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## EDITORIAL

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### **The Shape of the Contemporary Gothic**

The articles in this issue of *Aeternum* represent the shape of the contemporary Gothic, the multiplicity of its forms and the breadth of its reach as a genre. Like the shape-shifting monster of lore, the Gothic has come to be defined by its ‘monstrous’ multiplicity, its ability to change shape over the years, embracing new forms and innovative ways to frighten. From classic novels to contemporary works, from poetry to a TV series and even a video game, each author explores a different form of the shape-shifting monster we call ‘Gothic’ in this issue, offering their own interpretation of the contemporary Gothic they find at work in their chosen texts.

In the first article of this issue, Allyson Kreuter analyses Spanish writer Jose Carlos Somoza’s novel *Clara y la penumbra* (2001), translated into English in 2004 as *The Art of Murder*, by exploring the representation of the protagonist Clara, who is a professional human artwork, as an abject Gothic site. The theme of ‘body horror’ continues in Gareth Schott’s article, which reads the surgical treatment of the body post-mortem in the US TV series *Six Feet Under* through the lens of the Gothic. James Tregonning, in the third article of this issue, turns our attention to yet another form of the Gothic in the award-winning 2009 video game *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, by examining the ways in which science and the supernatural are contrasted to evoke fear. In the fourth article, Lava Assad discusses the ecogothic in the war poetry of Isaac Rosenberg through his representation of the abject animal. While Laura Davidel, in the penultimate article of this issue, explores the representation of the vampire Armand’s experience of immortality in Anne Rice’s famous series of novels, *The Vampire Chronicles*. In this issue’s final article, Jeanette Laredo uses contemporary trauma theory to examine the representation of the Gothic heroine through a comparative analysis of Emily St. Aubert’s narrative in Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* with Catherine Moorland’s in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*.

Finally, this issue of *Aeternum* concludes with two book reviews of texts that have been published in the past year. The first review, written by Katharine Hawkins, is of the short story collection *Quartier Perdu and Other Stories*, written by Sean O'Brien, an award-winning poet and Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University. Published by Comma Press, *Quartier Perdu and Other Stories* is O'Brien's second collection of short stories. Inspired by the unnerving tales of the Victorian Gothic, the eighteen short stories of the volume are collected into three parts that together explore the violence the surreal produces when it is blurred with reality. The second review, written by Gwyneth Peaty, is of Simon Bacon's edited collection *The Gothic: A Reader*, published by Peter Lang. In this unique approach to a *Reader*, Bacon brings together twenty-eight short academic essays on the Gothic, from established and emerging voices in the field, that each explore the genre through the representative lens of a single text, from its origins in the eighteenth century to its many and varied contemporary forms.

### **Editor's Details**

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## **Abject Artwork: The Representation of Clara in Jose Carlos Somoza's *The Art of Murder***

### **ABSTRACT**

*Contemporary Spanish author José Carlos Somoza's novel Clara y la penumbra (2001), translated into English as The Art of Murder (2004), is set in the near future and the plot concerns the world of "hyperdramatic" art, where human bodies are the canvases. The central protagonist, Clara Reyes, works as a professional human artwork and as such is a crafted image in which a Gothic move from interior depth to exterior surface is played out on the skin of her body, as a space for artistic discourse. The Art of Murder has drawn markedly limited scholarly engagement, which has not undertaken to explore the representation of Clara as an abject Gothic site, where subjectivity, image and corporeality are conflated to create the perfect canvas, aspects which will form the focus of my article. Whilst I acknowledge and am cognizant of the problems associated with accessing a work in translation, the technicalities and success or failure of the translation lie outside the scope of this article.*

**Keywords:** Gothic, corporeality, abjection, skin, Jose Carlos Somoza

The contemporary Spanish novelist Jose Carlos Somoza Ortega has produced a considerable body of work, much of which has not yet been translated into English. Somoza's novels are sophisticated and nuanced works that disregard genre categories and meld the thriller, noir mystery or crime fiction, science fiction and the literary novel, while engaging with philosophical concerns such as memory, art, narrative writing and reading, science, the body and human emotions. Nevertheless, it is the underlying sense of the terrible that haunts many of Somoza's novels that can be considered to provide his work with Gothic overtones. The Spanish Gothic and its cultural contexts and history in literature, but more particularly film, has only recently started to receive critical attention through studies such as those of Abigail Lee Six (2010), Ann Davies (2016) and Xavier Aldana Reyes (2017). However, unlike his contemporary Spanish writer Carlos Ruiz Zafón, whose work is located within a Spanish context and is considered inherently part of the Gothic tradition, Somoza's work focuses on a globalisation of collective fears, which Ann Davies, in her study on Spanish Gothic, considers inherently part of, what she terms, "transnational Spanish Gothic" which trades in Gothic cultural literary ideas (2016, 380). Many of Somoza's novels are not specifically set in Spain, but they have Spanish characters, often female leads, in plots that are premised on an underlying atmosphere of the sinister, of dread and abject repulsion centred on corporeality. Whilst, Somoza may not be a Gothic novelist per se, his work, in particular the novel my article examines, *Clara y la penumbra* (2001), translated into English as *The Art of Murder* (2004), is dominated by Gothic elements such as the double, transgressive corporeality and the deeply sinister. *The Art of Murder* is a sophisticated and multi-layered literary noir crime thriller that deserves more critical attention for its deployment of Gothic elements, which I suggest are as intriguing as those found in the oft-analysed work of Zafón. Premised on a science fictional future art world, *The Art of Murder* is a novel that has the reality of the reader's world combined with a world in which artists no longer work on two-dimensional, non-living surfaces, but use the human body as their canvas. The central protagonist of Somoza's novel is the young Spanish human canvas Clara Reyes. It is her ambition to become an artwork by the renowned hyperdramatic artist Bruno van Tysch. Clara is unaware, unlike the reader, of the fact that there is a spate of serial murders in which van Tysch masterpieces are being violently destroyed. The plot of the novel concurrently engages with the investigation of the murders and Clara's construction and development as an artwork. In my article, I will demonstrate that Somoza's evocation of Gothic and abject transgression is made visible in the construction of Clara Reyes' corporeality, which remains fundamental to the narrative of the novel.

