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EDITORIAL

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Gothic Trajectories

This special issue of *Aeternum* is a result of the Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia's 2022 interim online conference, held on the 27th and 28th of January this year. After the interruptions and delays that the global COVID-19 pandemic has brought on our personal and professional lives, it was a pleasure and a privilege for our academic community to come together virtually and share our scholarship with one another. Under the experienced leadership of GANZA President Professor Lorna Piatti-Farnell, the interim online conference ensured that our international network of Gothic scholars could once again 'meet' in a safe and supportive forum to consider what potential trajectories our field may face in the future. Over two days, we heard many fascinating presentations on this theme from postgraduate students, early career researchers, and established scholars alike, and the articles included in this issue are some of these papers that have been further developed into peer-reviewed scholarly publications.

The first article, “Gothic Trajectories of Childhood: Play as a Third Space, Affective Dissonance, and the Melodrama of *Kamen Rider Kiva*” co-authored by Sophia Staite and Ruth Barratt-Peacock, explores the significance of melodramatic play in the gothic Japanese children’s television program *Kame Rider Kiva*, and its trajectory through the show’s tie-in toy replica transformation belt for children. This issue’s second article continues to explore how the theme can be found at play in another television series, this time for adults, in HBO’s *True Blood*, an adaptation of Charlaine Harris’ *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* fantasy book series. Rene Hoff, in “I Knew This Girl Who Knew This Girl: Gothic and Horror Tropes as Rhetorical Refusals in HBO’s *True Blood*” addresses Alan Ball’s character creation and the trajectories that he places them on to defy audience’s stereotypical preconceived perceptions using the tropes of the gothic and horror genres. Hannah Lamarre continues this issue’s examination of gothic trajectories in another contemporary television series with her article, “I Know What I Am, Do You?: Asexuality as Frustration of Destiny and the Devil in *Penny Dreadful*”. Lamarre offers a compelling examination of the series’ protagonist, Vanessa, reading her as an asexual Other character whose asexuality specifically functions as the narrative trajectory through which she eventually succeeds. The fourth article of this issue, Sutirtho Roy’s “Life, Uh Finds a Way: Reading Post-Human Agency in the EcoGothic Spaces of *Jurassic Park*”, presents an ecocritical analysis of gothic space through the liminal hybridity of the dinosaur depictions in Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film, *Jurassic Park*. Finally, this issue is brought to its conclusion by Antonio Sanna, who has written a film review of *The Howling*, a horror classic directed by Joe Dante, in honour of its fortieth anniversary restoration and re-release in 2021.

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Gothic Trajectories of Childhood: Play as a Third Space, Affective Dissonance, and the Melodrama of *Kamen Rider Kiva*

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the interaction between melodramatic affect, television tie-in toys, and play for children going through the transition to formal schooling. Using the case study of the Kamen Rider Kiva toy transformation belt, it identifies a complex interplay between these elements. Kamen Rider Kiva is a gothic Japanese children's television program in the melodramatic mode. Aural cues play an important role in creating the program's affect, and these cues are reproduced by the tie-in toy belt's sounds. Through its combination of aural cues and affective loading (melo-drama), the belt makes certain structures of feeling portable. By taking the belt into different spaces, the child creates a bridge between dissonant identities and affordances. Our use of the term gothic trajectories of childhood acknowledges the co-forming influence of both time and space on childhood. The 'gothic' recalls the child's lack of power, 'childhood' evokes the multiple social practices that determine the child's possibilities for action and subjectivity, while 'trajectory' evokes the child's movement between the different spaces in which they must perform their various roles (of family member at home, pupil in class, playmate in the park, and so on). Movement between these space-roles may lead to a crisis of affective dissonance. Kamen Rider Kiva explores these issues in its plot, and the belt makes portable the affective loading of the aural cues the toy inherits from the program.

Keywords: *Kamen Rider*, play, third space, affective dissonance, childhood melodrama

Frustrated after a difficult morning at school, a six-year-old first-grader in Japan uses break time to sneak a plastic toy vampire bat from his bag. Pressing the toy bat to his hand he hears it play the transformation sound effect from Kamen Rider Kiva, a television program about a character who transforms from a weak human into a powerful vampire-like superhero through this vampire bat's bite. This sound, associated with both the flood of empowerment it represents diegetically in the television program and with the warmth and security of Sunday morning television-watching at home, reassures the child. Reinvigorated, he returns the toy to his bag and runs out to play.

Kamen Rider has been airing in Japan since 1971. Much like the related program *Power Rangers*, each season features a different theme and characters but there are consistent features repeated in every season. The program is a vehicle for toy sales, so every *Kamen Rider* uses a combination of morphing or, in Japanese, *henshin* belts and devices that can be sold as toys. The *henshin* transformation scene is a key pleasure of the text, as well as an advertisement for the toy. When the reluctant eponymous hero of 2008 season *Kamen Rider Kiva* is alerted to the presence of a threat, he transforms with the help of a supernatural vampire bat whose bite causes the *henshin* belt to emerge from inside the hero's body. The process of transforming into a superhero is facilitated by letting his bat familiar bite his hand and then inserting the bat into the belt, which it then uses as a roost. During the *henshin* scene the belt plays a leitmotif, and the hero performs a simple stylized choreography as his costume and demeanour transform. The bat is also used to control his different attack moves through the belt, each with its own dedicated aural motif. The belt and bat (along with a variety of add-ons) can be purchased as a toy that looks and sounds exactly the same as one in the program, because the program uses the toys it markets as props. The diegetic moment of empowerment and transformation is accompanied by specific choreography and sound created not by a soundtrack but by interaction with the belt. In keeping with the conventions of melodrama, we see sound and movement working together to enact a feeling or set of feelings. Because the toy is exactly the same as the prop in the television program, the child's play can do the same enactment without any kind of mediation and can do this enactment in different places. This paper unpacks these processes and explores the connection between children's media, space, and affect.

Childhood is usually considered as a temporal phenomenon. What we have chosen to term the 'gothic trajectories of childhood', however, acknowledges the co-forming influence of both time and space on childhood. The 'gothic' recalls the child's lack of power, 'childhood' evokes the multiple social practices that determine the child's possibilities for action and subjectivity (cf. Garlen 2019), while 'trajectory' implies both movement through time and angles between points in space. Childhood and geography are co-defining in many ways. Think, for instance, about

the places that children are expected to inhabit (the home, the school, the playground or the even more evanescent 'nature') or are prohibited from entering (public houses, selected film showings). There are also other, less obvious ways in which geography reflects dominant constructions of childhood, for instance the prevalence of spaces that are structurally difficult and/or unsafe for children to move in independently of adults (trains, trams, highways) or that exclude all non-economic participants (any space requiring money to enter, such as a theatre). This latter point is one aspect of the lack of control and possibilities for action and meaningful contribution that children face in highly industrialized societies and a contributing factor to the "hard times of childhood" (Waksler 1998) that are one aspect of childhood's gothic trajectory.

The other aspect of the 'gothic trajectories of childhood' we highlight is that the child must exist in multiple forms. These forms are temporal and ostensibly developmental (the transformation from being a pre-schooler to a pupil for instance), but also spatial. The child moves from being a baby in the home to being a playmate in another home-like group to being a pupil in an institutional setting. The stages are not necessarily linear and moving between these spaces may likewise lead to a crisis of dissonance. The simplest example of this is the difference between the home child and the school child. The child must straddle two different discourses, the home discourse and the school discourse, on a daily basis. Imaginary play offers chances to enact feelings of power and control within the space of play. The *Kamen Rider Kiva* belt facilitates this bridging through its mobility and its ability to carry the affective loading from the program to the playground or home. As Clare Hemmings notes, "Affect works to mark the ordinary through fantasy, so that how we see and engage the other is already suffused with meaning, dualistic, precisely not 'free'" (Hemmings 2015, 149). The child's engagement with the ordinary sites of childhood is coloured through the lens of melodramatic affect as they play. The ordinary plastic toy is viewed and engaged with in certain ways by the child because it carries the affective loading created by *Kamen Rider Kiva's* gothic melodrama: an affective loading that is perfectly attuned to what we have called the gothic trajectory of childhood. Because the melodramatic mode is a key aspect of these connections, we will now contextualise *Kiva* as a gothic melodrama, before moving to examine the relationship between the program, toy, and space.

Melodrama and the Gothic as Modes in Children's Television

Kiva is the 2008 season of *Kamen Rider*, and it has a vampire theme. It features parallel intertwined story arcs taking place in the 1980s and 2000s, tied together by a violin named the "Bloody Rose". This violin is crafted in the 1980s storyline by a vampire hunter and the vampire Queen he falls in love with. In the 2000s storyline

their son is alerted by the playing of his parents' now haunted violin to his duty to defend humanity from vampire attacks. Using the bite of his vampire bat sidekick to produce his belt and transform into Kamen Rider Kiva, a masked hero, he reluctantly rides out to save the day. This family dynamic is the primary reason for our categorisation of *Kiva* as a gothic story.

Helen Wheatley describes menacing domestic situations and family secrets as common characteristics of gothic television, along with, "perhaps most importantly, homes and families which are haunted, tortured, or troubled in some way" (Wheatley 2006, 3). When he takes the mask off, *Kiva's* protagonist is a painfully shy and lonely young man who has grown up without a family in a haunted, overgrown mansion. All he wants to do is work on his violin making and immerse himself in music, but he is constantly hounded into battles by the insistence of his parents' legacy. As the intertwined stories unfold the complexity of this legacy becomes clearer. In the 1980s, the vampire Queen experiences domestic violence in her arranged marriage to the King, but once her affair with a human is revealed she becomes an outcast from vampire society. She is marked for indiscriminate violence and openly hunted. There is a devastatingly sad story arc in the 2000s timeline involving the reunion between Kiva and his fully vampire half-brother, in which both struggle to come to terms with their relationships with each other, the mother who had to abandon them both, and their respective fathers who died fighting one-another.

Although there is a paucity of research on melodrama in children's texts, considerable literature has been produced on childhood and the gothic, which, as a closely related mode, provides a useful foundation for considering melodrama in children's fiction. As Peter Brooks (1976, 19-20) points out,

Melodrama shares many characteristics with the Gothic novel, and not simply in the subjects that were traded back and forth between the two genres. It is equally preoccupied with nightmare states, with clausturation and thwarted escape, with innocence buried alive and unable to voice its claim to recognition.

Even in the most benign and loving of circumstances, children are subjected to arbitrary control in every minute detail of their lives: what they eat and when, with whom they associate, the colour of their socks, the sounds they are permitted to make and the ways they are permitted to move their bodies are all subject to adult whims. They experience what Frances Waksler (1998) calls "the hard times of childhood", things that seem unremarkable to adults but are experienced as difficult by children themselves. Waksler (1998, 219) shares the following example from one

of her informants: “Do not bite your nails. Do not crack your knuckles. Do not slouch in your chair. Do not spill your milk. Do not mash your peas. Do not wear through the knees of your good pants.” Clausturation and thwarted escape, a feeling of being buried alive and unable to voice claim to recognition; these are, we argue, emotions at the heart of the experience of childhood. The protagonist of *Kamen Rider Kiva* embodies these feelings but is able to access superhuman power through his *henshin* toy. Over the course of the series, he develops inner strength and resilience to emotionally match the physical power his bat-and-belt give him.

In addition to being a gothic story, then, *Kamen Rider Kiva* is a program in the melodramatic mode. This mode is heteroglossic, combining musical, music-like speech, spectacular visuals, gesture, and choreography that carries emotion, but more importantly, embodies and enacts drama and personal crisis (Gledhill 2018, xiii). *Kamen Rider* combines these elements in the melodramatic mode with one key addition: the toy. The combination of music, choreography, and the medium of the toy itself lend our object of study to examination in connection with melodrama. This is the toy that the child can play with as they imagine the moment of empowerment that the main character undergoes. With this toy, the child can assert themselves from within the gothic family structures that we have described as being both part of the plot of *Kamen Rider Kiva* and a melodramatic interpretation of what the day-to-day experience of being a child can feel like.

The sound and costumes of the television program have the appearance of low production values. Rather than a production failure, this is in fact a key to the way that the program works in terms of marketing and the emotional investment of its audience. Rather than having the retailed toy a diminished and simplified version of a more elaborate television prop, the toy the child will play with includes the same sound and texture as the program. The *henshin* choreography is simple enough to be performed by a child either with or without the toy. In the program, these key moments of music and movement are affective. They are part of what creates the program’s structures of feeling, to borrow from Raymond Williams (2017 [1977]). The toy carries an affective loading from the plot of the television program, and through its sound and functionality makes the structures of feeling from the program and the child’s experience of watching the program portable in a unique way.

The *henshin* ties the characters’ different way of acting to a different way of being that is made possible through the toy. The hero’s transformation changes his experience of the places he acts in; the street or playground is transformed into a battlefield. In (what should be) the normal world, the places a child exists in are less hyperbolic. Nevertheless, each site in which childhood is practiced demands its own

codes of behaviour, ways of being in the world, and affordances that require the child to adapt. In *Kamen Rider Kiva*, the toy bat bridges the gap between the hero's identity as an introverted luthier (builder of stringed instruments) in his workshop and his superhero role on the streets. In this paper, we explore the possibility that, through the mobilisation of key aspects of melodrama, the toy can do the same in the moment of play as the child moves between different sites in which childhood is performed.

Affective Dissonance

We posit that even within one overarching cultural construction of childhood, any given child exists in multiple discourses across time and space. Childhood is a state characterised by a sense of the self that is multiple and sometimes dissonant. The different spaces the child moves between, make this visible. Each space offers a dominant set of behavioural codes as well as its own media ecology. As the child acts in these different spaces and passes through different socially determined life-stage transformations, they may experience affective dissonance. Clare Hemmings (2015, 153) uses the term affective dissonance productively to describe "the judgement arising from the distinction between experience and the world". She draws on Elspeth Probyn's insistence that "reflection on the lack of fit between our own sense of being and the world's judgement upon us constitutes a kind of feminist reflexivity, a *negotiation of the difference* between who one feels oneself to be and the conditions of possibility for a liveable life" (ibid, 152, emphasis in original).

In our application of this term to childhood experiences, we want to highlight the way an affective dissonance arises from the experience of difference between sense-of-self and socially constructed conditions of possibility. That is to say, a discontinuity between who one feels oneself to be, who one feels one has the possibility to be, and who one is expected to be. This affective dissonance relates to melodramatic crisis, "where an emergent feeling or perception is blocked by the perspectives and manipulations of others, by constraints of social codes or the inadequacy of available socio-expressive forms" (Gledhill 2018, xxiv). This is a central theme of *Kamen Rider Kiva*; the protagonist is forced to be someone his parents have imagined into being, in contradistinction to what he feels to be his true self and different again from the person he desires to be.

While struggling with the morality and danger of vampire slaying is not an issue for most five-year-olds, feeling a gap between oneself and the 'good boy' your parents entreat you to be or the 'clever girl' your teachers tell you that you are is a relatable manifestation of the same affective dissonance. The core audience for *Kamen Rider* are children of the ages at which they transition from private childcare arrangements including family care or childcare centres into formal, curriculum

driven care in kindergarten and then into compulsory schooling (in Japan these transitions occur between the ages of three and six, with three years of preschool often preceding entry to primary school at age six). Elina Lahelma and Tuula Gordon (1997) argue that 'pupil' is an occupation or profession requiring specific (often untaught) skills, while Maija Lanas (2019, 250) points out that this is a profession into which children are conscripted and then expected to be successful at for over a decade.

During the transition from child to pupil, both as overarching social categories of life-stage and in the daily movement from the environment of home to school and back again, there is a great deal of potential dissonance between who children feel themselves to be, who they have the possibility to be, and who they feel they are expected to be. As Lanas (*ibid*, 251) puts it, "[w]hen children enter school, they become subjects as 'students'. Such a becoming is not passive but takes place as they read surrounding expectations to them as students and, as they to various extents negotiate and perform these expectations." Building on these foundations, we argue that the affective dissonance of childhood is therefore a fundamentally gothic experience of clausturation that finds expression in melodramatic excess.

Children experience adult control (including over who they feel they have the possibility to be and who they are expected to be) differently in different times and spaces. Allison James, Chris Jenkins and Alan Prout (1998, 39) give the example of the dining table transformed into a site for making art, or time spent in the bedroom transformed into a tool of punishment. Crucially, they note, "the licence for the switch in affective placement is largely the prerogative of adults, while the child's experience is more often that of continuous regulation" (James et al 1998, 39). Play has the potential to be a bridge between different contexts (children at childcare centres and at primary school may play the same familiar games) and also to help a child parse new experiences and explore new roles and identities. As Patrick Biesty (2003, 50) argues, in "[a]bsorbing social reality and denying it simultaneously, play is cognitively and affectively dissonant." Using the *henshin* toy, a child can enact melodramatic excess through the third space of play that connects the child's experience with the different affordances of the spaces they act in.

