on the headstones of her ancestors, Ruthyns all. Here our young protagonist ponders the question: 'what makes a monster?' True to the sensation-narrative formula, it emerges that the 'monster' is within the family, a generic premise underlying novels and films of the relatively recently coined 'domestic noir' genre, including Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid* (2022) and its 2025 film adaptation (dir. by Paul Feig).[1] Even as the film plays with the often-shared conventions of sensation and domestic-noir fiction, Mulcahy leans more heavily into the latter as we get a female perspective. This is also true of Le Fanu's original text, which is centred around Maud's experience of the world. We might view *Uncle Silas* then, in retrospect, as differing from the works of Le Fanu's male contemporaries writing in the genre – the novels of Wilkie Collins being a useful point of comparison, as they are often told primarily from the male point of view.

Now an heiress, or more properly, a prize, Maud's fate lies in the hands of her dubious trustees. Maud's period of reflective mourning is violently seized by the arrival of seldom-seen relatives. Here to disturb her peaceful bereavement are her disgraced Uncle Silas (David Wilmot), his two children and their 'governess'. Maud dismisses warnings that Silas, 'a most expensive, vicious man' and suspected murderer, should not be welcomed into the ancient Ruthyn home, a decision she soon regrets. In a rare lowering of the heroine's defences, Maud embraces her embattled uncle as she welcomes him and his family into her home. Their presence is menacing. Her cousins Edward (Chris Walley) and Emily (Holly Sturton) are odious in their own ways, and both have designs on Maud's property. After all, the film is set in an era when fortunes are made and unmade through strategic, often incestuous marriages. Silas attempts to persuade Maud to marry her cousin Edward (named Dudley in Le Fanu's novel), 'for what could be better than marrying one's own blood?' Despicably encouraged by his father, Edward forces his attentions and eventually himself on Maud, who is increasingly rendered powerless, as she runs out of legal defences against the usurpation of her estate and the violation of her body.

The film revolves around Maud's attempts to outmanoeuvre her uncle and her untrustworthy trustees who conspire to acquire her substantial fortune. She matches Silas' determination with wit, and although 'unschooled', she consistently challenges the takeover of

[1] Julia Crouch, 'Genre Bender', *Julia Crouch's Blog*, 25 August 2012 <https://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender> [accessed 5 September 2026].

her home. One of many tense confrontations between uncle and niece occurs during a scene set in Maud's father's study, which the pleasure-seeking Silas has transformed into an opium den. The scene is made memorable by the two performers, who demonstrate impressive chemistry as they both attempt to attract and persuade the other through layers of palpable repulsion.

Maud is no shrinking heroine, unlike the similarly persecuted female victims of a Wilkie Collins novel (lily-white Laura Fairlie from Collins' 1860 novel *The Woman in White* comes to mind as quite the contrast). While Le Fanu's Maud is imaginative, sees ghosts and goblins all around, and eventually begins to feel as if she is going mad, there are no hysterics, fainting spells, or fetching of smelling salts necessary for Mulcahy's version of a gothic heroine. Described by her uncle as 'cold', Maud is a pragmatic, complex, and headstrong leading character, made all the more relatable for her various nuances. Maud's words spoken defiantly early in the film – 'I shall never leave Knowl', her family home – express a certain determination that will be severely tested throughout the film. But the threat to Maud in this instance involves more than her property; the sense of sexual danger is precisely what Mulcahy wants us to understand. The claret-swilling, opium-addled Uncle Silas is here to stay, and nothing will get in the way of *his* expected fortune. Despite Maud's admirable attempts to outwit her opponents and gain the upper hand, the proverbial wolves continuously circle outside her door, until eventually, they get in. While physical violation in Le Fanu's text is often sublimated into acts of textual violation, in the form of Uncle Silas' monitoring of letters, diaries, and legal documents, the threat of violation looms over Mulcahy's picture in more overt ways, culminating in Maud's sexual assault by Edward.