In his book *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (2014), Xavier Aldana Reyes has argued that the body is placed at the centre of Gothic fiction, so that the reading or viewing experience is focused on

corporeal embodiment or transgression (2014, 17). Aldana Reyes employs the term “body gothic” in his examination of the transgressive representations and constructions of Gothic embodiment and he emphasises the primacy of the body within the Gothic text and how the visceral nature of this body has been overlooked.<sup>1</sup> The representation of Clara’s body whilst central to the narrative is not visceral in Aldana Reyes’ terms, but instead functions to remove the visceral through an evacuation of the inner. However, this move from the inner to the outer is definitively transgressive as its aim is to make Clara as non-human as possible, transforming her into a mere surface for the use of paint and artistic creativity. Clara exhibits an ambiguous relationship with her body that is premised on an abject fear of her natural corporeal functions. Employing the concept of abjection formulated by Julia Kristeva in her book *The Powers of Horror*, I will argue that the abject is central to the representation of Clara’s corporeality in the novel as well as to her repugnance towards her body. However, Clara’s relation to her body is premised on the visual and in particular her gazing at her own reflection in the mirror. My article will briefly engage with a discussion of what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to as the mirror stage, specifically as it pertains to Clara’s relationship with her own reflection. During the course of this discussion of the mirror stage, I will suggest that Clara’s mirror-stage has gone horribly wrong, and she, like Narcissus, has fallen in love with her reflection, resulting in her own natural body becoming her abject Gothic Other. Most of the explorations of this novel have been undertaken by Spanish and French scholars, some of whom have examined Clara Reyes’s role as hyperdramatic artwork, whereas my article wishes to focus solely on the Gothic and abject representation of Clara’s body.<sup>2</sup> A site of almost inhuman embodiment, where surface replaces depth and inside becomes outside, Clara is rendered as no more than a skin canvas.

In *The Art of Murder*, the reader is introduced to the hyperdramatic world of art that consists of human canvases that are described by one character as “paintings which sometimes move and look like human beings” (Somoza 2004, 38). A distance between the reality of human corporeality and that body as a commodity whose value resides in its monetary worth, is established. A canvas is not considered human; it is only valued through the name of the artist it bears, and its subsequent selling price, and this is particularly the case for the van Tysch foundation. This foundation is set up in the name of the current master of hyperdramatic art Bruno van Tysch, and the novel opens with the gruesome and violent murder of one of van Tysch’s masterpieces, a very young female canvas. The resulting criminal investigation that occurs is more focused on the monetary loss associated with the destruction of the canvas than with any acknowledgement of the canvas as a human being. As April Woods, one of the characters investigating the loss of the van Tysch artwork, indicates “paintings are paintings [...] *they are not people*”, thus callously denying the murdered

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<sup>1</sup> See also Marie Mulvey-Roberts *Dangerous bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (2016). Mulvey-Roberts adopts a historicist approach to build on the idea of the Gothic body, showing how the body has been demonised as Other through acts of persecution, war and torture within historical reality, which she argues underpin the horror and terror of the fictional Gothic.

<sup>2</sup> See Séguin (2011); de Coca (2009); Calvo (2007-2008); Sustaita (2008); and Ortiz-Hernández (2009).

girl any humanity and establishing human artworks as no more than objects (ibid, 137). It is apparent that all agency or consent is denied any painting as they remain artefacts made valuable by the fame of the artist's name with which they are branded since "Art is money" (ibid, 84). All the human artworks in the novel are thus symbolic objects created by the name of the artist in what Pierre Bourdieu considers the replacement of the work-of-art-as-fetish with the "fetish of the name of the master" (1993, 258). It is in order to bear the 'name of the master' that Clara willingly allows herself to be constructed as "an artefact whose foundation can only be found in an *artworld*, that is, in a social universe that confers upon it the status of a candidate for aesthetic appreciation" (ibid, 254). In Somoza's novel, this social universe has been fostered by the van Tysch Foundation, whose paintings are considered immortal masterpieces because they bear the name of Bruno van Tysch. Paradoxically the immortality offered, which is what Clara craves, is one of ephemerality.