Toys and Play as Third Space

Much as Lahelma and Gordon (1997) identify certain skills as belong to the 'occupation' of pupil, so too does the child's use of media in play requires specific skills. The social construction of childhood in any given place or period is inevitably entwined with the available media ecosystems. In the case at hand, the *Kamen Rider* media ecosystem includes toys intended to evoke enactive play. In such a context,

play requires specific knowledge and skills relating to the source media combined with the ability to engage in imagination play that may be viewed as key skills required by the ‘occupation’ of childhood in Japan. As demonstrated in Raudhah Yahya and Elizabeth Ann Wood’s 2017 study on play as a bridging discourse amongst minority school children, play requires skills are both culturally specific and that need to be learned (Yahya and Wood 2017, 6). From this perspective, it is productive to approach play as a practice. In addition, we argue that as a practice, play offers the possibility to bridge different spaces and their associated conditions of possibility.

Kevin McMillan defines practice as “habitual or customary performance based on skills acquired through experience, training or routine performance embodied in ‘tacit knowledge’ or know-how” (McMillan 2018, 4). Practice is a habitual, non-calculative, unspoken, everyday dimension of human action. It is ‘second nature’. Play and media-based play fulfill these criteria. Television-inspired play can be seen as a habitual aspect of childhood. However, it requires specific knowledge and skills gleaned from watching and interacting with the program. In our case study, the *Kamen Rider Kiva* toy invites play that enacts set of feelings through the performance of choreographically specific movements (attack and *henshin* poses) in connection with the aural cues of the toy that presumes knowledge of the source media. Our combining of third space and affect suggest one way to start bridging the gap between research on play itself and the theoretical framework of spatial hermeneutics. In *Kamen Rider Kiva* the music-toy-screen connection represents an opportunity to conceptualize a ‘third space’ that bridges the different spaces and difference practices within the broader domain of childhood.

Despite its primary association with Homi Bhabba’s writing on cultural hybridity, the idea of third space has a wide range of applications. At its most basic level, third spaces can simply be viewed as a space that brings together two knowledge systems in a third space that cannot be reduced to either one system. These spaces can include cultural spaces, such as literature, or in the case at hand, play. Play has been identified as a third space, particularly in relation to the negotiation of identity where there is cultural dissonance between the home environment and the school environment (Yahya and Wood 2017, 7). For the purposes of our paper, we focus on the underlying affective dissonances of childhood rather than intercultural dissonance specifically. Engaging in imaginative, physical, enactive play with the *Kamen Rider Kiva* belt during break time, for instance, crosses the border between the institutional-learning-space of the school and the home-recreation-space of the living room and its television. It also straddles the is-space of reality and the potential-becoming-fantasy space of fiction.

Kamen Rider Kiva has a complex aural texture. Not only do characters, both heroes and villains, have their own musical themes but so do individual weapons, vehicles, and costumes. Known as ‘insert themes’, these are often recorded for the soundtrack by the actors themselves. The emotions, motivations, and conflict of characters are given exposition through these insert themes, making them integral to the communication of the drama in a way that reflects the melodramatic mode. In *Kamen Rider*, the belt prop’s ability to transform the hero into a superhero, complete with accompanying sound bites and movements, forms the focal point for the five axes of melodrama identified by Louis Bayman as: Sentiment, lyricism (bodily expressivity, soundtrack, lighting and composition), action as energy and its emotional extension, populism, and faith in a better future (Bayman 2018, 275-276).

The program’s use of aural cues creates a strong association of specific sounds with specific emotions and motivations we have termed affective loading; the child is then able to apply these associations in their play using the sound-producing toy. Because of the proximity of the toy to the television program (including similar sound quality), the child playing with the toy accesses sound-cues and the possibility to enact the choreography from the program without the interference of transmediation. Thus, the toy facilitates enactment of the structures of feeling created in the program rather than the less impactful re-enactment of these.

The toy invites play that reflects the typical function of melodrama: it enacts rather than re-enacts. Re-play would entail re-enacting scenes with the toy in the way that theatre pieces previously represented morals or ideals and so on. However, Christine Gledhill asserts that “melodrama’s protagonists embody and enact – rather than represent – sociometrical values” (Gledhill 2018, xxi, see also Pribram 2018). Melodrama includes music and aural cues in its creation of an affective loading that is enacted rather than represented. *Kamen Rider Kiva* does this in the same way. The program uses aural cues connected to specific emotions and situations as they are enacted. How the program embeds the toy in this structure shapes the affectivity of the child audience and prepares them for possible actions of future play and the spaces in which this play takes place. Because the toy carries the aural cues from the program and is the same as the prop that is used in the program, it is uniquely qualified to carry the same melodramatic affective loading (the same possibilities for enactment, mood, and feeling) to different spaces. The affect that the toy carries over from the program becomes part of the structures of feeling attached to the child’s play as they negotiate the affective possibilities offered by the spaces they straddle. The third space of play contains the affective loading of *Kamen Rider Kiva* through the use of the toy. As this third space (understood as a third system of knowledge combining and exceeding multiple sources) is produced in the melodramatic mode

and with the program's melodramatic affect, it is part of the structures of feeling that the subject brings to their experience of different places.

In this paper we approach space as something one *does*. Doing space in a particular way creates place. To play is to do space in a particular way. Thus, the moment of play creates place in dynamic interaction between established constructions of that place and the moment of play. The school, for instance, is a space made meaningful (in the sense of postmodern geography) as a place of socialization and learning according to sets of cultural norms. It would be too much to say that the act of play destabilizes or subverts the dominant cultural construction of a place in any sustainable way. However, the practice of play has the potential to change the dialectic relationship between the place and the subject (the child) who is *doing* space during their play. How space is *done* depends on its present affordances and may influence future affordances in turn. As Shaun Gallagher et al argue: "space is not already there, neutrally constituted in its objective extension; rather, it is enacted, put in place relative to action affordances that are both corporeal and intercorporeal" (Gallagher et al 2018, 83-96).

We argue that affect is in a circulatory relationship to these affordances. Put simply, the atmosphere of a space, its physical properties and cultural histories influence how another subject will experience it and act in it (the affordances of a space). At the same time, these actions, in turn, influence its 'structures of feeling', creating new possibilities and affordances. The child does not simply play with the toy in the schoolyard; the child does that space differently, redefining its place-status, because of the affective loading the toy carries over from the television program.

Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein asserts that,

[...] if the game were simply without borders, it would "*sich ausspielen*" (exhaust itself) into the infinite Newtonian space that acknowledges no centre. With clearly defined geometrical borders, on the other hand, play becomes a purely mundane activity. The conclusion is that games cannot be played within space but that they need a *place* in order to exist. (Betz-Bornstein 2017, 100, emphasis in original).

If we apply this idea to children's imagination play with the *Kiva* toy and its affective loading, it is important to note that the place Botz-Bornstein notes is needed for a game to exist is created in a certain mood or *Stimmung*. Further, it is this mood or *Stimmung* that determines how that space is experienced and what the parameters

for communication are. Children play with the toy according to the affordances of social conditions retained in meaning of that space-as-place and their anticipation of the possible affordances. However, play with the *Kiva* bat and belt also carries its own *Stimmung* into these places. This *Stimmung* is communicated through its sounds and the kinetic memories of the choreography it evokes. The affects that the child carries over into difference spaces feed back into the loop between what is brought to a space and its existent affect. Theoretically at least, the melodramatic affect that the toy carries has the potential to change the structures of feeling that determine the realm of possibility for the child at their site of play.

Outlook

We have argued that melodrama is a key aspect of *Kamen Rider Kiva's* affect. This affect is deeply entwined with gothic themes of repression and dissonant experiences of selfhood. The program's melodramatic affect, tied to the toy, is key in negotiating these themes. The toy offers the possibility to enact a sense of hope and empowerment because it contains the sounds and invites the choreography associated with the *henshin* or transformation of the hero into a superhero. Thus, the child is able to revisit and enact these feelings as they navigate their way through the different spaces in which they perform childhood; performances which, however, may or may not be in-keeping with their own sense of self. We further argue that, because the key elements of this melodrama are carried over in the toy, the *Kiva* belt contains the same affective loading in portable form.

By making the affective loading of the television program portable, the toy allows the child's imagination play to become a third space through which the child can enact (rather than simply re-enact) the affective loading of the toy. We have further argued that the affective affordances of the toy and the space of play meet in a dialectical relationship, so that the child, as they practice play, *does* place. Through the use of the toy, the child can *do* place in a way that has the potential to change the structure of feeling and thus, also the affordances in, and in-between, the gothic trajectories of childhood.

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RENE HOFF

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“I Knew This Girl, Who Knew This Girl”:

**Gothic and Horror Tropes as Rhetorical Refusals in
HBO's *True Blood***

ABSTRACT

HBO's True Blood, created by Alan Ball is a work of Gothic-horror fiction that has garnered attention for its complex, dimensional representations of marginalised characters that resist stereotyping. To facilitate these representations, Ball employs established and well-known Gothic-horror genre tropes such as the unreliable narrator, the terrible place, mirrors, and others to craft specific viewer expectations in the first scene of the show's pilot episode. He then creates a “rhetorical refusal” when he violates genre conventions, by deliberately refusing to satisfy the viewer expectations he so meticulously creates and encourages. In doing so, he prioritises the show's message over genre conventions, forcing viewers to confront their own preconceived notions and judgments, and to consider how they treat people who are different from themselves.

Keywords: True Blood, Trope, Gothic-Horror, Rhetorical refusal, Alan Ball

Acclaimed writer Alan Ball is renowned for creating characters who struggle to find a place in contemporary America. His wildly popular HBO series *True Blood* has been lauded by GLAAD, NAACP, and numerous other organisations for not only including large numbers of marginalised characters, but also for its representations of them ("*True Blood*" 2022). What makes *True Blood*'s marginalised characters stand out is not just their large number, but their depth and complexity. Commenting on LGBTQ+ characters in the show, series actor Kristin Bauer van Straten points out that because they are layered and multi-dimensional, both good and evil characters avoid affirming dangerous stereotypes (Reynolds 2014). Furthermore, she speculates that the show's character representations encourage even viewers who are not initially open to the presented viewpoints to at least acknowledge and consider the other side (Reynolds 2014). While this certainly seems to be true, character dimension is only part of the equation. In fact, Ball not only creates characters who defy stereotypes, he challenges perceptions that contribute to them by directing viewer attention to the preconceived notions they bring to the discussion. He accomplishes this feat by initially bombarding the audience with familiar Gothic-horror genre tropes that set up certain expectations, which he then refuses to satisfy, leaving viewers to question their judgments, shifting their attention away from stereotypes and toward reflecting upon how those judgments are constructed.

Before delving into discussing tropes in *True Blood*, defining the terms "trope" and "Gothic-horror" is necessary. Present in all communication modes, tropes are "rhetorical figures of speech" that use words and / or signifiers in ways that transcend their denotative meanings; they serve as "storytelling devices, reoccurring ideas, or motifs that provide shortcuts between the storyteller and the audience" and help to shape viewer expectations (Baldick 2008; Chandler and Munday 2011; Menard, et al 2018, 623). Defining Gothic-horror is a bit trickier: the Gothic - itself a blending of genres - is "unstable" (Hogle 2014, 5). Numerous scholars have pointed out that the Gothic both encompasses and has spawned many genres, such as fantasy, horror, science and detective fictions, and these genres have overlapping characteristics (Botting 2014, 172; Punter 2013, 96). Indeed, Catherine Spooner (2006, 26) asserts, "a text may be Gothic and simultaneously many other things." Generally speaking, however, Gothic texts tend to contain tropes such as stock characters, darkness, confinement, overwrought emotion, doubles, ruins, transgression of boundaries such as social class, life and death, or past and present, obscurity, discovery of ancient manuscripts, the supernatural, and many others. Horror, as the Gothic's progeny can contain these tropes or variations of them but is distinguishable from the Gothic for its tendency to include violence, gore, terror, and "bodily harm" (Punter 1996, 96; Wisker 2016, 329). It is important to note, though, that not all Gothic is horror, and not all horror is Gothic, and it makes sense, then, to

refer to a work that contains elements from both genres as “Gothic-horror” (Punter 1996, 96; Leeder 2018, 125). With its vampires, secrets, graveyards, murders, torture, and gore *True Blood* contains tropes from both Gothic and horror traditions and can therefore be classified as Gothic-horror. Moreover, the show - being set in the American south and featuring conflicts between races / species - also falls into the Southern Gothic tradition, and it contains elements from that subgenre. This is not to say that the show does not contain elements from other genres. Indeed, creator Alan Ball refers to *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* from which *True Blood* is adapted as a “mix of comedy and horror and romance and sex and violence and social commentary and farce,” and as the novels’ collective name implies, they are also mysteries (Fahey 2013, 121-2). This study, however, will examine Gothic-horror tropes - some of which are specific to Southern Gothic - in the pilot episode’s opening scene.

Place and Time

The opening scene, presented from the driver's point of view, features headlights of a moving vehicle as it travels down a very dark, deserted, Louisiana country road, which is surrounded by forest on all sides. The headlights illuminate only a few feet in front of the vehicle - unable to penetrate the vegetation on either side - highlighting the extreme dark, the oppressively dense, menacing quality of the forest, and emphasizing the area’s isolation. The scene is what Fred Botting (ibid, 4) would likely describe as a “Gothic landscape.” For Botting (ibid, 4) Gothic landscapes “stress isolation and wilderness, evoking vulnerability, exposure and insecurity . . . forests [are] shadowy, impenetrable . . . Nature appears hostile, untamed and threatening: again, darkness, obscurity and barely contained malevolent energy reinforce atmospheres of disorientation and fear,” and this scene certainly conveys these ideas. Additionally, showrunner Alexander Woo describes the show's rural Louisiana setting as “mystical,” “murky,” and “mysterious,” which “feels far and foreign,” and it is normal for characters in Gothic works to end up in strange, places that are decidedly “other” (Alavi 2008; Bowen 2014). Moreover, the narrow, wet, and very, very dark road, framed on either side by trees hung with Spanish moss resembling stalactites, forms a kind of tunnel or cave (*True Blood* 2008). In her analysis of horror films, Carol Clover (1992, 30-45) refers to such cavernous, tunnel-like settings with “dark,” “damp,” and “decidedly intrauterine” qualities as the “Terrible Place,” where a “killer lives or lurks, and whence he stages his most terrifying attacks.” The opening shot, then, effectively suggests that the car’s passengers have driven out of safety and are heading straight into another world, where they are sure to meet their doom.

The next shot shows the car's driver and passenger - a college-aged couple named Brett and Kelly - who are presumably on the way home from a party. Along the way, they spot a solitary, old, run-down convenience store, which functions as another feature of Gothic-horror settings: ruins. Gothic literature settings almost always feature ruins of medieval Gothic architecture, which is the "prerequisite decor for any real action to happen," and likewise, Gothic-horror fiction also often features ruins such as the ruined Carfax abbey in *Dracula* (Labourg 2019; Jones 2021, 34). In Louisiana, ruined medieval Gothic architecture, of course, does not exist, and American Gothic-horror writers substitute the European ruins with run-down edifices such as old houses, attics, and basements, or - in the case of *True Blood's* pilot episode - a dilapidated convenience store.

The first indication that the store is a ruin is its dated sign with yellowed lights - several of which are missing. The letters on the sign are crooked and mismatched: a backward-facing number "3" replaces the letter "E". The building sits alone on the side of a dark road, surrounded by trees, and its exterior is a hodgepodge of old neon and incandescent signs and newspaper machines. A battered 1960s Ford truck sits in front. Inside the store is a random assortment of older, dust-covered merchandise, discoloured containers, paper price tags, and badly hand-lettered signs. Behind the counter is messy, with piles of yellowed papers and unopened mail. Above the beverage coolers, backstock is haphazardly stacked, and the ceiling is dirty, old acoustical tile (*True Blood* 2008).