Unlike Le Fanu's better-known 'Carmilla' and 'Green Tea' (both 1872), *Uncle Silas* is not a narrative that explicitly draws from the supernatural. Similarly, *Lies We Tell* derives its creepiness from the hair-raising and realistic performances of Wilmot and Walley, to the extent that actual ghosts in this film are superfluous to requirements. The excellently styled cousin Emily, with her tightly ringleted blond curls, is ghoulishly angelic in appearance, which is entirely consistent with her character, at once sweetly seeking a sisterly companionship with Maud while fawning greedily over her jewels and trinkets. The governess 'Madame' (Gráinne Keenan) is a quietly menacing presence, although a significantly toned-down version of Le Fanu's fiendish Madame de la Rougierre, who appears 'like some evil being seen in a dream'.[2] The decision to render the Madame less cartoonish seems altogether the right choice for the

[2] Sheridan Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas* (Wordsworth Editions, 2009), p. 387.

script and demonstrates the film's use of restraint, which is one of its major strengths, especially considering the potential for brash gothic excess in Le Fanu's novel. Mulcahy understands that true monsters are not so conspicuous.

David Wilmot's performance as Silas is an exercise in precision, as he brings a repulsive kind of attraction to the character – at moments almost believable as the benevolent father figure and romantic hero Maud had hoped for earlier in the film. An early scene sees the pair walking hand in hand, Wilmot styled as a gentleman squire. Her uncle arrives at Knowl with his reputation in tatters, and Maud sympathises with the kindly seeming and presumably misunderstood outsider. It does not take long for the veneer to crack, and the first indications of trouble come with Silas' sharp treatment of the aged servants. Wilmot's pale-blue eyes do so much to express the character's oscillation between kindliness and Mephistophelean villainy. A memorable moment of pathos arrives when, during the final showdown between Maud and Silas, our heroine, despite all she has endured, tells an uncaring Silas that 'I would have loved you'.

While diverging from the book in many ways, the film recreates the sensation-gothic narrative technique of 'playing detective' by retaining its first-person perspective. The Ruthyn family secrets emerge for us here at the same pace as they do for Maud, whose point of view we share. As in Le Fanu's novel, we know what Maud does, and we know it through her investigative work. The film modernises the sensation-fiction heroine through O'Casey's punchy and uncompromising performance, her responses to gaslighting from the wider community of male clerics and physicians, the threat on her bodily autonomy, and her lack of options for justice and redress. Using her father's library to read up on her legal recourses as Silas encroaches on all that rightfully belongs to her, she discovers that the law is not on her side. Maud is defiant, and will not submit, even as her corsets become constrained and it becomes clear that she has been impregnated by her rapist, Edward (a shocking departure from Le Fanu's plot). 'I decline to marry my rapist', she repeats.

Le Fanu's original *Uncle Silas* works within the cultural context of the years leading up to the Married Women's Property Act (1870). Le Fanu's themes resonate further with a new era in which women's precarious position in legal contexts – particularly in terms of bodily autonomy – play conspicuously into the film's feminist reflections. The taut script deals with heavy and sensitive subjects, including a sexual threat that results in an onscreen rape and a resultant pregnancy. Such challenging images are handled with the moderation and tact that subjects of this nature demand, and are narrative components that call to mind the contemporary issues that Mulcahy seems to subtly address in this storyline. These issues

include those that are specific to trauma on this island: contraception, divorce, issues of sexual morality, Magdalene laundries, mother-and-baby homes. The end of the film, however, sees Maud as the mistress of her own household. She reflects and wonders 'how I lived through that terrible ordeal'. It's difficult not to see parallels with recent history in Ireland, as those who lived through a repressive religious and state regime here may similarly reflect, 'how did we live through this'?

Director Mulcahy and writer Elisabeth Gooch understand the tradition they are working in, and the homage feels sincere. Mulcahy is attentive to the film's literary roots, not attempting to bring all of its thematic or generic staples into a modern setting, but certainly emphasising the relevance of their feminist entreaties to contemporary audiences. This is a Victorian gothic thriller in its very bones. From its tightly laced costumes to the sensation-gothic screenplay, *Lies We Tell* provides a rich Victorian gothic atmosphere, but with a distinctly modern resonance. In doing so, it combines elements to produce a thoughtful adaptation of an Irish gothic classic, made with genuine affection for the subgenre.

Orla Donnelly

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