A hyperdramatic masterpiece is continuously substituted by a newer human model, because the "original" canvas can be "got rid of" as there will always be "another one" to replace it (Somoza 2004, 57). The constant replacement of the original human canvas assumes what Umberto Eco calls "the immortality of duplication" in a simulation of the absolutely fake (1987, 6, 8). The hyperdramatic artworld is founded on the idea that "everything of value is consumed, used up, disappears", but at the same instance the used-up items can be copied *ad infinitum* in a hall of mirrors (Somoza 2004, 53). The human artefacts or artworks in Somoza's novel become what Warwick and Cavallaro refer to as "regimes of signification" in a culture that accords value to what appears upon their surface and this surface can be considered to "conceal not a presence but an absence, not a depth but a vacuum" (1998, 133). The directing of the reader's attention to the surface of the human art object or artefact emphasises the excessive nature of the artefact's constructed position as (de)humanised merchandise (Séguin 2011, 3). Yet, the aesthetic appreciation for these works remains founded on an abject ambivalence, because the artworks both attract and fascinate people, whilst simultaneously shocking and repelling them. One character attending a van Tysch exhibition is described as "slack-jawed with shock", but still fascinated (Somoza 2004, 32-33). Throughout the novel the human paintings are portrayed as monstrous and grotesque yet compellingly seductive as the boundaries between art and the human body are entirely blurred (Eco 1987, 8).

It is in this seductive blend of human and artwork that Clara Reyes is first introduced to the reader as "Girl in front of a Looking Glass". Her entire body is painted "titanium white" and is focalised as:

Standing completely naked, her right hand covering her pubis and the left one out to the side, legs slightly apart, painted from head to toe in different shades of white. Her hair was a dense mass of deep whites, her body gleamed with brilliant glossy tones. In front of her stood a looking glass almost two metres tall, inserted directly into the floor without a frame (Somoza 2004, 12).

In the *prudica* position, Clara's right hand is placed over her pubis and her left hand is held outwards, as though to hold a garment in what seems to be a reference to the sculpture called the Aphrodite of Knidos. The unframed looking glass acts like a pool of water, and the myth of Narcissus and the painting of Narcissus by Caravaggio appeared to be referenced. Narcissus fell in love with his own image reflected in still water, and this, ultimately, led to his death. His tragedy is not excessive love of self, but the realisation that what he is seeking does not exist. There is a failure to distinguish self from Other and Narcissus falls in love with an image without a body (Bal 2001, 241). My argument will consider how Clara is indeed a female version of Narcissus, caught in her image in the mirror, she has imputed an ideal bodily existence to what is only a visual reflection. In so doing, I suggest she condemns her own material corporeality to be the abject and monstrous Other.

The mirror in this artwork acts to provide a sense of her body being extended in space, adding temporality to the stasis of the reflection (Bal 2001, 241). Clara's body is reflected in the watery light of the mirror so that her skin and hair, in gradating shades of white, ensure that her shimmering bodily surface becomes one of purity, in what Mieke Bal has referred to as light-writing (2001, 225). Clara remains completely immobile, her face impassive, exactly like a statue sculpted from white marble, but as Steven Connor argues "the ideal of white skin was the ideal of pure luminosity, of a skin so refined that it was itself vanishing from view, and letting light come from within" (2004, 161). The shiny-white coated surface of Clara's skin constitutes her body as hard, apparent in the word "titanium", and its mica-like glow enforces her marmoreal stillness and impenetrability. The abject vulnerability of her skin seems to have become inviolable so that it acts as a physical shield where the "luminous skin-substitutes reduces the voluminous body to the spill and shimmer of light across a surface and therefore immaterializes it" (Connor 2004, 53). Connor relates the body whose skin shines to the nature of a mirror with its "depthlessness and invisibility (the mirror offers everything to the eye but itself, for you can only ever look *in* a mirror, never *at* it)" (Connor 2004, 54). Like a mirror, Clara's body offers everything to the eye, yet at the same time it reflects the gaze, ensuring that she never gives of herself, but lies permanently on the boundary between self and Other.

A corporeal object, Clara represents an excessive fantasy that remains both touchable yet untouchable, a corporeal surface that seems to lack inner substance (Bal 2001, 224-225). Clara is aware of the critics appraising her and criticisms she regards as not "of her, of course, but of the work" (Somoza 2004, 17). Yet she is aware that they are staring at her thighs, buttocks, breasts and her unmoving face, as well as the looking glass. She feels the gaze of the "public like cold acupuncture on the body" which excites her in a "shudder of emotion" (ibid, 117). This objectification for Clara is not about her body, but about her as an artwork, though she is aware that there are what she considers "crazy" people who are not interested in the artwork but only in the "naked woman on show" (ibid, 17). As a work of art, Clara no longer regards any of the nude nooks and crannies of her body as sacred because a canvas has "nothing of its own: mind and body were dedicated to creating and being created, to becoming



transformed" (ibid, 48). It is the plasticity and surface of Clara's skin that is the excessive object on display, a canvas surface transformed into a work of art. A corporeal object caught in the reflection of the mirror, Clara represents an excessive fantasy that remains both touchable yet untouchable, a surface that seems to lack inner substance (Bal 2001, 224-225). It will become apparent that mirrors are of central importance in Somoza's narrative as they act as a Gothic device and a psychoanalytical one. It appears that something has gone wrong with Clara's image of her body that involves an encounter with a mirror and the image reflected there.

As a young child Clara has an encounter with a mirror and her own reflected image. Entering the attic of her parent's house, she feels "the horror was calling out to her" and it is this horror that can be considered the pivotal psychological moment that defines Clara as she glimpses:

A slight movement, a shadow lit by the brightness outside the room. She turned to face it, strangely calm. Her sense of terror had grown to such a pitch she felt about to scream [...] It was a little girl. A girl who lived in the attic [...] Her skin shone like marble. She looked like a corpse, but she was moving. Her mouth opened and shut. She was blinking continuously. And she was staring at Clara. Her flesh crawled with terror [...] she realised in that split second that the girl in the attic was the most dreadful sight she had ever seen, or would ever see. It was not horrible, but unbearable[...]then it dawned on her [...] the girl's haircut was just like hers, that her features were exactly the same [...] (Somoza 2004, 52).