Despite the store's ruined appearance, however, it does also stock more current items, with *Tru Blood*, of course, being the most significant (*True Blood* 2008). The store is, then, a blending of both old and new, suggesting another Gothic-horror element: "clashing time periods," which tends to occur during times of significant transition (Bowen 2014). Botting (ibid, 1-20) contends that time in the Gothic is fluid, the line between past and present is often unclear. Throughout the scene, the boundary between past and present becomes increasingly blurred as viewers are given subtle and not so subtle reminders of the American South's past atrocities. Brett mentions hurricane Katrina - an event that devastated poor, minority areas and made evident slavery's legacy. Playing on the television is Bill Maher interviewing vampire rights advocate Nan Flanagan, and they discuss the vampires' struggle for equal rights, slavery, and exploitation. Thus, the story takes place in a time of transition, with a familiar conflict from both present and past: othered individuals struggling to be treated as equals. The camera punctuates the discussion with images from the store that are associated with these topics such as the Confederate flag and "Red Man" tobacco. Meanwhile, a customer, who is actually vampire, dressed in stereotypical "redneck" attire, whistles "Dixie" while he shops for his *Tru Blood*. The ties to the American Civil War, The Civil Rights Movement, and

Reconstruction / Jim Crow are all evident here, suggesting to viewers that the American South is a transitional setting that has not completely evolved from its racist, exploitative past (*True Blood* 2008). This past, tainted with the guilt of slavery and its legacy is a prominent concern of the Southern Gothic, and the decaying traditions of slavery are, as Botting (ibid, 158) asserts, manifested in old buildings like the aging convenience store.

Clashing Socioeconomic Classes, Urbanoia, and The Last Chance for Gas

The convenience store also serves as another trope, or, rather, a collection of tropes that signify the clashing of socioeconomic classes. Gothic texts have traditionally featured notions of civility and barbarism, which have evolved to include social and economic class, and Gothic-horror and Southern Gothic texts continue to grapple with these issues, which are frequent enough to have become tropes (Punter 2013, 183-184; Murphy 2013, 142; Clover ibid, 124). One of these tropes is what Bernice Murphy (ibid, 155-7) calls "The Last Chance for Gas," which occurs when "naive" characters from urban or suburban areas commit a form of trespass when they enter rural areas, signified by the last gas station - often also a general or convenience store - before they leave "civilisation". The store is the last opportunity to turn around and avoid trouble, and often the unwitting travellers receive a warning from the store's owner or patrons, which they usually ignore, and when the last chance episode occurs near the beginning of a text, it signals the beginning of the travellers' demise (Murphy ibid, 155-7). Therefore, when the couple in *True Blood's* opening scene decide to stop at the convenience store at the edge of "civilisation," viewers expect that this stop will be their last opportunity to escape an untimely demise.

Additionally, the "Last Chance" features the city travellers' collision with the local (and usually impoverished) rural population, which often harbors deep resentment towards outsiders, and the collision results in violence (Murphy ibid, 155-7). Similarly, Clover (ibid, 124) explains that many horror works begin when "civilised" city-dwellers make the archetypal journey to the "uncivilised" country where the people are a "threatening rural Other," and the "rules of civilization" do not apply. Thus, the audience presumes that when people such as Brett and Kelly travel from their safe, "civilised" college town and travel to the country, conflict will arise, and it will end badly for them. When Brett and Kelly drive down the dark road, it is obvious that they are out of their (sub)urban element. Clover (ibid, 126) points out that city / suburbia dwellers usually "drive late-model cars." For their foray into the country, Brett and Kelly drive a new Cadillac Escalade, which when juxtaposed with the store's run-down appearance makes the viewer aware of how very out of place the couple is, heightening the expectation that they are headed for danger.

Clover (ibid, 126) contends that horror films comment on the division of social class, through conflicts between privileged exploiters and impoverished victims. In the conversation between characters, this divide becomes clear. Brett's purpose when he speaks to the store clerk is obtaining V-Juice, so he is nice to him. After the clerk scares the couple with a poor vampire impersonation, he begins laughing. Brett looks up and then down at the ground, clearly displeased, and takes a moment to gather himself. Kelly does not. Instead, she tells the clerk, "That wasn't funny" (*True Blood* 2008). Brett, who has not lost his original purpose, decides that flattery will help him get what he wants, and says, "No, Kelly, that was pretty funny" (*True Blood* 2008). By this point, the real vampire has moved in behind the couple, and he, with an incredulous look, says, "I didn't think it was funny" (*True Blood* 2008). The exchange that follows is telling. Brett replies sarcastically, "We don't care what you think" (*True Blood* 2008). Meanwhile, Kelly looks derisively at the country man. Brett then dismissively turns back to the store clerk and gives him a look that both shows his disgust at the country man's interruption and simultaneously suggests that he sees the clerk as his equal, which is, of course, untrue, as Brett only does so to get what he wants. Brett then resumes his conversation with the clerk, asking if he knows "where we can score any V-juice?" for which he says he can "pay good money" (*True Blood* 2008). The country man / real vampire is disgusted and tells Brett and Kelly "You two need to leave" (*True Blood* 2008). Visibly annoyed with having his purpose interrupted, Brett turns around to face the country man and says "All right. Fuck you, Billy Bob!" (*True Blood* 2008). Brett's disrespectful comments to the country man, and both his and Kelly's body language clearly show that Brett and Kelly place themselves above both the clerk and the country man. That Brett and Kelly view themselves as superior to the clerk and the country man is ironic, as the clerk and the country man are both vampire figures, who traditionally represent wealthy aristocrats. The social classes are therefore inverted. It is also clear that Brett only speaks to the clerk - or even enters the store at all, for that matter - because he wants to use him to obtain V-Juice. In other words, Brett flatters the clerk to exploit him.

Clover (ibid, 128) discusses exploitation as a horror trope at length, claiming that when city people arrive in the country in fancy cars, they humiliate the country people by arrogantly throwing money around in front of them. When Brett arrives in the fancy car, dismisses the country man, saying "Fuck you, Billy Bob," and tells the clerk that he can "pay good money" for V-Juice, he clearly displays the behaviour Clover discusses (*True Blood* 2008). Clover (ibid, 126-9) also maintains that the tension between the country and city people stems from the city's exploitation of the country's resources. The audience later finds out that "V" is obtained through "drainers," who capture vampires, drain their blood, and leave them to suffer and / or die (*True Blood* 2008). Though the audience is at this point unaware that the

country man is a vampire, it quickly becomes clear why the country man is so upset by Brett's inquiries and his dismissive attitude. If we think about "V" as a resource, which the city people extract and sell from vampires such as the "country" man, the link Clover discusses becomes evident. Ironically, vampires are traditionally the exploiters who drink the blood of their victims, who are generally members of the lower class, but here Brett and Kelly, members of the lower class, exploit the vampires.

The country man / vampire's reply clearly shows his frustration at the sale of V-Juice, and possibly frustration at the couple's arrogant and misplaced superiority. He replies, "Fuck me? I'll fuck you, boy. I'll fuck you, and then I'll eat you" (*True Blood* 2008). The country man / vampire's reply, then, also makes sense because the city man's exploitation of the country man's resources is a metaphorical rape, which the country man reciprocates physically, and country man as a rapist is a common horror trope (Clover *ibid*, 129). It is likely, then, that audiences would expect a "redneck" country man to reciprocate Brett's metaphoric rape with the actual act. Additionally, Murphy (*ibid*, 14, 44, 92-131) asserts that rural dwellers of horror films are often cannibals, and it is also likely that audiences would expect the country man to be one.

Stock Characters Behaving Badly

These character tropes evince another Gothic-horror pattern: stock characters. Gothic literature and its subgenres, Southern Gothic and horror are famous for their predictable and formulaic stock characters, and from its beginnings, Gothic works have featured young heroines (Punter 1996, 5, 9; Botting *ibid*, 4). In horror works, young people are slaughtered with such regularity that they have been dubbed "teenie-kill pics," or - as Roger Ebert calls them - "Dead Teenager Movies" (Clover *ibid*, 33, Ebert 1985). Brett and Kelly, played by unknown actors, serve as "fanservice extras," or horror movie archetypes, which include college students and other stereotypes such as virgins or prudes, promiscuous "whores," pranksters, fools, scholars etc. who typically are among the first to be killed (TV Tropes.com; Murphy *ibid*, 148-55; Crump 2021; Briefel and Ngai 2000, 283). These character archetypes, being horror film staples, are familiar to audiences. *True Blood's* viewers, then, would certainly recognize the young man and woman as such, and would fully expect Brett and Kelly to die rather quickly.

Further marking the characters for death is their taboo behaviour (Menard, et. al *ibid*, 627). Even the first Gothic characters, whose behaviour by today's standards could hardly be considered taboo, did behave in ways that challenged societal tradition, such as heroines who travelled outside their spheres without patriarchal supervision, which often put them in danger (Botting *ibid*, 12). Similarly, horror film

characters who behave in ways society disapproves of are far more likely to be slaughtered than those who do not (Menard et. al. *ibid*, 627, 638). Brett and Kelly mark themselves for early death when they engage in taboo behaviours such as sex. As they travel through the strange / terrible place, Kelly, clad provocatively in a swimsuit top with a low-cut, sheer overshirt, is driving and notices that Brett is asleep. Smiling mischievously, she unfastens his shorts. He awakens and asks, "what the hell are you doin'?" to which she replies, "I'm bored," and she begins to masturbate him while she drives (*True Blood* 2008). Thus, within the first forty-five seconds of the show, the two young people engage in what some would consider to be an "illicit" sexual act (*True Blood* 2008). According to Clover (*ibid*, 33) horror film characters who have sex - especially illicitly - are almost always killed immediately after the act, usually early in the film. Thus, the audience expects that since Brett and Kelly engage in sexual act so early in the scene, they will shortly meet their demise.

The couple's sexual escapades, however, are not the only things that mark them as future victims. Another well-known horror film trope is consuming alcohol or drugs. As Menard, et. al. (*ibid*, 621) points out, in the film *Scream*, which comments extensively on horror tropes, indicates that in addition to abstaining from sex, to survive a horror movie, "you can never drink or do drugs. No sin factor. This is sin." That Brett is asleep in the car suggests that he has been drinking. Later, when the couple enters the convenience store - which has multiple brightly lit signs advertising liquor and beer - they stumble into the door, giggling, and Brett tells the store clerk that they are indeed "a little drunk" (*True Blood* 2008). Additionally, Brett is on the hunt for "V-juice," which has hallucinatory, aphrodisiac, and erectile-enhancing properties (*True Blood* 2008). Thus, they are actively seeking drugs, and because they have already been drinking, viewers would likely expect them to be killed.

Further reinforcing the idea that the couple will be dispatched is their curiosity, which Crump (2021) asserts is the biggest "sin" characters in horror films can commit. Curiosity, however, is not unique to horror. Instead, it takes its cues from earlier Gothic works, which depict inquisitive heroines whose curiosity often puts them in harm's way (Botting *ibid*, 5). Likewise, curiosity ultimately causes many horror characters' deaths, for had they not investigated strange noises, studied ancient books, or gone into the abandoned house, they would not have put themselves in the situation to be killed, and Crump (*ibid*) claims that "Curiosity is horror as much as the slashers and monsters that comprise the genre's most iconic villain are horror." Curiosity, therefore, is a necessary horror trope and is certainly one with which audiences would be familiar.

Kelly and especially Brett are definitely curious. Indeed, the first thing the audience hears from Brett is a question when he asks Kelly, "What the hell are you

doin?" Kelly's reply also indicates curiosity (*True Blood* 2008). She answers Brett's question with "I'm bored" (*True Blood* 2008). Boredom, of course, invites inquiry, and Kelly's response combined with Brett's question, evinces the couple's curiosity. Next, when Brett sees the convenience store sign advertising Tru Blood, he is curious about obtaining V. Once inside the store, Kelly makes a statement: "Y'all have Tru Blood ...for real," inflected so that it invites confirmation, implying a question (*True Blood* 2008). Brett then makes a series of inquiries to the store clerk:

BRETT: You get vamps in here? I didn't even think we had any in Louisiana.

CLERK: [pretending to be a vampire] You didn't know that New Orleans is a Mecca for the vampire?

BRETT: Seriously? I mean, New Orleans? Even after Katrina? Didn't they all drown?

CLERK: Vampires cannot drown ... because we do not breathe. [Brett and Kelly become visibly afraid.]

BRETT: Dude, no harm intended. We're just a little drunk.

CLERK: Nice. I could uuuse a cocktail!

The couple, believing the clerk is really a vampire, is terrified until the clerk suddenly yells, "Score! I totally had you guys!" and laughs, revealing that he is not really a vampire (*True Blood* 2008). Thinking he is out of trouble, Brett then becomes curious again and asks whether the clerk knows where they can "score some V juice," causing the store's other customer - a real vampire - to become unhappy and threaten him, which of course compels the audience to expect the curious to be swiftly dispatched (*True Blood* 2008).

Important to note also is the real vampire. The store clerk pays little attention to him, and the couple even less. Yet they are all, and so is the audience, aware that he is there in the background. However, when the couple asks about vampires, the camera cuts to him, revealing that he is clearly listening to the conversation. It is unclear whether he appears afraid or merely surprised, but it is obvious that he is listening. The camera then cuts back to the couple and the clerk, and their conversation continues. When the clerk begins to impersonate a vampire, viewers notice that the other customer is continuing to listen and has begun to move towards the conversant. By the time the clerk says that he could "uuuse a cocktail," the customer has moved behind the couple (*True Blood* 2008). Though it is subtle, the interest in and movement toward the conversation implies curiosity, which leads the audience to surmise that the customer will be killed along with Brett and Kelly.

Mirrors and The Unreliable Narrator

Another Gothic-horror trope at work here is the unreliable narrator, through which audiences receive the character's "version of events and characters in the story," revealing "personal prejudices, anxieties, fears, tastes, delusions, and even beliefs," and those "descriptions [in this case camera shots] will often also imply *the . . . cultural environments* that shaped his/her views, and so contributed to how he/she perceives and makes meaning from the world . . ." (Davison 2019). *True Blood* emphasises and plays upon this trope using Kelly's protestations when Brett asks the clerk if he knows where to score any V-Juice. She says, "Gross! Brett, no! . . . I knew this girl who knew this girl, who did vamp blood during Greek Week . . . she like . . . clawed her own face off!" (*True Blood* 2008). Kelly neither witnessed the purported event nor heard it directly from the source, and her indirect knowledge of this story functions as a sort of "found document" or "legend" (Botting *ibid*, 6). Gothic-horror literature is frequently framed and epistolary, relaying second-hand - and sometimes even third or fourth-hand - information to the reader. While Kelly's story has no physical document, it is no matter. The point is that a story is conveyed through at least one indirect source, creating an unreliable narrator scenario, which the audience would likely recognize (*True Blood* 2008).

While Kelly's story certainly emphasises the idea of an unreliable narrator, the scene sets up this idea earlier using mirrors, which are a staple of Gothic-horror and are used in many different ways. Linked to the uncanny, fracturing, and doubleness, mirrors can function as both atmosphere and narration; they distort and restrict perceptions, allowing only "partial visibility," which frames "events from partial perspectives," and stimulates the imagination (Botting *ibid*, 6; Benschhoff 2017, 160). As Jones (*ibid*, 62) points out, "There is good reason why vampires cast no reflections in the mirror. It is because what looks back at us is ourselves." Both ideas are important here. For example, when the couple is driving, Kelly begins to untie Brett's pants. The audience sees only an indirect and indistinct view of this action as reflected in the window, forcing spectators to fill in the rest of the picture. Moments later, when Kelly performs the sex act, viewers see only Brett and Kelly's faces and upper torsos as reflected in the passenger mirror. Thus, showrunners have engaged viewers' tendencies to make judgments based on available information. Additionally, the audience's indirect views of the action imply an added layer of narration, for if the camera functions as the narrator, then the reflections in the mirrors imply that viewers are seeing the narrator's *interpretation*, which adds an additional layer that allows for misperception and suggests to the audience that it may not be able to trust what the narrator tells them. Another mirror occurs in the convenience store, where the very first thing viewers see is a convex mirror reflecting back at them (*True Blood* 2008). Though such mirrors are certainly

commonplace in convenience stores, its primary placement gives it emphasis, alerting the viewer that it is important. Moreover, its convex shape is significant. The convex mirror, intended to afford the clerk a more complete view of the store, produces a distorted reflection. The distortion here is key, and, as Davison (2019) explains, the unreliable narrator gives viewers a distorted account of the narrative's events. Thus, the deceptive mirror suggests the idea that viewers may not be able to trust what is being shown to them, and seeing their own distorted images reflected back at them further implies that their own perceptions may be flawed, and cautions that they not be able to trust their own judgments.

Tropes As Rhetorical Refusal

I have enumerated here the great many Gothic-horror tropes that appear in the show's first scene; however, I have not yet addressed how they function rhetorically, which is grounded in pattern and familiarity. Kenneth Burke (1969, 57-8) asserts that presenting arguments in familiar forms moves audiences toward agreement with any argument because the form's familiarity encourages identification with it and inclines the listener toward assent. As Botting, Clover, and others have pointed out, Gothic and horror tropes are old and well-known to audiences. This familiarity appeals strongly to genre consumers, which can draw them into difficult conversations they may not otherwise enter. Additionally, the familiar patterns in Gothic-horror tropes set up specific viewer expectations, and when authors deliberately do not fulfil them, the result can be rhetorical. Schilb (2007, 3, 6, 10, 158-75) refers to this as a "rhetorical refusal," and he claims that when fiction authors intentionally violate genre conventions, it shifts the attention to the author's message of the story, casting the message as the higher priority, and challenging the "frame" that audiences bring to it. Similarly, Tobin (2018, 15) maintains that when characters defy reader expectations, readers must "reassess what we at first took him or her to be," suggesting some "ethical consequences regarding how we assess both others and ourselves in everyday life."

Ball openly shares his feelings about surprises and viewer expectations. In an interview he reveals his awareness of patterns in television and film: "We've all seen so many thousands of hours of filmed entertainment, and there are certainly types-stereotypes, archetypes-that we've come to recognize, which feel familiar and comfortable, and highly predictable (Rapp 2021). In *True Blood's* pilot episode commentary, he explains that "certainly after all of the vampire, and horror and slasher movies, we have been conditioned" to have certain expectations that fulfil our "crazy psychic" needs (*True Blood* 2008, director commentary). Additionally, Ball explains his methodology, telling more than one interviewer that he writes what he would like to see, and he prefers plot events and characters who surprise him

(Fahey 2013, 77). Further, in an interview with Kinney Littlefield (2013, 102), Ball explains the show's purpose:

Q: So, is *True Blood's* theme really how we treat outsiders, those who are different?

BALL: Absolutely ... It's also about the terrors of intimacy and any kind of misunderstood, hated, feared minority – homosexuals, other cultures. Also, at the same time, it's a metaphor for a group [vampires] that is frighteningly powerful – and ruthless. So, it's a metaphor that works both ways. We've actually taken that aspect maybe a little further than it exists in Harris's books.

Ball's explanation here is important, giving insight into the motives behind his decisions, and these comments make it clear that Ball is not only consciously aware of patterns such as Gothic-horror tropes, but he also intends to use them in unexpected ways to draw attention to how people treat those who are different.

Looking at the tropes presented in *True Blood's* opening scene together, then reveals Ball's intentions. *True Blood* presents audiences with an unreliable narrator showing two attractive, wealthy, young people from the "city" who, as a result of their curiosity and seeking of drugs and sex, find themselves in a strange and "terrible" place, where the past atrocities of slavery, war, disaster, exploitation, and racism collide with the present, which may not be as evolved as its inhabitants believe. In this place, Brett and Kelly flaunt their privilege and exploit the local "country" people. The audience, with its fill in the blank judgments encouraged by the unreliable narrator's mirrors, expects, therefore, that the couple will be spectacularly slaughtered. Moreover, the store clerk subverts the traditional vampire trope when he mocks vampires with his poor imitation and helps Brett in his attempt to obtain vampire blood. Brett and Kelly further this subversion when they - unaware that the country man is actually a vampire - assume a superior socioeconomic position toward him, even going as far as to insult him. The vampire is both incredulous and infuriated, and audiences have every reason to believe that the angry vampire will kill the store clerk, Brett, and Kelly; however, the vampire does not. Instead, he threatens Brett and Kelly, who he allows to escape, issues a warning to the clerk, pays for his Tru Blood, smiles, and tells the clerk to have a nice day. Therefore, despite the preponderance of expectations Ball sets up with the many tropes, he disrupts genre patterns and does not fulfil the audience's expectations. No one dies or is even harmed in the sequence. All the carefully crafted audience predictions are denied in one big rhetorical refusal. The effect is, of course, very funny. However, because of the hyperbolic number of expectations set up by the tropes, it is also quite jarring to the audience. Viewers are left not knowing what

to expect next because both the characters and their own judgments have all proven to be wrong. These incorrect assumptions, then, call into question the validity of and basis for those judgments in a funny and disruptive way, which encourages viewers to think about what preconceived notions they bring to the discussion, and to examine how they treat others who are different from themselves, again forcing them to confront how they perceive and manage difference.

The rhetorical refusals in the opening scene also alert viewers to subversions that appear later in the show. For example, as Frederik Dhaenens (2013, 103) points out, Benschoff and others assert that representations of LGBTQ+ characters in Gothic and horror works are “complicated” because “the genre generally omits representations of characters who are explicitly marked as gay, and those few characters who are ostensibly gay are either victims or villains.” Like the other tropes presented here, these representations are repeated often enough to be called patterns, which create certain expectations for spectators, and when *True Blood*'s audience meets Lafayette, they expect that as an out gay man who wears makeup, deals drugs, and prostitutes himself, he will certainly be a villain or possibly a victim (*True Blood* 2008). Indeed, he does behave villainously when he commits crimes, and he does become a victim when Eric Northman, the vampire sheriff of the Bon Temps / Shreveport area discovers he has been selling “V-juice” and kidnaps, imprisons, and tortures him (*True Blood* 2009). The audience discovers, however, that Lafayette sells drugs and turns tricks to supplement his meagre income because despite working two jobs, he is unable to otherwise support his institutionalised, mentally ill mother. Furthermore, Lafayette not only survives his ordeal in Fangtasia's basement, but he also performs many heroic acts, and lives until the end of the series (*True Blood* 2009, 2010). In other words, Ball violates the genre patterns that doom Lafayette to be either victim or villain, creating a rhetorical refusal that draws attention to and questions their constructions.

Lauded for his representations of marginalised characters, *True Blood*'s creator Alan Ball creates both good and evil marginalised characters who are layered and multi-dimensional, and who resist affirming dangerous stereotypes. These characters, appealing even to viewers who may initially disagree with ideas presented through them, encourage entry into the conversation about the presented ideas, yet creating characters that resist limiting labels is only part of Ball's success; Ball challenges the very notions upon which stereotypes are built. Using the familiar patterns, the show's Gothic-horror genre provides, he imbues the show's opening scene with well-known tropes, such as unreliable narrators, ruined buildings, and taboo behaviours, which construct specific audience expectations. He then creates a rhetorical refusal by deliberately subverting the patterns he builds, shifting viewers' attention away from the tropes themselves, and toward the preconceived notions

they employ in making judgments about how the tropes will play out. In this way, Ball achieves his aim: encouraging audiences to think about how they view and interact with those who are different from themselves.

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“I know what I am. Do you?”:

Asexuality as Frustration of Destiny and the Devil in *Penny Dreadful*

ABSTRACT

Throughout the TV series Penny Dreadful, protagonist Vanessa Ives suffers relentless spiritual and sexual pursuit by demons Dracula and Lucifer, who believe her to be the legendary Mother of Evil. In order to unleash darkness upon the world, they must seduce Vanessa into an eternal sexual union – an event that Vanessa vehemently, and unsuccessfully, seeks to prevent. Vanessa unites the Gothic monstrous Other with the emerging “asexual Other” in her anxiety as an object of unwanted desire within the erotoheteronormative system. This paper proposes a reading of Penny Dreadful that employs Ela Przybylo’s method of “asexual resonances” to consider Vanessa as an asexual character and her asexuality as the apparatus by which she frustrates and ultimately foils the demons’ quest. Vanessa’s continual rejections of the demons’ sexual advances through strategic manipulations of erotoheteronormative conventions and her persistent reinscriptions of her own identity expose the horror of reproductive heterosexuality as a site of erasure. Drawing on Jack Halberstam’s framework of queer failure, I argue that Vanessa’s failure to wholly avoid or eternally sustain her demonic union marks not only her triumphant failure to assimilate into the erotoheteronormative system, but also a significant, recognizable asexual experience that empowers her toward liberation from that system. Finally, I discuss how Elizabeth Hanna Hanson’s concept of asexual narrative structure illuminates the series’ failure to achieve not only a productive erotoheterosexual narrative structure, but a satisfying erotoheterosexual narrative as well, and how that failure ultimately situates the series a macrocosm of the Gothic Other it portrays.

Keywords: asexuality, Gothic, Penny Dreadful, Vanessa Ives, asexual horror

At the centre of Showtime/Sky Atlantic's Neo-Victorian Gothic horror drama *Penny Dreadful* is Vanessa Ives, a medium. Vanessa who suffers relentless spiritual and sexual pursuit by the vampire Dracula and his brother Lucifer the fallen angel. The brothers seek to make Vanessa the legendary Mother of Evil through a sexual union foretold through centuries of mythology, but Vanessa fervently attempts to prevent this union through strategic subversions of the erotoheteronormative tactics the demons employ to seduce her. In this paper, I borrow Elizabeth Hanna Hanson's term "erotonormativity" to describe what Mark Carrigan (2012, par. 2) terms "the sexual assumption", or the pervasive and unexamined cultural assumption of (hetero)sexual attraction as normative and universal (Hanson 2016, 345). *Penny Dreadful's* erotoheteronormative (il)logics are the site of much of its narrative and thematic frustration and failure. Following Barry McCrea's (2010, 253) suggestion that Bram Stoker's *Dracula* explores the horror of heterosexuality as viewed from the safety of the gay closet, I propose an asexual reading of *Penny Dreadful* that explores the horror of erotoheteronormativity as a site of erasure as viewed from the "asexual closet." This reading, in turn, exposes the structurally "horrific" repercussions of the series' failure to recognize the inherent asexual logic of its own narrative.

In this paper, I read Vanessa not only as an asexual character, but also as an asexual evolution of the Gothic Other who threatens the series' erotoheteronormative and narrative systems and engages with those systems in ways that resonate to me, an asexual critic, as instances of asexual possibility. I draw upon Ela Przybylo's studies of asexual theory to argue that Vanessa's resistance to these systems marks a series of asexually resonant experiences that subvert a larger heteronormative narrative. Through key instances in which Vanessa manipulates erotoheteronormative rituals and undermines the sexual assumption as a means of retaining her agency, I explore how she embodies what Allen Grove (2000, 430) terms the Gothic "obsession with veiling, cloaking, and unknowability" by strategically wielding her own unknowability in defence of her identity. I also refer to Elizabeth Hanna Hanson's (2016, 349) concept of the asexual closet: a liminal space rarely seen but deeply felt, much like the "demimonde" in which *Penny Dreadful's* characters exist, that embodies the process of self-inscription necessary to "give the asexual nothing the shape of a something." Examining the series' "dissatisfying" finale, I employ Jack Halberstam's notion of queer failure to consider how an asexual reading of Vanessa's death positions her fate as an act of resistance against the erasure and inadequacy of the erotoheteronormative system. Finally, I return to Hanson's theory of asexual narrative structure to reveal an inherent asexual logic at the level of the series' narrative structure, examine the ways in which the series fails this logic entirely through its structural investment in

erotonormative trajectories, and consider what asexual theory can offer the Gothic genre.

Though the series makes no indication of Vanessa as an explicitly asexual character, her strategic navigation of, and implicit separation from, the erotoheteronormative world around her demonstrates what Przybylo terms “asexual possibility” through “asexual resonances”: “traces, touches, instances [that allow] us to search for asexuality in unexpected places” (Przybylo and Cooper 2014, 298). I follow Przybylo’s (2019, 14) lead in considering asexuality not only as a legitimate sexual orientation characterized by a lack of experienced or desired sexual attraction, but also as “a unique series of identifications that together constitute a distinct orientatory outlook on relating, intimacy, and sociality.” Asexuality has no bearing on an individual’s experience of or interest in romantic attraction, nor does it necessarily dictate an individual’s interest in sexual contact. Likewise, instances of asexual possibility are not indications of aversion to sexual encounters or relationships, but rather moments that suggest a fundamental detachment from the cultural system of erotonormative attraction and desire. As such, Vanessa’s participation or interest in romantic and sexual contact does not undermine her asexual possibility.

In the official series companion book, series creator John Logan characterizes Vanessa’s relationships with her suitors as “partly supernatural, partly intellectual [...] somewhat erotic and somewhat simply romantic” (Gosling 2015, 19, 109). Josh Hartnett, who portrays Vanessa’s love interest Ethan, elaborates that “all the characters in this show feel alienated in some way [...] and are in want of relationships that will help take away that feeling of alienation, help them be understood” (ibid, 19). Although Logan’s use of (traditionally) sexually charged terms like “erotic” to describe these relationships may seem counterproductive to my argument, I follow Przybylo in breaking from Freud’s conflation of the erotic with sex and considering instead Audre Lorde’s framework of the erotic, which privileges “‘sharing deeply any pursuit with any other person,’ through [...] the knowledge of the self and a life lived with an attunement to an inner knowledge” (Lorde 1978 as cited in Przybylo 2019, 30). As this framework allows for asexual expressions of the erotic, so too do Logan’s descriptors allow for interpretations of Vanessa’s romantic relationships as asexually erotic through the shared experience of alienation and understanding they afford Vanessa and her partners.

Logan (2015, 125) states that he created Vanessa as “the manifestation of what it is to be a monster” (Gosling 2015, 125).” Her boldness and curiosity draw her toward the darkness and the unknown, but these “monstrous yearnings, or these yearnings for liberation [...] also [make] her strong, powerful, and liberated in a time

when women couldn't be" (ibid, 122). Jack Halberstam (1995, 15-6) defines the Gothic monstrous Other "both as other than the imagined community and as the being that cannot be imagined as community"; he elaborates that the monstrous Other produces horror by "[representing] a bad or pathological sexuality, a non-reproductive sexuality, a sexuality that exhausts and wastes and exists prior to and outside of the marriage contract." Though Vanessa's abilities render her "like no others" within the show's framework (2.3 "The Nightcomers"), her theorized asexuality situates her Otherness even more deeply. This is not to suggest that asexuality is inherently monstrous, but that its refusal to privilege compulsory sexuality and reproductive sex renders it as such through the dominant cultural lens of reproductive heteronormativity. Hanson notes that while "asexuality may ... qualify as queer by existing beyond the pale of heteronormativity, it is subject to erasure even in queer space by the sexual assumption" (2016, 345). Not only is Vanessa Othered within the larger social structure of Victorian England, but her asexuality also sets her apart from her own community: the series' multiple canon queer characters enact their queerness solely within the erotonormative framework. A series that can conceive of so many versions of Otherness – and which imbues even its most Othered figures with the "human" experience of sexual attraction – neglects to imagine an experience outside of that framework at all.

Penny Dreadful tries to paint Vanessa as a progressive and perhaps even feminist portrayal of a complex character who transcends the archetype of the repressed Victorian madwoman, but the series' portrayal of her sexuality ultimately betrays the spectre of Gothic resistance to female agency – and female sexual agency in particular. Amy Montz (2020, 51) observes that the Neo-Victorian tendency toward "surface sexuality," or prioritizing the addition of sex to contemporary adaptations of Victorian texts over the development of female characters' agency, "reinforces Victorian stereotypes about the danger of female sexual autonomy [...] [and] brings about the horror and rejection of female desire that the Gothic genre is ultimately known for." The series attempts to telegraph Vanessa's sexual empowerment by showing her participating in sexual encounters onscreen but plays into the trap of "surface sexuality" Montz describes by linking those encounters to episodes of demonic possession, to the point that Vanessa eschews most sexual contact for fear of triggering such an episode. The same supernatural abilities that Logan asserts make her "strong, powerful, and liberated" (Gosling 2015, 122) effectively bridle her bodily autonomy by imbuing her sexual expression with the threat of violation.

Furthermore, despite Vanessa's numerous accounts of her persecution as "unending torment" and "[living] forever violated" (2.7 "Little Scorpion"), the series frames her sexual pursuit by Lucifer and Dracula as a seduction she cannot entirely

resist, insisting that “she loves [the demons] in her way” (2.1 “Fresh Hell”). However, the narrative consistently fails to develop that relationship beyond sexual violation from Vanessa’s perspective. Its conflation of passive external behaviour or even flat-out refusal with active desire exemplifies what Jamil Khader (2012, 76) describes as “a tension between the overcoding of sexual performance and the undercoding of sexual utterance.” Logan states in the series companion that he didn’t want to cast Vanessa as a victim; rather, he wanted her to be “complicit in her own sin” (Gosling 2015, 122). Logan elaborates that “it was important for me to create a moment where the demon [...] says to her [...] ‘You allowed all this to happen. Hell, you sought it out and fucked it’” (ibid, 124). But Vanessa is a child when Dracula first whispers to her; she cannot consent to his overtures. When he appears again and announces his intentions to an adult Vanessa, she asks if she has a choice; he informs her that she “has always had a choice” (1.5 “Closer Than Sisters”). When she denies him and refuses his advances outright, he insists that she’s lying, and the scene culminates in a sexual encounter during which Vanessa is visibly possessed. We don’t see her consent to the encounter, but we do see her aggressor dismiss her refusal and maintain that he knows that she truly wants him.