This encounter with the mirror and reflected image allows Somoza to play with the concept of the spectral Gothic double as well as more directly with the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage. In the mirror stage, Lacan argued that the child transitions from a non-unified image of the body to a body image of unity or totality. This image, or imago, is predicated on the narcissistic sense of satisfied self-discovery of the infant. In this state of primary narcissism, the infant takes itself as its own love object, because wholeness cannot be accomplished without the infant's own image (Slatman 2007, 193). This recognition of the specular image is not a genuine recognition because though the infant recognises him/herself in the mirror, there is no ability to see the difference between him/herself and this image (Weiss 1999, 13). This lack of differentiation between self and the otherness of the image causes a confusion of self with the image.

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty this misidentification and investment in the reflection is a condition of human visibility, where the body "sees itself seeing; touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. [...] It is a self through confusion, narcissism, through inherence of the two who sees in that which he sees" (1964, 162-163). The child, in this instance Clara, participates in this form of double seeing, she is seeing herself and having herself return her look and she becomes captured by her own visual image. Yet there are difficulties in seeing, as Lacan indicates:

The *imagos* – whose veiled faces it is our privilege to see in outline in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic efficacy – the mirror image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world [...] if we observe the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearances of the double, in which psychological realities [...] are manifested (1977, 3).

Clara is initially not able to recognize the young girl as her own reflection, as her vision is shaded by fear, she struggles with the light and dark in the room and becomes caught in the “penumbra of symbolic efficacy”. This misidentification of her image causes her to confuse the spatiality and solidity of her real body with that of the reflection in the mirror. Who is seeing and being seen, who is reflecting whom and what is real and what fictional results in Clara being unable to distinguish self from the reflected other, resulting in her lack of a sense of self.<sup>3</sup> The mirror becomes not a boundary but permeable and Clara falls in love with the image without a body, her ideal image. For the mirror stage to be successful, the child needs to escape from this primary narcissistic identification with the mirror image and displace this image back onto the body in a realisation of self. It is this displacement that I suggest does not occur in the case of Clara. Rather, she remains caught in her image held in the mirror unable to recognise the mirror image for the illusion that it is, which results in her establishing her own physical body as her Other. The fascination, terror, and revulsion that Clara feels towards her mirrored reflection, whose skin is seen to shine like marble, represents a disturbance of identity, the overflowing of boundaries, the space where the self dissolves into meaninglessness. Confronting the nausea of abjection, a subject can experience a sense of “*jouissance*”, repugnance and fascination that vie with one another (Kristeva 1982, 9). The reflected visual image is imputed with a bodily existence and Clara’s true, natural body is denied and objectified, so that she becomes a study in Gothic petrification. The immobility and empty canvas surface of the art work replacing Clara’s lived body experience.

Under mysterious circumstances, Clara is again hired to become a human canvas. Details of who she will be working for, or in what capacity, are not provided, which adds to the growing sense of unease that Somoza develops in the narrative. Clara’s story parallels the continued killing of van Tysch masterpieces. The viscerality and gruesomeness of the violent scenes of murdered works of art are connected to the alienation and Othering of Clara’s own body in a disturbing yet alluring narrative (Aldana Reyes 2014, 16). This Othering of Clara’s corporeality is furthered through a specific medico-artistic intervention called “priming”, which provides a white base and then a “pale lemony-yellow colour” paint, offering the body a uniformity of texture and stability that results in a blemish free surface to receive and hold paint (Somoza 2004, 105). In order for this to happen a collapse between inside and outside is enforced as her body is medically peeled clean from vagina to urethra, anus, retina, follicles, sweat glands and breasts. The entire body interior and exterior is cleansed,

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<sup>3</sup> The Spanish title of the novel, *Clara y la penumbra*, seems to play with this Lacanian concept of the penumbra of symbolic efficacy.

remoulded and shaped so that she is converted into an abject, inhuman zero (Weiss 1999, 32). The priming of Clara's inner body, I suggest, acts as a repression of the unnameable abject domain of bodily fluids that reinforces her refusal of her interior corporeality. As she is told "we'd like to be a pure work of art like a piece of canvas or a lump of alabaster [...] But we are alive. And life is not art: life is disgusting" (Somoza 2004, 119). In order not to be disgusting and alive, Clara has to become non-living, a petrified, alabaster-like embodiment that avoids the horror of embodiment through an abjection of it. This rejection of the living body and Clara's attempt not to behave like life is founded on an act of expulsion, a purging of the self, in which "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself" (Kristeva 1982, 3). Julia Kristeva posits that this abjection of the self establishes a corporeal boundary between myself and what is not myself thereby actively constituting myself as entity (1982, 3-4). Clara is expelling both her bodily and subjective self in order to reconstitute herself as a dehumanised object. This dehumanisation is accomplished through pharmaceutical interventions where she takes pills so that her "menstruation [...] stopped as if by magic" and she is able to "control her bodily needs" (Somoza 2004, 13).