The only instance in which Vanessa arguably “seeks out” her persecution occurs as she declares to Dracula and Lucifer, who have appeared to her together for the first time, that she will endure their offensives in order to remain herself (3.4 “A Blade of Grass”). As the brothers threaten her with the unholy battery of horrors, they’ll use to force her submission, Vanessa stands firm: “Then do it. Unleash them.” When Dracula demands who she is to defy him, she replies, “I am nothing. I am no more than a blade of grass. *But I am*. You think you know evil? Here it stands.” This scene complicates the question of Vanessa’s complicity by allowing her to explicitly refuse to consent to the demons’ demands and troubles the narrative’s insistence that Vanessa’s pursuit is a seduction by explicitly establishing that the demons’ subsequent assaults on Vanessa are punishments for her refusal. Her declaration of the evil inherent in her existence as *something* and *nothing* seeds the suggestion that *she* is the monster to be feared, not Lucifer or Dracula; the narrative’s ideology is so entrenched in the sexual assumption that the possibility that she *wouldn’t* reciprocate the demons’ lust becomes not just unthinkable, but monstrous. But the series’ failure to actually enact that reciprocal desire through her actions signals a critical rupture in the narrative’s internal logic that exposes the series’ governing framework as erotoheteronormativity and emphasizes the need for an alternate reading outside of that framework.

An asexual reading of *Penny Dreadful*, then, pushes the Gothic’s terror of female desire even further by introducing the threat of the woman who does not possess, and therefore cannot be manipulated by, sexual desire at all. The series uses

the demons' sexual link to Vanessa as a means of keeping her sexuality in check; by tying sex to her fear of possession, the narrative can portray her as a "sexually empowered" woman without allowing her *too* much agency. But through an asexual lens, Vanessa as an asexual Other becomes ungovernable within the erotoheteronormative framework; her asexuality renders her invisible, and therefore unprecedented, to the erotonormative eye. By examining the motives behind her instances of sexual expression and understanding their teleological detachment from erotoheteronormative productions of desire, her sexual encounters emerge as calculated bids for agency through imitations and manipulations of the erotoheteronormative system. The potential for disruption she poses to the erotonormative status quo thus renders her monstrous in her inability to be anticipated by the framework she threatens to destabilize.

Halberstam (1995, 2) suggests that a key element of Gothic horror is the realisation that not only are multiple interpretations embedded in Gothic texts, but also that "meaning itself runs riot. Gothic [texts] produce a symbol for this interpretative mayhem in the body of the monster." Przybylo, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993, 8) adds that "asexual, as much as queer, can gesture toward 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances' that challenge sexual categorization" (Sedgwick 1993 as cited in Przybylo 2019, 3). Within the erotoheteronormative system, sexual action is understood to indicate sexual interest, but Vanessa's sexual actions cannot be counted upon to reflect the same objective and thus resist interpretation, making her impossible to reliably situate within that system. This rupture demonstrates asexual resonance in its defiance of the series' attempts to forcibly concretize her as an unequivocally erotonormative participant in the demons' sexual charades. Her insistence that her "sexual behaviour and sexual identity are not always linked in obvious or absolute ways" (Przybylo 2019, 11) not only makes her monstrous in the eyes of the erotoheteronormative system, but also invites the specific horror of asexual multiplicities converging on a system in which they are entirely unimaginable. The invisibility of the asexual closet plays on the Gothic fixation with veiling and cloaking that Grove identifies and allows Vanessa to remain truly occluded to even those closest to her. This "plausible deniability" enables her to move through the erotonormative world undetected to learn its rituals and then undermine them from within. In her final rejections of both Lucifer and Dracula, she conceals her true motives beneath the cloak of erotonormative expectations; she even manifests the death she has spent three seasons contemplating by framing it as the utmost act of love. The erotoheteronormative system is horrific to Vanessa, as I will explore, but through her capacity to destabilize it, Vanessa's insistence on inscribing her identity through that unknowability renders her horrific to the system that threatens her, too.

Vanessa's understanding of erotoheteronormativity as an oppressive system—but a fragile and manipulable one—is introduced in season one alongside the dissolution of her close friendships with Mina and Peter Murray. As a child, Vanessa stumbles upon a sexual tryst between her mother and the Murrays' father and clings to that scant sexual knowledge as a source of power into young adulthood. But when Mina becomes engaged, Vanessa struggles with the ensuing shift in dynamic: "I watched your courtship [...] flourish, all the stratagems of advance and retreat. [...] How could he not be conquered? ... When would I see you again? [...] What would I do?" (1.5 "Closer Than Sisters"). Vanessa understands sex as a negotiation of power and control, and when Mina's induction into erotoheteronormative adulthood threatens to render Vanessa irrelevant, she attempts to salvage her power and save them both. "You didn't seem to mind this loss of self," she narrates on the eve of Mina's wedding. "Perhaps I minded it for you." And mind it she does, through her own imitations of heterosexuality: first, she kisses Peter, and when that proves unsuccessful, she seduces Mina's fiancé.

In Vanessa's understanding of heterosexuality as a game of power, Peter occupies the same deferential space as Mina. Given her dismissal of Peter as a romantic prospect—"What would I do? Marry Peter?"—Vanessa's actions here signify not attraction, but an asexually resonant bid for control. Peter poses no threat of developing sexual feelings for her or taking sexual advantage of her; he is effeminate, "always ill, and never good at games," and his weakness at *this* game is of great value to Vanessa because it allows her the asexually resonant experience of playing at heterosexuality without the threat of having to actually engage with it. But when Peter rejects her and Vanessa prays for assistance, it isn't God who answers, but Dracula, who promises, "What games we will have!" Peter may not be good at games, but Dracula is, and he perceives Vanessa's clumsy attempt at performing heterosexuality as a chance to manipulate her toward him instead. Vanessa's subsequent seduction of Mina's fiancé, despite its proximity to this encounter with Dracula, reads not as the compulsion of demonic influence, but as an attempt to disrupt the heteronormative system to save herself from the obscurity of spinsterhood and Mina from marriage's perceived "loss of self." Vanessa calculates the tryst for Mina's discovery and holds her gaze even as the sexual encounter intensifies, confident that she has freed Mina from the system that privileges her heteroreproductive relationship over her nonsexual bond with Vanessa before she is permanently lost to that system. Vanessa's shock when her transgression destroys their relationship is also asexually resonant: Mina clearly values sexual contact in a way Vanessa does not; lacking that investment, Vanessa fails to understand the gravity of what she has done. Although her imitation of heterosexuality ultimately results in disaster, her temporary success in disrupting the game proves to Vanessa

that her disruptions have the power to thwart not only the system's attempts to erase her, but the system itself.

Samuel Finegan (2017, 225-226) notes that "*Penny Dreadful* pictures an apocalypse in specifically heterosexual terms. ... the evil of [the series] is clearly and deliberately reproductive." While Vanessa fails to save Mina from marriage because she cannot fully fathom the workings of erotoheteronormativity, Lucifer's attempt to seduce Vanessa fails because he cannot fathom how Vanessa's identity and desires can exist outside the system of reproductive heterosexuality. In the season two finale, Lucifer offers Vanessa a vision of eternal peace in exchange for her soul; if she accepts, she will "be loved, simply for who [she is]. Is that not the engine of all human creatures? To be normal?" (2.10 "And They Were Enemies"). In this vision, Vanessa and Ethan are married with two children and, more implicitly, an active sex life to the proposed exclusion of social engagements and childcare. Mina is also alive and partnered; the world is seemingly free of trauma, and Vanessa and her loved ones are resoundingly *normal*.

Here I want to return to Hanson's idea of the asexual closet and its process of inscribing *nothing* as *something*. What makes Vanessa "like no others" is difficult to name and qualify, but the consistency and ferocity with which she defends and chooses her Otherness over ordinariness reflects, as Finegan (2017, 223) suggests, "a glory in the state of queerness." In supposing that all humans want to be loved and to be normal – and in equating wanting to be loved *with* being normal – Lucifer betrays a critical instability in his manipulation. "You will be who you are," he assures Vanessa, but he fails to recognize that Vanessa's detachment from the axis of desire and attraction on which the series turns prevents her from being anticipated within that ideology at all. She is Othered even among the demons who claim to know and love her where no one else will. The Vanessa in the vision is loved because her Otherness has been totally erased – and this, Lucifer emphasizes, is reproductive heterosexual bliss. Vanessa manipulates this erasure to her advantage; when Lucifer urges her to kiss him to seal her fate, she leans in as if preparing for a kiss, but pauses just short to counter, "You offer me a normal life. Why do you think I want that anymore? I know what I am. Do you?" She uses his ensuing confusion to psychically overpower him, destroying his vessel and casting him out. Allen Grove (2000, 430) notes that "the trajectory of the Gothic's marriage story [...] is linear, comfortable, and knowable", but Vanessa complicates this trajectory by inscribing *herself* as unknowable. Her declaration that "I know what I am" exemplifies asexual identity in its refusal to give shape to *nothing* and its simultaneous insistence that that *nothing* is still *something*. Lucifer may claim to love her for who she is, but his inability to anticipate this element of Vanessa's Otherness – and the value she ascribes to it – reveals that claim to be false. But *she* knows herself, and her continual

reinscription and liberation of herself *as* Other sets the stage for her to orchestrate Dracula's demise – and her own.

Vanessa's enduring desire to remain as she is, despite great personal cost, reflects an inherent asexual logic that directly opposes Dracula's drive to pursue and reproduce. But where Lucifer fails by assuming that Vanessa's priorities and desires reflect the erotoheterosexual norm, Dracula deceives her into falling for him by mimicking her own tactics. Through a persona designed to appeal to Vanessa, Dracula cultivates a relationship with her that proves more erotic, in the Lordean and Przybylan senses, than perhaps any other relationship in the series in his determination to share Vanessa's experiences of grief, curiosity, and isolation. But his imitation cannot mask his inherently heteroreproductive mission. When Vanessa angrily confronts him about his deception, he defends himself as "a man who wanted to possess [her] for his own ends, but instead [...] fell in love"; when she rejects him, he demands that she show mercy for his frustration at being "always in search of that one thing [he] cannot attain" (3.7 "Ebb Tide"). Despite his later affirmations that he respects and encourages her non-normative desires – "I don't want to make you good. I don't want to make you normal" – Dracula exposes himself as yet another force imposing an intensely erotoheteronormative framework of male entitlement, female subjugation, and sexual assumption onto Vanessa. By reframing Vanessa's lifetime of torment at his hands as the actions of a man so lovestruck that he would manipulate, torture, and kill just to be with her, he erases Vanessa's experience of violation with the expectation that such a display of desire for her will outweigh her anger. But despite that anger, she takes advantage of his assumption and chooses to manipulate his trust as he did hers in order to "deny the darkness its prize for all time" (3.9 "The Blessed Dark"). When Dracula asks if she accepts him, Vanessa replies, "I accept myself," and enters his long-sought heteroreproductive union with the intention of destroying it – and herself.

Throughout the series, Vanessa identifies loss of self as the greatest horror she can imagine; that she ultimately chooses to enact her own erasure, rather than live within a framework that continually violates her, reflects the true horror the erotoheteronormative system wreaks on those outside its bounds. Figuring her death as an unproductive embodiment of queer failure reveals the radical potential to read her fate as a triumphant failure to submit to this system. The narrative frames her death as a sacrifice to save not only herself, but the world, from becoming monstrous, but I argue that her death allows her monstrosity – and agency – where the narrative does not. Although Ethan believes order will be restored if they defeat Dracula, Vanessa's insistence that "it's not [Dracula], it's me" reveals her as the monster in the erotoheteronormative machine: although she ultimately destroys the cycle of her persecution, her engagement with a system in which she does not

belong breeds disaster. Her drive toward death sidesteps any sense of responsibility to “remake, rebuild, or reproduce” the world she leaves behind; instead, she “dedicates [herself] completely and ferociously to the destruction of self” (Halberstam 2011, 163). In orchestrating her own erasure, Vanessa doesn’t save herself from becoming a monster so much as she ultimately brings herself into being as the anarchic, asexual monster the series has spent three seasons trying to bring to heel.

The heteroreproductive system’s cultural supremacy depends entirely *on* reproduction: on its power to convince those within its system to continue perpetuating it. Vanessa, outside that system, feels no such conviction, and her success in swaying Ethan, too, from his belief in the system’s restorative power chips further at its shaky foundation. His agreement to end her life “with a kiss [...] with love” (3.9 “The Blessed Dark”) ruptures the framework’s stability by denying the absolute power of reproductive heterosexuality: not even the promise of a heterosexual future – as either Dracula’s bride or Ethan’s mortal lover – tempts Vanessa from the edge. Rather, she embodies “a feminism that finds purpose in its own failure ... that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but [...] in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing” (Halberstam 2011, 152). Her death by Ethan’s hand marks an asexually resonant act of intimacy that exposes the erotoheteronormative system’s precarity by positioning the ultimate rejection of *any* reproductive future, not just a monstrous one, as the ultimate gesture of love. Notably, Vanessa’s headstone bears no epitaph, only her name and the years of her birth and death; the series only affirms her unknowability once she no longer poses a threat to its dominant systems. This concession to her desires visually reinforces the queer failure inherent in her fate and reinscribes her as both *something* and *nothing*, ensuring that she remains indelible and unknowable even in death.

Vanessa’s death is perhaps the series’ most egregious failure to deliver a cohesive feminist spin on the Gothic genre. Since its finale aired in 2016, fans and critics alike have expressed their shock and disappointment that her otherwise dynamic arc concluded with such a blatant concession to the Gothic obsession with beautiful corpses. Particularly, the series has drawn academic criticism for portraying women who defied Gothic and Victorian stereotypes in the first two seasons only to punish them for that defiance in the final season. However, Logan explains in an interview with *Variety* that “the show is about empowerment, and [Vanessa] controls her own destiny. [...] She owns her life, and at the end of the day, she owns her death” (Ryan 2016). Critic Rikke Schubart (2017, 30-33) wryly adds that while “we could understand Vanessa’s death as an act of free will [...] fantastic fiction can take women beyond the limits of the natural world, however, not beyond a male author's decision to end their lives.” Perhaps it’s this dissonance that renders

Vanessa's fate so dissatisfying. Logan's claim that her death was intentionally written as an act of empowerment *could* fulfill his original mission to create a Gothic monster who resisted victimhood and reckoned with her complicity in her own sin. But that claim – and that mission – rings hollow when the narrative effectively denies her empowerment *until* her death.

Antonija Primorac (2018, 157) laments that “this refusal of being [...], the embrace of death, [seems] the only strategy available to neo-Victorian queer subjects on screen in their revolt against the heteronormative matrix.” Although I believe that queer theory does offer a lens through which to read Vanessa's death as a radical act of empowerment, I echo Primorac's frustration that the erotoheteronormative framework cannot truly be destabilized if the *only* avenue of liberation available to queer Others is death. Truly radical disruptions of dominant cultural frameworks cannot occur without figures outside them to represent alternative modes of being, but it is not enough to simply construct those figures within the constraints of existing oppressive frameworks. Queer theory, and asexual theory in particular, demonstrate that alternate ways of living, desiring, and being are not only possible, but also allow possibilities for the liberation of self and society that prove unimaginable within the erotoheteronormative system. These alternate frameworks offer valuable opportunities to expand the horizons of the Gothic through their potential to create and locate Others who don't just challenge the genre's status quo but transcend it entirely.

As such, Elizabeth Hanna Hanson (2016, 352) introduces her theory of asexual narrative structure as a counterpoint to the traditional desire-driven, productive, “heterosexually structured” progression most Western narratives follow, often to literal heterosexual conclusions. Focused on stasis rather than progression, asexual narrative structure offers a useful framework through which to read Vanessa's death as logically, if not emotionally, satisfying. Where heteronarratives produce “closure, which promises meaning and resolution where the stasis of asexuality cannot: structured by non-desire and non-event, asexual stasis has nothing to resolve,” an asexually structured narrative is one that “frustrates both the teleological movement toward closure and the aimless desire that may also characterize those narratives that resist closure” (ibid, 347). Halberstam (1995, 42) notes that the Gothic Other “is an excellent example of the secret of sexuality that is both hidden and revealed within the same text,” while Hanson counters that “the asexual possibility [...] introduces the threat that the secret is that there *is* no secret, that there is nothing to be found out, that the story may well head nowhere” (2016, 350). *Penny Dreadful* builds on and to the question of how Vanessa will free herself from the demonic pursuit and prophecy that hound her: How will she defeat Dracula? How will she return to God? How will she make peace with herself? The conventions of

traditional heteronarrative structure undergird the urgency of these questions as the final season culminates in order to gain narrative closure to Vanessa's arc, we expect the story to progress through its climactic tension to a satisfying, meaningful resolution that demonstrates her faith in God *and* in herself.

Although the finale of *Penny Dreadful* is constructed as the culmination of a heterosexually structured narrative, in actuality it embodies Hanson's notion of asexual possibility. The narrative tension surrounding Vanessa's fate "is not a productive tension [...] but the cessation of movement" (Hanson 2016, 351). She doesn't save herself through a demonstration of her psychic strength or by manifesting an act of God – she just dies. Like Dracula after Vanessa's death, the "secret" the narrative has spent three seasons building toward simply ceases to be. As asexual theory provides a lens through which to read Vanessa's death as the triumphant conclusion of her resistance to erotonormative subjugation, Hanson's asexual narrative structure exposes the inadequacy of traditional heteronarrative structure as a means of expressing an intrinsically asexual narrative. The resulting uncomfortable hybrid – an asexual narrative forced into a heteronarrative structure, lacking desire, building to nothing, marched insistently and unproductively through a traditional story progression – parallels Vanessa's own expressions of Otherness. As she frustrates her erotoheteronormative world by refusing to engage with desire as it demands her to, so too does the asexual narrative frustrate the desire, movement, and closure that heteronarrative structure demands.

Judith Butler (2005, 89) posits that "[t]hat which persecutes me brings me into being," and so too does Vanessa's persecution by Lucifer, Dracula, and the erotoheteronormative system at large galvanize her identity as a monstrous Other as a source of power, pride, and joy from which she draws throughout the series, even as those forces attempt to subjugate and erase her. Her struggle to remain true to herself and her desires reflects the relentless negotiation and exhaustion of embodying asexual identity in a culture so saturated in the sexual assumption that it cannot and does not care to imagine us, but her persistent defence of her Otherness also marks a valuable example of asexual validation and even glory. This particular experience of discomfort and defence emphasizes *Penny Dreadful's* erotoheteronormative ideology, but through Vanessa's destabilization of that ideology through subversion and resistance, the series is rendered fragile and unstable by its own hand – and by its own Other, who resists its attempts at erasure even in death. Vanessa's emergence as an asexual iteration of the Gothic Other presents new possibilities for asexual theory as a means of destabilizing existing frameworks of erotonormative assumption and oppression as well as uncovering new modes of intimacy, resistance, and desire within the Gothic convention. Heather Love (2007, 40) notes that while queer studies have "a tendency to read the

queerness of queer desire as excess rather than lack. [...] it would also make sense to understand queerness as an absence of or aversion to sex", and I believe that asexual theory specifically holds the potential to lift the veil of the Gothic's characteristic excess to uncover its lacks. Furthermore, in a genre so fixated on expressions and repressions of sexual agency, asexual theory provides a lens entirely removed from the erotoheteronormative system through which we can investigate the instabilities within not only existing Gothic texts, but new ones as well. Though the asexual resonances of the Gothic may exist as yet unseen, they remain deeply felt, and no matter how deeply buried they might be, asexual theory uniquely offers the tools to uncloak them.

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“Life, uh, finds a way”: Reading Post-human Agency in the EcoGothic Spaces of *Jurassic Park*

ABSTRACT

*The Gothic narrative has often been read in contemporary criticism as a tale of resistance, where monster heroes who are originally meant to be feared, are celebrated in their defiance of hegemonic power structures. As these power structures are often laden with humanist dogmas, the resistance against them becomes post-human in its very conception and manifestation. The purpose of this study is to read the Gothic spaces of the ‘Jurassic Park’ franchise through an ecocritical lens, to delineate how the dinosaurs occupy liminal spaces between the ‘human’ and the ‘animal’. In their hybridity, they thwart anthropocentric desires to capture, contain or subjugate them. The latest instalment of the franchise, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* has been credited for its explicitly Gothic ambience and use of Gothic tropes; however, this paper explores how such tropes subtly originate in the very first film itself. As such, it hopes to highlight how the spaces of resistance established across the ‘Jurassic Park’ franchise act as EcoGothic contact zones for manifesting non-human and post-human agency. This study looks at the different ways in which this agency comes into conflict with anthropogenic paradigms of power, and how the latter’s failure leads to an expansion of these spaces – to transcend beyond the jungles, volcanoes and grasslands of the island to envelop the entire globe. Finally, this paper hopes to look at the narrative and meta-narrative implications of this conflict, to explore how the fictional spaces inform us of our changing relationship with the environment and the biosphere.*

Keywords: Posthuman, EcoGothic, dinosaur, *Jurassic Park*, resistance

The intrusion of the non-human 'Other' into familiar human spaces has formed a staple trope of Gothic literature, such that animals conventionally associated with fear, disgust and repulsion become essential in these narratives. Gothic fiction has often focussed on the untamed, uncontrolled spaces in which these non-human creatures dwell, which offer a sense of uncanny opposition to the ordered world of socially acceptable norms. The latest film in the 'Jurassic Park' franchise, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018) borrows heavily from Gothic tropes, as made evident by the architectural design of the isolated Lockwood manor, the wealthy benefactor, the innocent orphan, the antagonistic stepfather figure, concealed family secrets, expert use of shadows, and the haunting figure that stalks the protagonists. Reading these Gothic elements through an eco-critical lens calls attention to the menacing spaces in which human/non-human encounters occur, creating a source of unnerving discomfort or a sense of uncanniness. Such spaces are not limited to this castle (Lockwood Manor) but are evident in the plethora of different environments spread across the preceding films of the franchise. As such, the directorial design behind *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* has only made explicit the subtly Gothic ambience that had its origins in the very first film, *Jurassic Park* (1993). The dinosaurs, regarded as "a figure of the limit of our Gothic imagination... at which the known world reaches the boundaries of the unknown or other" (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 141), continue to haunt these fictional spaces and resist all human attempts to expunge them from the world.

Within the 'Jurassic Park' franchise, prehistoric reptiles become the monster-heroes of a Gothic literary framework, as hybrid forms standing at the boundary of what is to be allowed to come to the wild heath of society and what is consigned to remain in the wilderness (Punter 2000, 145). In a billionaire's attempts to tame the genetic pool of animals long extinct, *Jurassic Park* becomes a strongly didactic parable against scientific hubris in the Anthropocene. The dinosaurs – these neo-Frankensteinian monsters (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 141) – exist in an era named after human beings ('*Anthropos*': human) and are born of human actions but subvert anthropogenic attempts at controlling them to varying forms and degrees. The narrative pits them against human protagonists and highlights the antagonistic nature of these creatures by emphasizing their monstrosity, bloodlust and cunning. Throughout the films, a handful of human beings can flee and seemingly achieve victory over their reptilian predators. However, such victory can be read in a different light through a post-human lens.

Firstly, the human beings in *Jurassic Park* and its sequels are forced to flee from their non-human assailants while the dinosaurs are mostly able to retain complete control over their home terrain, where they reproduce, multiply and

expand. These terrains became EcoGothic spaces of post-human resistance against a world of anthropocentric, capitalist order signifying the ultimate failure of the pinnacle of humanistic achievement. *Jurassic Park* rethinks the very notion of agency as one solely attributed to the human, and instead subscribes to the post-human notion of agentic capacity to include anything with the ability to make a difference, produce various kinds of effects and affects, and even alter the course of events by their action (Coole 2013, 451-469). Such agentic capacity enables non-human, post-human and ahuman entities “not only to impede or block the will or designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, viii). However, little to no scholarship exists on how the Gothic spaces envisioned in ‘Jurassic Park’ celebrate non-human and post-human agency. It is important to clarify that I use *Jurassic Park* to refer to the first film (1993) and ‘Jurassic Park’ to refer to the film series. The park is simply titled Jurassic Park (without inverted commas or italics). Similarly, I use Jurassic World to refer to the theme park and *Jurassic World* to signify the film of 2015.

This article hopes to rectify this very gap by positing how the narratives exhibit a steady change in the perception of non-human agency over the five films, achieved concurrently with a depiction of the repeated failures of anthropocentric systems of order. The importance of *Jurassic Park* increases manifold in an era of climate change, species extinctions and questions regarding the potential future of humanity on Earth. As a film that voices concerns with the past, present and future, it situates itself firmly alongside similar narratives of eco-horror like *Jaws* (1975), *Piranha* (1978), *Anaconda* (1997) and *Lake Placid* (1999) which problematize our relationship with science, nature and the non-human world (Tidwell and Soles 2021, 1-20). The imminent release of *Jurassic World: Dominion* makes it all the more necessary to reflect on the themes of the first film. The ideas espoused in *Jurassic Park* remain relevant even today and address the bio-ethical concerns of a decade that is seeing an increasing desire for mass de-extinction of species. This desire is hardly limited to the ideological realm, as seen in the partial success achieved in reverse-bio-engineering chickens with dinosaur-like legs (Bharat 2022) and faces (Wener-Fligner 2015). By no means does this article advocate against scientific progress, nor does it claim that such experiments shall reach their inevitable conclusion in a scenario similar to the one in the film.

Rather, the purpose of this study is to read the Gothic spaces of the ‘Jurassic Park’ franchise through an ecocritical lens, to delineate how the dinosaurs occupy liminal spaces between the ‘human’ and the ‘animal’. This article explores how these spaces of resistance act as EcoGothic contact zones (Haraway 2016, 33) heavy with conflict, where non-human and post-human agencies are manifested. Throughout the films, these spaces expand to not only encompass the different islands in the

archipelago but, by the end of *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, the rest of the world. Finally, I look at the future of the franchise – building from an analysis of the end of *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* as well as beyond, to explore how more-than-human agency is established in contact zones heavy with conflict.

Failure of Anthropocentric Order:

The first park, regarded as the pinnacle of humanistic achievement, was an entrepreneurial marvel created by ageing businessman John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) in the original film. Set up to be the first of its kind and far more revolutionary than Hammond's flea circus, the park was established on a secluded island off the coast of Costa Rica. The island is part of the fictional archipelago *Las Cinco Muertes*, which loosely translates to 'Five Deaths'. The very choice of name acts as a form of classic Gothic foreshadowing, as does the violent opening scene which culminates in a dinosaur handler being pulled into the cage by a bloodthirsty Velociraptor. The shaking trees, the terrified expressions of the workers, the rainy night, the Velociraptor's snarls and the screams of the dying worker contribute to this Gothic setting. The failure of humanistic order is established in this very opening scene, in terms of the Velociraptor's triumph over all attempts to rescue the dying man; no amount of tasing or shooting the dinosaur can save him. In its atmosphere of mystery and suspense, and the collapse of order, the first scene envisions a space of resistance against an anthropocentric desire for control – a feature characteristic of the EcoGothic sensibility (Principe 2014, 2).

The Gothic has always revolved around eerie and inhospitable spaces which haunt our psyche and as such, the EcoGothic becomes a useful lens for reading these Gothic spaces through an ecocritical lens, to draw more attention to the uncanny sites of action and its non-human residents. The necessity of adopting an EcoGothic lens in contemporary times has been summed up by Andrew Smith and William Hughes:

Debates about climate change and environmental damage have been key issues on most industrialized countries' political agendas for some time. These issues have helped shape the direction and application of ecocritical languages. The Gothic seems to be the form which is well placed to capture these anxieties and provide a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory and political process (Smith and Hughes 2016, 5).

Such spaces are not limited to classic Gothic settings of castles and manors, but also encompass forested terrains (Kroger 2016, 15-17), polar ice caps (Lanone

2016, 28-43) and even the war-fraught post-apocalyptic wastelands (Smith 2016, 134-146). Researchers have located EcoGothic sensibilities in the transformation of human beings into trees (Punter 2016, 44-57) and monsters (Ganz 2016, 87-102), causing the destabilization of the 'Anthropos' in its different ontological and epistemological realities. The EcoGothic emerges as a critical tool to oppose humanistic exceptionalism and its consequences in the Anthropocene.

Jurassic Park, itself borrowing inspiration from the 'kaiju' films of Japan (Ryfle 1998, 17) aligns with its predecessors' EcoGothic desire to emphasize the capacity of non-human creatures and agentic forces to intrude into and defy anthropocentric order. Such order is seemingly restored in the morning after the opening scene of *Jurassic Park*. The inconvenience caused by the man's death is the "20-million-dollar lawsuit by the family of the worker" (Spielberg 1993), rather than any emotional regret. His worth is summed up in monetary terms, a paradox of the Anthropocene that Jason W. Moore notes as immensely anthropocentric (Moore 2017, 594-630). The failure of the park can be traced in equal parts to capitalistic and scientific hubris, both serving as markers of the Anthropocene. *Jurassic Park* does not feature a looming castle, but in a truly Gothic fashion, ominously hints at the failure of this technological utopia through the characters' reactions, words and actions throughout the early segments of the film. One character who opposes the notion of complete control throughout is Doctor Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum), a scientist specializing in Chaos Theory. The ripple effect of chaos theory describes the tendency of small-scale events to spiral into large-scale chaotic situations; *Jurassic Park* envisions this effect in a truly post-human and Gothic manner, by using it to depict the subversion of complete human control (Borwein and Rose, 2020).

Malcolm refuses to sanction the safety of Hammond's dream project. In doing so, he represents the defiant energies of chaos theory in a microcosm, by standing in opposition to the very purpose for which he had been brought, namely, to endorse the safety of Jurassic Park along with the other experts, Doctor Alan Grant (Nigel John Dermot Neill) and Doctor Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern). Such endorsements were necessary to bolster the park's approval ratings and satisfy Hammond's investors about its overall security – a security that was even brought into question in the first place due to the aforementioned dinosaur handler's gruesome death. As such, Malcolm's words become significant in highlighting the imminent danger lurking beneath the dazzling exterior of Jurassic Park. The following exchange with the scientist Henry Wu (BD Wong) reinforces Malcolm's prediction that Jurassic Park is an "accident waiting to happen" (Spielberg 1993):

Wu: Population control is one of our security precautions. There's no unauthorized breeding in Jurassic Park...all the animals in Jurassic Park

are female. All vertebrate embryos are inherently female anyway. They just require an extra hormone given at the right developmental stage to make them male. We simply deny them that.

Sattler: *Deny* them that?

Malcolm: John, the amount of control you are attempting, it's not possible. If there's one thing the history of evolution has taught us, it's that life will not be contained. Life breaks free, expands to new territories, crashes through barriers painfully, maybe even dangerously.

His words, despite being derided, become prophetic, as the creatures of the island do behave in an “unpredictable fashion” (Spielberg 1993), by locating a loophole in this seemingly infallible system. This “group composed entirely of female animals” (Spielberg 1993) breeds by changing their sex, a capacity that these hybrid creatures derive from the presence of amphibian DNA in their genetic sequence.

Hammond repeatedly reiterates that he spared no expense in optimizing the park for visitors, but ironically, his employee Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight) is dissatisfied with his salary, believing that Hammond went “cheap” (Spielberg 1993) on him. This leads Nedry to betray Hammond and steal the dinosaur embryos for a rival company. To meet his goals, he de-activates the electric fences and endangers the security of the entire park. The anthropocentric space of order is destabilized by the chaotic or contrary actions of, both non-human and human actants. This scenario can be understood as fundamentally post-human if we look to Francesca Ferrando's idea of philosophical post-humanism as a new approach towards recognizing agency, where both human and non-human actants are characterized by agency and modes of existence which “can be traced in the modes of existence that employ strategies of encounter, recognition, and relationality, rather than hierarchical attitudes, rigid dualistic models and assimilative techniques” (Ferrando 2021, 187). However, Nedry's triumph is short-lived, and he is brutally killed by a *Dilophosaurus*. As such, the space he ventures into truly becomes a Gothic contact zone. A contact zone, to borrow Haraway's use of the word, refers to the space (geographical or otherwise) in which “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other... It treats the relations in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Haraway 2008, 216). The Gothic nature of this contact zone is emphasized by how the non-human animal (the *Dilophosaurus*) hinders the plan of the human (Nedry), by jumping into his car which is stuck in the mud, and by doing so, destabilizes the normative structures of power and order.