This designed corporeal alteration positions Clara as a posthuman and gothic figure because she is biotechnologically enhanced beyond the natural human body's functionality so that she is rendered as a type of human monster (Botting 2008, 46). Though Clara's posthumanity does not assume the shape of the accepted Gothic monster or cyborg, she has readily assumed a medically transformed body which denies her natural interior physicality. She considers what lies beneath the surface of the skin as abject and has a phobic horror and loathing for her bodily functions and self (Connor 2004, 170). It is the mirror of her skin's uninterrupted border and its defence against perforation and permeability which act as a boundary to control and deny the abject uncertainties of her body's borders (Kristeva 1982, 63). Clara's enforced loss of her corporeal identity and sense of self represents a Gothic "alienation of the self from itself" and a move from the reality of her body into an obsession with the fantasy ideal image of her specular double (Botting 1996, 157). The willing modification of her body disrupts the integrity of her individuated subjectivity and natural bodily functions reconstituting her as a denatured, posthuman object (Bolton 2014, 2-3). Clara's skin can be seen to act as a complex threshold between the self and the non-self, between human and the non-human and it assumes the role of a Gothic disguise that renders the notion of subjectivity a surface effect dispersed through a continuum of artistic reinventions (Spooner 2004, 5).

In the novel, these artistic reinventions occur subsequent to the priming phase, in a process known as sketching. Clara does posing exercises designed to test "the canvas' physical capabilities" (Somoza 2004, 233). Positioned in severely contorted positions for hours, Clara knows "nothing better than an uncomfortable position [...] to force her out of her own humanity" and in this extreme state of bodily discomfort she is "stripped of memories, fears, complicated thoughts" as she forced to concentrate "entirely on the masonry of her muscles" (ibid, 234). To become a human canvas Clara has learnt to endure and force her body and mind through pain aided

by a dissociative state called “quiescence” and the drugs she takes so as not to be “at the mercy of any of her inner organs” (ibid, 12, 163). This combination of dissociative state and medication has become part of her self-alteration and the artifice of her performance as painting. Clara’s attitude towards her body establishes it as the “not me and abject other” and her inner being is negated as she seems to forcibly dissolve the boundary between interior and exterior, undermining her embodiment in order to transcend it. I would suggest that Somoza is constructing Clara’s corporeality as one of both transformation and deformation as her body image is modified and she no longer appears entirely human (Reyes 2014, 4). Alienating herself from herself, Clara’s response to pain is contrary to Elaine Scarry’s contention that pain has no object and is not willed or directed (1985, 161, 164). Instead, Clara wills and directs her pain to objectify and other her own body and, in the process, becomes monstrous as her normal body is forced to mean and be different through a Gothic shifting and transgression of its boundaries (Aldana Reyes 2014, 7). Pain becomes a ‘framing event’ that maps the corporeal terrain of Clara as a canvas and extends her so that she loses all sense of an inner existence: “it was wonderful to cease to be Clara and become an object with scarcely any sense of pain” (Somoza 2004, 234). Dissociated from her body through an abject exclusion of her inner natural functions, Clara is transformed into a depersonalised and empty surface as her body’s image is altered past the point of an understanding of human corporeality as evinced in the ordinary viewers’ response to human works of art as both fascinating and disturbing. Nevertheless, this transformation is regarded as not extreme enough by the male sketchers, so they stage the enactment of a rape late at night.

Clara is woken from sleep with arms being flung around her. Her wrists are clamped above her and a heavy body forcibly pins her to the bed. Her hair is savagely tugged and when she fights, she is slapped hard enough to stun her. This violence is an exertion of power aimed at constructing her as a docile body, a surface that is only there for the projection of the desires of the artist. Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of the idea of a ‘docile body’ is one constructed by power where the body is “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (1977, 136). The docile body is not only acted on by an external power, but the power is internalised to produce “the boundaries of a subject” as well as to pervade “the interiority of the subject” (Butler 1997, 89). The enacted rape seems aimed at expunging any inner resistance that Clara might retain, thus enforcing an internal docility that matches the external docile othering of her body. Rather than submit, Clara fights back and the sketcher withdraws, leaving Clara with a deep-seated lack of completion. She regards herself as “nearly drawn” and “messed up” made into a “paper ball” and tossed “*in the shit*” (Somoza 2004, 268 italics in text). The sense of abjection located in the word ‘shit’ with its implications of corruption and impurity, along with idea of being crumpled into a paper ball, generally thrown into the rubbish bin, reveals Clara’s fear of corporeal imperfection. This fear of deficiency is exacerbated when she learns that she is set to become a canvas by the great Bruno van Tysch.

On Van Tysch's arrival to complete the painting, it becomes apparent that he is after Clara because of a luminosity he saw in her eyes in the catalogue containing "Girl in front of a Looking Glass". He wishes to capture this luminescence and swiftly realises that: "It's mirrors which produce that in your eyes [...] Look at yourself! [...] you look at yourself and you catch fire [...] Why are you so fascinated by your own image?" (ibid, 312-313). It is Clara's narcissistic identification with her image in the mirror and the abject fascination and terror that this inspires which produces the luminous light in her eyes. It is what her mirror image offers to her gaze that causes her, like Narcissus, to strive to subsume herself in her reflection. The body in the mirror lacks corporeality and as Kaja Silverman notes the object in the mirror "acquires the value of that without which the subject can never be whole or complete, and for which it constantly yearns" (1988, 7). For Clara, this image in the mirror is not just a disembodied phantom but possesses a materiality that is tied to her own corporeal experience. It is in this reverse convergence of subject and object in the mirror that Clara encounters a disembodied, abstract image of bodiless perfection. Clara's need to transcend her corporeal self, to remove the boundary between the mirror-self and the reality of her embodiment, represents a drive towards a point of total insignificance and an unbounded otherness (Kohlke & Gutleben 2012, 17). This loss of self almost becomes a reality towards the close of the novel.