As such, this contact zone becomes a space of resistance, where the aforementioned “radically asymmetrical relations of power” between Nedry (the

seemingly powerful human who is in charge of the park's defences) and the Dilophosaurus (the seemingly powerless non-human who is confined within its electrified fence) are reversed. The movement of Nedry's jeep on the well-constructed roads is obstructed by the heavy rain, foliage and mud – signifying the ultimate triumph of natural forces over humanistic designs and desire for control. This marks the triumph of non-human agency over humanist designs of travel along ordered paths. This is the Gothic space where human and non-human agents come into conflict with each other, and the non-human domain intrudes into and even dominates the humanist domain. Nedry does not regard the predator seriously at first, till it shoots venomous spit into his eyes – a weapon intended to “blind and paralyse” (Spielberg 1993) its prey, which would then be consumed alive. The Dilophosaurus's use of venom evokes Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (Kristeva 1982, 1-31), which concerns the subconscious human reaction to a possible breakdown of meaning, caused most often by the forced intrusion of the Other into the domain of the Self, or the forceful entry of the object into the finite space of the subject. Kristeva remarks on how bodily fluids, open wounds and sewage can remind us of our own corporeality, materiality and mortality, thereby blurring the lines we have so carefully constructed to bracket our cultured humanity as different from the world of nature and the animals:

...refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being (Kristeva 1982, 3).

As such, the abject works in more ways than one in this scene, both narratively and meta-narratively. The eyes are often regarded as our primary means of perceiving the world, and hence understanding meaning; in blurring the vision through the use of spit (a bodily fluid), the liberal human subjectivity of the '*Anthropos*' is hindered, struck at, mocked and finally rendered futile. Nedry dies a gruesome, abject, painful death – which we do not see on screen, but are aware of, as the camera pans to the blood running down a nearby path in a homogeneous mixture with rain.

The use of the abject is a common trope in Gothic narratives, often intended to evoke horror and discomfort (Hogle 2020, 108-125). *Jurassic Park* is no different and such elements of abject abound throughout, often in the form of severed limbs, corpses, mucus, blood, gore and sweat. When the dinosaurs start breaking free and running amok, the setting becomes inherently Gothic. Stormy weather is not only used by Dennis Nedry as an excuse to break off the power supply to the electrified fences which keep the dinosaurs in but underscores the main action of the story and

sets the tone. The rain and the mist, obscuring the vision of human characters, accentuate the ominous ambience of the scene and thus assume agentic capacity. The post-human agency is not merely limited to the human and non-human creatures that inhabit these EcoGothic spaces but extends to the spaces themselves... where these unfamiliar creatures from distant pasts invade the spatio-temporal contact zones of the familiar present, through the use of futuristic technology gone awry. As such, these spaces and their resident creatures create a sense of uncanniness, by locating the strange in the ordinary, the unsettling and mysterious in the known, and the 'other' in the domain of the 'self' (Royle 2003, 90).

The uncanny sensibility is magnified in the figures of the Velociraptors, which stalk the characters in the final part of the film and cause our notions of familiar and unfamiliar to clash and collapse. These Velociraptors are "veritable monsters not only due to their inherent savagery, but also for their crafty, menacing intellect... qualities far too human-like for our comfort" (Debus 2006, 126). These Velociraptors can open doors with their claws, function as a community or family and stand almost eye-to-eye with a human adult – all these are "ways in which they mimic the human" (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 143). The camera pans over their eyes several times, highlighting their intelligence which is juxtaposed with predatory malice. Their smaller size lends them an advantage over the larger predators by allowing them access to human habitations and spaces. Indeed, Doctor Alan Grant foreshadows the actions of these 'six-foot turkeys' in the very first section of the film:

Try to imagine yourself in the Cretaceous Period. You'd get your first look at the six-foot turkey as you move into the clearing. But raptor, he knew you were there a long time... You stare at him, and he just stares back. That's when the attack comes – not from the front, no, from the side, from the other, from the other two raptors you didn't even know were there. Velociraptor's a pack hunter, you see, he uses coordinated attack patterns... (Spielberg 1993).

The full magnitude of these words is realized when the expert tracker Robert Muldoon (Bob Peck) falls prey to this tactic; his attempts to stalk a member of the pack, are interrupted by a Velociraptor that had been hiding in the bushes nearby. Muldoon utters the words "clever girl" (Spielberg 1993) before being torn to shreds. Unlike the implicitly male creatures which had featured in Doctor Alan Grant's narration, the Velociraptors in *Jurassic Park* are a pack comprised almost entirely of females. Almost all the dinosaurs which ruin human endeavours in the films are female, while the human beings who lose their lives, fortune or both to these dinosaurs are male. A clear, even if unintentionally gendered, dynamic of power is established that serves to emphasize the Gothic sensibilities of the film.

The Gothic has often been regarded as a site of opposition toward hetero-normative hierarchies. In *Jurassic Park*, nature triumphs over culture, non-human triumphs over humans, female predator triumphs over the male that had attempted to control it – a form of control that had included attempts to regulate the sex of these hatchlings even before their birth. This exercise of power falls short first in its attempt to control the genetic code, and later, in its misguided designs to contain the results born of the tampered genetic code. Hammond is the wealthy patriarch, the success of whose park depends on the confinement of female non-humans – as such, his design, which is both anthropocentric and masculine, fails. Muldoon, despite being an expert tracker finally meets his match at the claws of the Velociraptor pack leader. Dennis Nedry condescendingly tries to shoo away the Dilophosaurus before him, unable to take it seriously because of its size – a mistake that proves fatal. The aforementioned characters are far from being archetypal male figures which appear in Gothic fiction, but in their attempts to subjugate the dinosaurs, most of whom are female, they become figureheads of patriarchy.

Gothic fiction establishes spaces of resistance, where female characters adopt non-normative ways of manifesting agency, combat anthropocentric paradigms of a male-dominated world and “break free of stereotypical constraints” (Nabi 2017, 73). It might seem to be ludicrous or even misogynistic to liken these dinosaurs to the women in Gothic texts, but I argue these entities – to varying forms and degrees – blur the line between what is human and what is not. These creatures, and especially the Velociraptors, exist in a liminal space between the constructs of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ by virtue of their uncanniness and intelligence. They become non-humans who behave similarly to human serial killers in horror films, acting as “canny beasts who hunt in pairs, rip in with their hooked claws and begin dining while the prey is still alive” (Edmundson 1999, 26). The archetypal Gothic narrative defines two clear roles for women, that of the ‘predator’ and the ‘victim’:

The first is dangerous yet powerfully attractive; she helps portray the pain/pleasure paradox that has come to be synonymous with Gothic literature. The latter is fragile and vulnerable, she gives the heroes something to rescue, and is often the prize for their brave endeavours (Nabi 2017, 73).

The dinosaurs seem to fit into the predatory role while the human characters like Doctor Ellie Sattler and Hammond’s granddaughter Lex seem to become the victim. However, *Jurassic Park* does not play these tropes straight but offers a more nuanced look to “blur the lines between these stereotypical characters in order to add depth, uncertainty and purpose” (Nabi 2017, 73). Elli Sattler displays remarkable

agency throughout the film and rescues her male brethren about as many times as they rescue her. Lex Murphy (Ariana Richards) and her younger brother Tim (Joseph Mazzello) become paragons of childish innocence, thrust into the world of dinosaurs; even when they attempt to relax in the familial space of their grandfather's restaurant, the imminent shadow of the approaching Velociraptor – both literally and figuratively – disrupt their peace. Lex proves to be remarkably smart for her age and restores the park's power through her programming expertise. On the other hand, the predatory *Tyrannosaurus rex*, popularly dubbed REXY, is the dinosaur that the films are most known for, right down to the very iconic nature of the scenes in which she appears. She chases the protagonists and causes widespread chaos, but it is she who finally engages the Velociraptors in battle at the climactic end, allowing the heroes to escape. Such might hardly have been her intention, and the film establishes more-than-human agency in the notion that her action only happens to align with the protagonists' desire to flee.

Jurassic Park's dinosaurs can evade the male gaze metaphorically, by breaking free of the constraints imposed on them, and literally by hiding from their line of sight. The initial tour, designed to introduce the guests to dinosaurs behind barred, electrified cages, falls short because "two no-shows" (Spielberg 1993) – the *Tyrannosaurus* and the *Dilophosaurus* – conceal themselves from the human view. The dense foliage of the cages designed to contain them ironically become spaces for manifesting agency, where they manage to escape the gaze of the tourists. The scenes which take place outdoors, but also gradually intrude indoors, emphasize the dinosaurs' "primitiveness, their archaic and uncivilised wildness" (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 145). In these spaces, "which are the proper spaces of the dinosaurs, the humans are most at risk" (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 145).

As such, this Gothic text creates a porous world "where social, political, spiritual, physical, geographical, and personal boundaries are... permeable" (Yang and Healey 2016, 3). Female agency in a Gothic space is notable in this very exchange between Ian Malcolm and Ellie Sattler:

Malcolm: God creates dinosaurs. God destroys dinosaurs. God creates man. Man destroys God. Man creates dinosaurs.

Sattler: Dinosaur eats man. Woman inherits the Earth (Spielberg 1993).

Sattler's seemingly absurd statement becomes realized in the fact that the dinosaurs which eat men are mostly female. They embrace the archetype of the monstrous predatory woman, use it to transgress normative boundaries and dominate the space that she had once been contained in as simple visual attractions to be enjoyed by the anthropocentric gaze. This achieves greater significance in the

light of the Humanist project of the West, which has been widely critiqued to be Eurocentric, hetero-normative and masculine (Ferrando 2021, 77-81). As such, post-humanism becomes a counter-gaze that subsumes and acknowledges the voice of religious, ethnic, gendered and other minorities in a globalized context (Ferrando 2021, 80). *Jurassic Park* can be viewed through Francesca Ferrando's post-dualistic lens of post-humanism (Ferrando 2021, 59-61), where the contact zones of human/non-human conflict destabilize rigid dualistic identities.

As such, non-human animals do triumph over human attempts to confine them. Nature does thwart culture. Female dinosaurs (through reproduction and predation) do defeat masculine order – but the Gothic spaces envisioned in the film go a step further to meta-textually question the unconscious dualisms with which we might have pitted nature, non-humans and femininity against culture, humans and masculinity. As discussed above, dinosaurs like the human-like Velociraptors (and later in the franchise, the Indoraptor and Maisie Lockwood) defy any attempt to define them within the rigid dualisms of 'man' and 'animal'. Human and non-human individuals in *Jurassic Park* perform vastly different and often varied functions, to emphasize the fluidity (as opposed to the fixity) of their identities. The film deconstructs the dualistic certainty with which we view gender and species, such that nature, culture, humans, non-humans and ahumans often slide into and through each other by virtue of their liminal existence, and manifest non-human, post-human and more-than-human agency in multifarious ways (Carranza 2019). The EcoGothic spaces of *Jurassic Park* become post-human sites of resilience, where different human and non-human subalterns can not only speak (Spivak 2003, 42-58) but roar, snarl, hiss and even drive away their oppressors such that "the questioning of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism would become a central theme of the franchise" (Khapaeva 2019, 26).

Continual Triumph of Non-human Agency:

The Gothic spaces of *Jurassic Park*, with its "volcanoes, wild storms and impenetrable jungles" (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 145) do not limit themselves to the island of Isla Nublar but expand to cover other spaces in the land, sea and sky. The second film of the series, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) delves into the lore of the franchise to explore the presence of dinosaurs on another island in the same archipelago, Isla Sorna. Due to failed attempts to contain them, the dinosaurs had been thriving on Isla Sorna well before the events of the first film had taken place. The third film, *Jurassic Park III* (2001) features a return to Isla Sorna, in search of a middle-class family's son who had supposedly been marooned there in an accident. *Jurassic World* (2015) leaps into the future to feature a fully functioning theme park with dinosaurs, which had somehow stuck around long enough for them to be

regarded as boring. Such diminishing interest causes Masrani Global Corporation, the thematic successor of Hammond's InGen, to create a hybrid dinosaur composed of the different attributes of various predators. This predator, exotically dubbed the *Indominus rex*, breaks free, and in a scenario reminiscent of the first film, causes widespread chaos which consequently leads to the abandonment of this theme park. The fifth and latest instalment, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* depicts the destruction of Isla Nublar by a volcano, leading to deliberations regarding whether these animals need to be saved, or should be allowed to go extinct a second time. A selection of 'saved' dinosaurs are brought to the Lockwood Manor, seemingly to preserve their species, but in reality, their rescuers hope to auction these creatures off. When this endeavour fails, it is unanimously decided that the dinosaurs must be killed with poison gas.

All the texts mentioned above depict humanistic attempts to vie for control and wrench away agency from non-human creatures to varying forms and degrees. Their designs are opposed by the actions of various non-human actants, which chaotically leads to the expansion of the contact zones in which these dinosaurs operate and come into conflict with human beings. Jessica Gildersleeve and Nick Sulway (2020, 146) address this ever-widening space:

...the space occupied and ruled by the dinosaurs grows and expands as the series progresses, a Gothic reversal of human colonisation, until finally at the end of *Fallen Kingdom* they encroach on the human space to the extent that they threaten the human species. In *Jurassic Park*, it takes only one (Gothic) storm to destroy the power to the fences that contain the dinosaurs and thus enable their freedom. Very quickly, the distinction between inside and outside, the human space and the dinosaur space, the civilised and the wild, is collapsed, made abject, as rain floods the park's buildings and the Velociraptors enter the cafeteria and kitchen.

Indeed, it is the anthropocentric desire to colonize, control and dominate over the non-human that paradoxically leads to the imminent triumph of the non-human creatures. The second film follows the premise that Hammond's nephew Peter Ludlow (Arliss Howard) has taken over his uncle's company and has plans on to set up a theme park on the mainland. Two teams are sent to the island; one, consisting of several hunters and trappers, reaches the island to confine the various species in cages.

John Hammond is the neo-Frankenstein, but despite his hubris, he might be regarded in a more benevolent light because he does not want to kill his monsters.

Instead, his desire to preserve his monsters in the free-range ecosystem of Isla Sorna leads him to send the second team, including the recurring character of Ian Malcolm, his daughter Kelly (Vanessa Lee Chester), and his girlfriend Sarah Harding (Julianne Moore) to Isla Sorna. The two teams come into conflict because of their opposing interests, in no small part due to Malcolm's group freeing the captured dinosaurs who destroy the hunters' camp. However, the dinosaurs are not companion animals. They are not creatures that can immediately recognize and reciprocate benevolence, hinting at their indomitability by force and compassion alike. This is evident in the Tyrannosaurus pair which tear Eddie Carr (Richard Schiff) into two despite the latter's contribution to healing their new-born hatchling.

The humans in the films can confine the dinosaurs in small spaces, for short periods (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 141-154) but life does "break free" (Spielberg 1993) eventually. This form of life that has been separated from man by a span of sixty-five million years collides violently with civilization. The dinosaurs' tenacious instinct for survival and agentic capacity is evident in wild spaces, moving into which "results in increased threats to human life and thus often constitutes the site of human death: this is the case for each occasion when the human characters engage in pseudo-safari expeditions in small vehicles" (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 145). It is also evident in the scenes in which the humans attempt to flee, often helplessly, from the gigantic Tyrannosaurus rex or the lurking Velociraptors in the tall grass. It is evident when a male Tyrannosaurus rex and his infant are brought to San Diego, where the adult breaks free of his confinement and wreaks havoc on the suburban and domestic spaces of the city, terrorizing its inhabitants.

The Gothic space is not limited to the tall grass, or even the buildings of an isolated island, but extends to the mainland to evoke horror at the collapse of spatial and temporal boundaries. The climactic scene of *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* foreshadows the events of the fifth film, and through its very title, opposes the idea of order. The world of Isla Sorna is 'lost' and has slipped out of human control – the same human control that had once attempted domination of the wilderness into a carefully ordered (Jurassic) 'park'. This human desire for control is manifested in the third film through the actions of Paul (William H. Macy) and Amanda Kirby (Tea Leoni), who trick Alan Grant into visiting Isla Sorna, as an expert guide who can help them find their missing son Erik (Trevor Morgan) – a son, who had gone missing because he and his guardian had failed to respect the boundaries of the dinosaur-populated island, and had veered too close to it. This attempt at control is also made evident in the attempts of Alan's assistant, Billy (Alessandro Nivola), to muggle Velociraptor eggs back to the mainland – an action that causes the entire family of Velociraptors to pursue the protagonists till the end of the film.