To create his own eternal artistic immortality, van Tysch has ordered the serial killing of his most famous artworks. Clara is the final canvas needed to complete his self-obsessed masterpiece. She is kidnapped and faces the killer and imminent death and knows:

She was about to cross it.

The looking glass. At last.

She knew *the thing* she was about to see, that she was on the verge of seeing was *the horrible*. The finishing touch to her body in the art work that was her life. [...]

*The horrible. At last.* (Somoza 2004, 454-455 italics in text).

This is the ultimate experience of fear and the beckoning of the unknown that is reliant on the threshold of the mirror, its limits and its transgression. There is an element of the Gothic sublime in Clara's reaction to her prospective death, the need to cross over into the dark, unspeakable terror of the beyond. It is Clara's inability to describe her experience as more than 'The Thing' and 'the horrible' that indicates the fear and fascination that is held in the crossing of the limits between reality and non-reality that lie outside of the conceptualisation of her imagination and the reach of language (Beville 2014, 37). According to Gary Farnell, 'the Thing' is representative of the Gothic abject in that it is "the absolute otherness of the void at the centre of the real" that partakes of "the amorphous, chaotic, meaningless physical level beyond all reference" (2009, 113). Located both inside and outside the self, 'the thing' gives rise to the terror and pleasure at the prospect of encountering the void. For Clara, her pull towards the unreachable, unknowable place of horror and of the thing represents her fall into the

space of the mirror where “the abject is edged with the sublime” (Kristeva 1982, 11). The mirror has been the site of the trajectory of her body and its abject separation of her inner and outer being. Clara teeters on the borderline of abjection between the real of her corporeal existence and the unreal world of the mirror. It is the horror of the separation between her physical reality and the ideal image that leads to her need for self-transcendence (Becker 1999, 166). Embracing what the killer is offering, she knows will take her into the unknown and emptied-out self-as-other where no limits of bounded embodiment exist (Kohlke and Gutlben 2012, 35). In order to attain this perfect unbounded embodiment, Clara realises she needs to be killed to be turned into immortal Art (Gilbert & Gubar 1979, 17).

Clara’s rescue, just before she crosses into the mirror, results in her realisation that she has been “dreaming [...] But what happens when everything you are and have been forms part of the same dream” (Somoza 2004, 467). Having confronted her image in the mirror with its threat of abject dissolution of her identity, Clara has regained a sense of agency that confirms and shapes the ambiguous boundary of her embodiment and sense of self. Whispering to herself the words “Welcome to the world, Clara. Welcome to Reality” is an acknowledgement of the relinquishment of her narcissistic desire for her mirror image and an awakening to the reality of her embodied self (ibid, 468). My examination of Jose Carlos Somoza’s *Art of Murder* has attempted to demonstrate how Clara’s corporeality is constructed as a discursive site that is both Gothic and abject, whilst remaining a surface that can undergo constant reinterpretation, remoulding and re-presentation.

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## **“The Use of the Dead to the Living”: Gothic Surgical Horror in *Six Feet Under***

### **ABSTRACT**

*US television drama Six Feet Under has been examined for its contemporary expansion of Gothic tropes (e.g. Coghlan et al., 2016). This paper develops existing readings by focusing on the evocation of Gothic surgical and body horror (Conrich & Sedgwick 2017) within Six Feet Under and the manner in which it directs attention to treatment of the body post-mortem. Death care, it is argued, reflects a broader cultural unwillingness to concede to the inescapable decay, deterioration and demise of the body. This paper examines the various cultural logics attached to revulsion aroused by dead bodies, hidden carnographic transformation of the body, and their uncanny social reappearance “cleansed, purified, immobile” (Bronfen 1992, 99). It is argued that the Gothic corpse in Six Feet Under represents “potential that has yet to be realized in full” (Shapira 2018, 2) referring to the illimitable aesthetic values of ‘makeover culture’ (Jones 2008) that are imposed on the dead. By delving deeper into the industry practices portrayed in the funeral drama, a connection is revealed between the increasing tendency for living bodies to become “a mixture of nature and artifice” (Van Dijck 2001, 100) and its uncomplicated extension to the dead.*

**Keywords:** Six Feet Under, surgical horror, body horror, makeover culture, gothic corpse

In the third volume of *Aeternum*, Coghlan *et al.* established how the concluded HBO television series *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) exhibited tropes of California Gothic in its geo-specific suburban reworking of the haunted house, in which the “dysfunctional and under-threat middle class”, exemplified by the Fisher family, are variously trapped (Coghlan *et al.* 2016, 17). Their entrapment is largely generated and perpetuated by the family funeral business that literally intersects and occupies the family space. Fisher & Sons Funeral Home (later Fisher & Diaz), not only carries the name, memory and past-labours of their deceased father (Nathaniel Fisher), which must be preserved, but its commercial spaces (slumber rooms, chapel and morgue) that also reside in the same American Victorian Craftsman mansion (Seamon 2013), replete with peaked roof and gabled dormers, that the family call home. With the intramural attendance of the dead within the same structure, a suppressive intensity infuses the ‘living’ quarters, contaminating it with a requisite comportment, emotional and behavioural restraint and self-control associated with the demeanour of commercial ‘death care’ (Heller 2014). Jennifer Jenkins states that Gothic “is about contamination, whether perceived or real”, arguing that its “narratives topically address prevailing or sublimated fears of institutions that threaten the essential human” (2012, 480). This paper argues that such fears are well-founded in terms of the fiction of the anatomy and the transformation of the body post-mortum during ‘death care,’ thus making *Six Feet Under* a Gothic text that “bears witness to the permeability of boundaries, which is the point at which monstrosity begins to arise” (Kavka 2002, 228).