Gothic fiction is well regarded for manifesting horror and suspense, often through jump scares, foreshadowing and nightmares. Such foreshadowing is evident in what may be regarded as a manifestation of Doctor Alan Grant's post-traumatic stress disorder from his first time on the island. While on the Kirbys' plane, on course to Isla Sorna, he has a nightmare about a talking Velociraptor which transfixes him with an uncanny gaze before speaking his name. The Velociraptors on the island do not speak but in their agency and attempts to regain their lost eggs, prove to be a constant source of terror for the human protagonists. The Gothic spaces are envisioned not only on land but also in the skies and the water, in the actions of the swooping Pteranodon which attempt to feed the protagonists to their chicks and in the Spinosaurus' attempts to sink their boat. This Spinosaurus's pursuit of the human characters singles it out as a particularly antagonistic figure, a relentless serial killer inhabiting EcoGothic spaces which emphasizes the "dinosaur narrative's overarching warning about the humanoid threat of these creatures" (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 145).

In *Jurassic World*, Zach (Nick Robinson) and Gray (Ty Simpkins) discover the original reception building of the first film that has now been taken over by the jungle – perhaps the greatest visual metaphor of how natural forces curb over-reaching humanistic aspirations. Elizabeth Parker likens the forest or the jungle to a physical space which has exuded an eerie effect on the human psyche since time immemorial (Parker 2020, 11-67) – as such, the victory of the wilderness over the controlled human terrains becomes a viable tool for tapping into our dark ecological sensibilities. Dark ecology, as formulated by Timothy Morton, looks at nature beyond its pastoral idealizations, to focus on the “hesitation, irony and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking” (Morton 2012, 16), to take note of the ugliness and horror that is often ignored while thinking about human beings' relationship with nature. As such, nature (or our conception of it as the wild, untamed terrain) in the 'Jurassic Park' franchise is not good or bad in a truly dark ecological fashion but transcends anthropogenic desires to view it through a lens of moral dualism. The incomprehensibility of EcoGothic spaces which give rise to fear and discomfort is depicted through the original park owners' abandonment of Jurassic Park after events had spiralled out of control. Elizabeth Parker builds on existing scholarship in the EcoGothic (including *Dark Nature* by Richard J Schneider, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* by Simon C Estok and *EcoGothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils) to delineate how the horrors of the Anthropocene can be best captured in EcoGothic and eco-horror, which often feature human beings falling victim to forces and non-human agents over which they had assumed absolute control. The 'Jurassic Park' franchise showcases human beings abandoning and fleeing these contact zones of conflict, highlighting a common trope that it shares with *The Day of the Triffids* (1963), *Frogs*

(1972), *Phase IV* (1974) and *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977). More recently, *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014) highlights a similar theme where the titular non-humans drive away their human oppressors from their homes.

This theme of natural forces overtaking sites of anthropogenic order is reiterated when, like its predecessor, *Jurassic World* is eventually destroyed. The failure of this renewed attempt to establish a theme park can be traced to the lack of reverence that several human beings have towards the non-human, summed up in Claire Dearing's (Bryce Dallas Howard) words to her business investors:

Our shareholders have been patient, but let's be honest, no one's impressed by a dinosaur anymore. Twenty years ago, de-extinction was right up there with magic. These days, kids look at a Stegosaurus like an elephant from the city zoo (Trevorrow 2015).

A sense of boredom with the old attractions leads to a desire for a dinosaur that is "bigger, louder, with more teeth" (Trevorrow 2015), which, in turn, leads to the creation of the uncanny *Indominus rex*. However, there had also been an ulterior motive behind its creation; in combining the intelligence and cunning of the *Velociraptors* with the size and ferocity of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the *Indominus* is conceived of as a biological weapon of mass destruction. However, the *Indominus* turns against its creators, thwarting the desire to use it for anthropogenic ends. The Gothic space envisioned by the *Indominus* is also inhabited by the *Velociraptor Blue* and her pack. Strangely, despite positing the collapse of human order, *Jurassic World* is also the first film that highlights the ability of human protagonists and dinosaurs to work together in a mutually sustainable manner, where their agency, motivations and goals intersect and complement each other.

The latest film, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, even goes so far as to bestow Blue with empathy, a quality brought out in her interactions with her trainer Owen Grady (Chris Pratt). Nowhere, however, does it paint her as subservient to human desires. She chooses to embrace freedom at the end of the film rather than stay with her pseudo-paternal figure. The film brings out the "unholy" (Bayona 2018) triad of Blue, the *Indoraptor* and Maisie Lockwood (Isabella Sermon) as different lenses to explore the confluence where humanity meets a non-human zone of resistance. Blue is humanized as is the *Indoraptor*, but in very different ways – the latter is cloned from a fraction of Blue's DNA. Denied a normal birth or parental affection, the *Indoraptor* embodies a Gothic fascination with unnatural reproduction that can be traced back to the very first novella where science fiction and the Gothic had intersected: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Created and having met its end in Lockwood Manor, this monstrosity (Indoraptor) is the only dinosaur that never sees the open plains and fields of Isla Nublar. Its existence is confined to the Gothic mansion, which it shares with Maisie Lockwood – another character who is never allowed to leave the premises. Her similarity with the Indoraptor is brought out through the means of a visual metaphor, in the form of a glass window where their faces are horrifyingly juxtaposed. Maisie is revealed to be a clone and in realizing the same – “They are alive. Like me” (Bayona 2018) – she frees the dinosaurs into the wilderness of the mainland, creating an EcoGothic space that now far transcends the limits of the archipelago. The film makes the point that it does not matter that the dinosaurs were revived via cloning; they are as alive as the rest of the inhabitants of Earth and deserve to go on surviving.

Envisioning More-than-human Contact Zones in the Chthulucene:

Maisie’s existence in a liminal space, where she is cloned despite being biologically *Homo sapiens*, poses a counter-gaze to the implicitly Eurocentric hierarchy based on the Platonic ideas of dualism which deem the copy (or the clone) as inferior to the original (Mambrol 2019). Furthermore, in defying the hegemonic narrative that wills the re-extinction of dinosaurs for continual human sustenance, she manifests post-human agency. The freed dinosaurs not only represent a threat to human beings as a new top predator, but their abject human-animal characteristics lend them the power to thwart anthropocentric designs (Gildersleeve and Sulway 2020, 145). The Gothic seems to be the ideal vessel for addressing our desire to master our anxieties which often seem to overwhelm us (Maier and Ayres 2020, 9), and such an idea can be extrapolated to refer to our reading of EcoGothic spaces in the light of contemporary environmental collapse:

Debates about climate change and environmental damage have been key issues on most industrialized countries' political agendas for some time. These issues have helped shape the direction and application of ecocritical languages. The Gothic seems to be a form that is well placed to capture these anxieties (Smith and Hughes 2016, 5).

In this context, the impossible presence of the dinosaur is “reinvigorated in the conservatism of the Neo-Gothic narrative not as a warning, but as a manageable problem” (Maier and Ayres 2020, 9).

The film raises questions regarding the manageability of this problem and hints that this idea of managing stems from an anthropocentric desire to control and rectify an error. The dinosaur’s existence in the contemporary world is generally

regarded as a form of environmental damage... especially in its opposition to humanistic designs. The end of *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* shows different species of prehistoric reptiles spreading across the Earth and causing chaos in ordered spaces. The trailer for the upcoming *Jurassic World: Dominion* further hints at an expansion of these EcoGothic spaces, where various other companies have seemingly begun cloning dinosaurs to patent, package and sell them – something that had been foreshadowed in the first film (Spielberg 1993). Despite all these incidents, the franchise celebrates the existence of the (seemingly) cloned girl Maisie whose mere birth is deemed to be unnatural by normative anthropocentric standards. This sentiment, which celebrates life in its myriad forms, is also notable in the continued survival of the dinosaurs (also cloned and hence unnatural) against all attempts to destroy them, and the actions of the Dinosaur Protection Group in ensuring that the dinosaurs thrive. An EcoGothic reading of the texts “examines the construction of the Gothic body – unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid... through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity” (Principe 2014, 1). Thus, these Gothic sites of resistance do not regard the dinosaurs’ survival as problems to be managed, but rather, celebrate their existence in alterity, and offer a critique of what we conventionally understand as horror, “by suggesting a different way of tackling difference” (Nayar 2014, 118). In doing so, they manifest what may be dubbed the post-human Gothic, which performs a function similar to the EcoGothic (Bolton 2014, 2-3).

These spaces originate with the collapse of anthropocentric order, but even amidst the ensuing chaos, human agency persists in varying forms and degrees. Such a statement might seem contradictory to my aforementioned arguments throughout, but actually serve to complement the same – the Gothic, or the EcoGothic, does not ensure the survival of non-human beings at the expense of human lives. Instead, it imagines ways to destabilize hierarchies such that different entities can co-exist. The ‘Jurassic Park’ franchise establishes these spaces, in which human protagonists display remarkable resilience against unassailable odds. Such resilience often does not ensure survival but is revered all the same. Furthermore, an absolute lack of human agency would counter the didactic idea established in the first film regarding the impact of human actions on the environment in the Anthropocene. Post-human agency becomes an idea that reminds us of our responsibilities and power, while also regarding the limitations of the same. In ‘Jurassic Park’, nature is regarded neither as the benevolent Wordsworthian space that nurtures liberal humanist subjectivity (Ghani 2015) nor is it fully “red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson 1850, Line 15). Rather, it becomes an EcoGothic space manifesting dark ecology where there is a possibility, rather than a certainty, of different actants co-existing peacefully. These spaces become contact zones where

we find kinship with other humans, clones, dinosaurs and hybrid reptiles, often with high degrees of “unpredictability in complex systems” (Spielberg 1993). In this way, the films enable us to envisage a “compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures” (Haraway 2016) of the Chthulucene.

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FILM REVIEW

***The Howling*. Directed by Joe Dante. UK: Studio Canal, 1981. 87 min. DVD. 2021.**

Reviewed by Antonio Sanna (Università degli Studi di Sassari)

In 2021, Studio Canal released on DVD the fortieth-anniversary edition of Joe Dante's *The Howling* (1981), a film that helped to affirm the director's career (he worked later on *Gremlins* [1985]) and that can now be rightfully considered as a classic of horror cinema and a milestone in the history of cinematic werewolves. *The Howling* earned almost \$ 18 million US dollars at the box office and was followed by seven sequels (1985-2011). The story, loosely adapted from Gary Brandner's 1977 novel, focuses on Los Angeles TV news anchor Karen White (Dee Wallace). Traumatized by the encounter with a serial killer who has been stalking her, she is invited to Dr. Waggner's (Patrick Macnee) Colony on the coast "in the north" to recover from her temporary amnesia. There, she and her partner "Bill" Neill (Christopher Stone) join an eclectic community of eccentrics attending group therapy and practicing sports and social activities in the middle of nature. The clinic is indeed immersed in the woods – a milieu where the connection between human beings and their bestial nature is favoured – and it is set against the dark environment of the city represented at the beginning of the film and characterized by bothering (flashes of) neon lights and the prevalence of close-ups confounding the viewer. After Bill is bitten by a werewolf while walking in the woods, he stops being a vegetarian, secretly meets with Marsha (Elisabeth Brooks) – a nymphomaniac, seductive woman living in a nearby shack – and becomes abusive against Karen. Karen's TV colleague Terry Fisher (Belinda Balaski) joins the

protagonists at the Colony after discovering that the body of the serial killer Eddie has disappeared from the morgue. Eddie (Robert Picardo) is actually a werewolf living in the area of the Colony and brutally murders Terry after she has managed to call for help. TV reporter Chris Halloran (Dennis Dugan) rescues Karen and together they confront the entire community at the Colony, which leads to a “classical” final conflagration and the hurried escape of the protagonist.

Though it is certainly outdated, the film still manages to create a suspenseful atmosphere through the nocturnal frames of the thick, foggy wood – which is (unrealistically) backlit with a blue light – the sense of insecurity provided by the wooden bungalows (which offer no protection against the attacks of the werewolves) and all the paraphernalia of horror films, including lights and torches turning off unexpectedly, jump scares, the Vertigo effect of the camera, the use of the monster’s point of view and the association of sex and pornography with violence and horror as well as of the monstrous feminine with lasciviousness. Some sequences of *The Howling* are certainly unexpected even by contemporary standards, as is the case with the werewolves’ attacks during the daylight (the creatures can shift at will in this narrative, without the need to wait for the full moon and they do not suffer any physical pains during their transformation), the revelation that the entire community at the Colony is actually made of lycanthropes and the ending with Karen’s revelation during a live broadcast.

Today, the special effects may appear equally outdated because of their use of pneumatically operated masks giving the illusion of the transformation of the face (whereas previous films on werewolves used trick photography, makeup and prosthetic devices), although this film, along with John Landis’ *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), was an innovative turning point for the realization of the lycanthropic transformation on screen and should be considered as fundamental in the history of horror films. *The Howling* is indeed representative of that phase of “body horror” which began in the early 1980s and was characterized by the production of special effects that were themselves functional to the narrative and led to the legitimization of the genre in the eyes of the critics and the public (Mathijs 2010, 153, 164).

The film makes use of some of the main central motifs of lycanthropy, including the idea that it is an infectious disease (Douglas 1992, 248) and it reflects “a deep-seated anxiety over the definition of what it means to be ... human” (Creed 2005, 128). Furthermore, werewolves in *The Howling* represent the definition of them elaborated by Jacques Derrida, when affirming that they “[place themselves] or find [themselves] placed ‘outside the law’” (2011, 64), as their voluntary separation from society confirms their inability to stand by human laws (but also because one of

them is actually the local sheriff). Only one of the characters, Dr. Waggner, embodies the concept of the werewolf as a divided self, torn by psychological torment because of the struggle between his rational and ethical side and his beastly, savage and repressed impulses. The rest of the “werewolf pack” are violent, hot-tempered and uncivilized and they embrace instead their own savagery.

The werewolves in *The Howling* therefore represent the self-aware, conscious lycanthropic subjects that, as Carys Crossen has argued (2019, 21), emerged during the 1980s and have become popular in horror, fantasy and young adult fiction until the present day. Such self-awareness is also reflected in the fact that Dante has “packed” the film with references to other werewolf productions and their directors, from the characters’ surnames to a series of depictions of wolves on cans, paintings and film sequences on TVs. Such a use of intertextual cross references, though not as explicit as in the films belonging to the genre produced in the late 1990s, is all the more appreciable in our postmodern view of horror films for its irony and light-heartedness.

The Howling remains a seminal work in werewolf fiction, with a heavy impact on contemporary Gothic for its representation of monsters and the monstrous as well as for the fact that it exemplifies one of the most popular Gothic cycles of horror cinema, the “body horror” period of the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, the film epitomizes an evolution of the figure of the werewolf, both in terms of its appearance (as allowed by the most recent developments in special effects of the time) and in terms of its behavioural traits (as werewolves in the film are self-aware and, with one exception, unashamed of their condition but, rather, enjoying their community and violence over human beings). John Landis’ *An American Werewolf in London* follows in the line of conflicted, tortured, solitary characters suffering from their monstrous condition – earlier represented in films such as Stuart Walker’s *Werewolf of London* (1935), George Waggner’s *The Wolf-Man* (1941) and its Universal sequels, Terence Fisher’s *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961) and Freddie Francis’ *Legend of the Werewolf* (1975) – which has then been revived in productions such as Stephen Sommers’ *Van Helsing* (2004), *Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed* (2004), Alfonso Cuarón’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) and the TV series *Being Human* (UK, 2008-13) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-16).

On the other hand, *The Howling* can be considered as a worthy predecessor of those contemporary productions in which werewolves are proud members of their packs (or do not suffer for their solitude), are generally unafraid of the human community and, whether they are villainous or antiheroes, they are self-conscious (and even proud) of their liminality and monstrosity, scheming and advancing their agendas. Recent examples of such a tendency include films such as Anthony

Waller's *An American Werewolf in Paris* (1997), Wes Craven's *Cursed* (2004), Harald Zwart's *The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones* (2013), David Hayter's *Wolves* (2014), Tiago Mesquita's *Among the Shadows* (2019), Josh Ruben's *Werewolves Within* (2021) and the *Twilight* and *Underworld* sagas (respectively, 2008-12 and 2003-16) as well as the TV series *True Blood* (2008-14), *Teen Wolf* (2011-17) and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-17).

The fortieth-anniversary edition DVD of *The Howling* also contains the trailer of the film, several deleted scenes (many further explore the protagonist's feelings and her elaboration of her trauma through her conversations and therapy sessions), a few outtakes, and a twenty-minute special on Joe Dante's career (directed by David KS Guionet). Through the words of the director himself, the special initially traces the influences on Dante by other directors along with his early collaborations and then focuses on the production history, special effects and budget difficulties of *The Howling* as well as of some of his subsequent productions, including *Innerspace* (1987) and *Small Soldiers* (1998). One can conclude that the film's fortieth anniversary special DVD release is indeed a worthy honour for a seminal piece of horror cinema history.

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