By virtue of its location, *Six Feet Under* normalises preparatory death rites. Indeed, it often presents casual everyday exchanges between central characters as they go about the routine practices of embalming or performing cosmetic restoration on the dead. Gothic works traditionally function to give visibility to the otherwise unseen and impalpable (Lloyd-Smith 2004; Coghlan *et al.* 2016), with contemporary Gothic “more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases” (Spooner 2006, 63). Pete Boss attributes this neoteric concentration on the body to the increasing “influence of medical technology and institutional bureaucracy” on and over the body (1986, 14). Once a person is declared dead, common law countries follow the principles that, firstly, “there can be no property in a human body after death” (Leiboff 2005, 221), and secondly, the dignity of the human body should be preserved in death. The professionalization of death care and performance of funeral rites is driven by the aim of giving the dead a ‘pleasant demeanour’, thus avoiding confronting mourners with the deterioration of the body (Harris 2007). Yet, it is argued that ‘exquisite stasis’ is achieved via surgical procedures that border on the horrific (Aldana Reyes 2014). The horrific nature of restorative practices have been masked by definitions of body horror that have otherwise concentrated on graphic depictions of body mutilation in destruction. Furthermore, the mode of body surgery performed on cadavers is

permitted to prevail as it serves as a 'liberating practice' for mourners – removing the oozing exudations and discharge of a body in collapse. Nevertheless, methods used to preserve the identity of the dead are invasive, intrusive and often monstrous sites of "human-technological hybrids" (Edwards & Graulund 2013).

In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard notably proclaimed the cellar "is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces" (1958, 18). In the Fisher household, the cellar functions to contain death while practices are performed on the body that decelerate the processes of death, in order to give the corpse a new life in death. In the Fisher's 'prep' room, David and Nate conduct their business but also articulate and explore "repressed thoughts and feelings through corpses that seem to come back to life" and converse with them (Seamon 2013, 158). Consistent with Gothic literature, death is horrific precisely because it is often not quite the end. As Conrich and Sedgwick have already stated "*Frankenstein* is undeniably a commanding progenitor of the Gothic body" in its exposure of the body as the raw material for medical science to attempt to breach the boundary between life and death (2017, 7). Such themes remain evident in contemporary concern and debates surrounding the ethics of medical extension of life, resuscitation, and the medical definition and declaration of death (Liao & Ito 2010). On this last matter, the prevailing definition of death is today framed biologically, expressed as the "irreversible loss of the psychophysical integration of the human being or human person" that constitutes a 'higher-brain' or 'consciousness-related' formulation of death (Lizza 2018, 3). That is, it expounds that while the body might still possess a level of 'internal organic integration' (side-stepping *Frankenstein's* capacity to artificially establish this in a 'constructed' human form) it is said to lack a 'spontaneous drive' to interact with the environment in a 'life sustaining' manner (U.S. Presidential Council on Bioethics, 2008).

Liggins (2000) discusses how the relationship between surgeon and patient, anatomist and cadaver during nineteenth century advancement of medical science as a state-regulated institution, provided a pre-natal context for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In this context, medical science succeeded in shifting established attitudes and beliefs on the sanctity and inviolability of the body, to gradually accept how dissevering the body could be a path to knowledge that would supplant a different kind of violence associated with unsafe and unethical medical practices. To this effect, Liggins cites Dr Southwood Smith's (1827) objections to practitioners who "give speed to the progress of disease and certainty to the stroke of death" labelling them "instruments of cruelty and murder" (ibid, 60). Released in 2015, the UK television series *Frankenstein Chronicles* points directly to Mary Shelley's fiction as the product of historical events connected to the way medical science achieved authority over the body via the Anatomy Act, passed in the UK in 1832. Set in 1827 London, the series follows Detective Inspector John Marlott's (Sean Bean) investigation following the discovery of a patchwork corpse on the bank of the Thames. In the course of his inquiry, Marlott enters the burgeoning world of anatomical science and dissection that led to dead bodies being in high demand. In an attempt to achieve legitimacy and

political disassociation from unsavoury means of acquiring bodies (e.g. grave robbing), the Anatomy Act instead sought to exploit the culture of poverty to gain greater access and authority over the body. Southwood Smith's (1827) article *The Use of the Dead to the Living* typifies the anatomist objective in his recommendation that: "all unclaimed bodies from hospitals and workhouses should automatically be handed over for dissection" (xiii).

*Six Feet Under* works to substitute past horrors associated with manufacturing a body in a "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 1818, 43) with the presentation of a now acceptable clinical future for the human form, in which inert bodies are sanitized and sculptured to permit exhibition and 'uninterrupted gaze' (Jones 2008). In his book *Body Gothic*, Xavier Aldana Reyes argues that surgical horror "appropriates Frankenstein's gothic laboratory and transforms it into the antiseptic clinic and the nightmare of the operating theatre" (2014, 147). *Six Feet Under* deservedly fits this sub-genre as it too deals with "explorations of the limits of the body and of existence" referring to the manner in which the human frame is preserved at any cost (ibid). The television drama represents a contemporary redeployment of the Gothic that portrays an industry charged with the "recomposition of the human body" rescuing it from its collapsed, besmirched state by conforming to the same cultural logics that drive makeover culture (Sawday 1996, ix). In doing so, post-mortem body restoration is tied to the forms of body modification practices performed in life that promote "the clearly manufactured and purchased [...] over an organic or 'natural'" (Jones 2008, 92). Within makeover culture, living bodies are enhanced, improved and 'preserved' in a state of youthfulness. As Walter has argued, "late-modernity's celebration of the body is threatened by disability, disease, death and decay" (2004, 465). Thus, early nineteenth century "resurrectionist culture" is reconfigured in *Six Feet Under* so that rebirth is exchanged for release from degeneration and protection from decay thus preserving the dignity of the human body in death rites (Marshall 1995, 327).

### **Authority Over the Body**

*The Rainbow of Her Reasons* (2005) constitutes the sixth episode of the fifth and final season of *Six Feet Under*. It provides an interesting case example and provocation for the way in which the funeral drama represents and explores the pervasiveness of appearance ideals and its impact for the dead within mourning and burial rites. In this episode, individuals close to the deceased are able to witness the body 'untouched' before a peaceful, relaxing appearance is imposed upon an otherwise violently arrested life. Over the course of the episode, mourners consistently disregard funerary customs and boundaries that ordinarily regulate contact with the dead. The dysfunctional nature of appearance ideals imposed upon the dead is further emphasised by the involvement of film director Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol*, 1996; *American Psycho*, 2000; *The Notorious Betty Page*, 2005) as a guest director for the episode. Harron's directorial involvement in *Six Feet Under* provides a connection between the television series and one of her other most notable film projects, in which she brought one of the great sociopathic misogynists of contemporary fiction to the

screen – *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman. In *American Psycho*'s "damning critique of the cultural consequences of contemporary capitalism" Patrick Bateman represents a corporate acquisitive struggling to contain and control the ever-evolving set of codes for projecting status and success, such as the design of business cards, achieving table reservations in exclusive restaurants, apartment living, personal grooming and appearance etc. (Rollert 2016). Bateman's empty corporate existence and excessive yuppie life-style is typified in part by his "excessive and erotic [narcissistic] interest in his own body", which serves to emphasize how he inhabits a culture that values appearance above all else (Floti 2017).

A level of equivalence exists between the deference with which Bateman objectively treats his own body and the clinical practices performed on the dead by funeral directors, as represented and (partially) portrayed in *Six Feet Under*. At the beginning of *American Psycho*, film audiences are introduced to Bateman via his elaborate daily cleansing and exercise routines. Bateman's applications of anti-aging and beauty enhancing products constitute an excessive projection of pathological narcissism through which he desperately tries to communicate and associate substance with appearance. Yet, like a human cadaver, Bateman reveals he is lifeless within, a cypher rather than a character (Young 1993). He reveals:

There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping you and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there (ibid).

#### **"Fiona Lenore Kleinshmidt, 1948-2005"**

Following the convention established from the first season of *Six Feet Under* onwards, its final season continued the practice of opening each episode with a prelude that depicts the death of the person that Fisher Family & Sons are subsequently entrusted to prepare for viewing and burial. While the series chronicles the changing relationships and family ties that connect individuals to Fisher Family & Sons, each episode tells its own story – the story of the deceased. In this way, the episode directed by Harron is the story of Fiona Lenore Kleinschmidt. Unlike the majority of cases handled professionally by the Fisher sons, in this episode the deceased is known to the family as the friend of Aunt Sarah, sister of Ruth who is the mother of Nate, David and Claire Fisher. The episode also reveals Fiona to be the woman to whom eldest Fisher son, Nate (Nathaniel), lost his virginity when he was only fifteen years of age. The otherwise routine-nature of the preparatory process and the conditions under which the immobile body is observed are unsettled in *The Rainbow of Her Reasons* due to the Fisher family's personal relationship with the deceased. The veneer of objectivity associated with performing the professional role of a mortician is particularly disrupted for Nate, due to his prior subjective experience of the body that he is then required to treat dispassionately. During the episode Nate consults with Aunt Sarah over the funeral arrangements for her friend. Although the episode avoids subjecting its audience to the cost breakdown associated with Fisher Family & Sons

services, the scene serves to allow Sarah to request that Nate “make her beautiful” (ibid).

Having experienced his first sexual encounter with Fiona at the age of 15 years, Nate once again beholds her naked body – this time not by mutual consent but as the result of Fisher Family & Sons authority over death. As Nate enters the mortuary, his ordinary everyday place of work, he reacts with “whoa!,” to which his brother David acknowledges: “Yep, first person you ever slept with”. This statement takes restorative artist Federico, who is working on Fiona’s body, by surprise, as he exclaims “Really?” Looking down at the body, subjectively discerning the naked, older and inert Fiona before him, Nate states, “For real.” David then vocalises what Nate might be thinking when he asks: “I bet you’d never thought you’d see her naked again?” Federico then pushes the conversation too far by asking: “Hey, how’d she hold up? What’s the difference on her 20 years later?” To which Nate responds: “In case you haven’t noticed she’s all bruised and busted up you fucking idiot,” before covering the body with a sheet in a gesture of protection. In this respect *The Rainbow of Her Reasons* conforms to Harron’s broader treatment of violent events, also employed in *American Psycho*, where “she finds the aftermath of violence more interesting than the actual act” (Bastién 2016). In this episode, Harron again exhibits her tendency to linger on bodily trauma, firstly as Fiona’s death is the result of an accident (she slipped and fell down a canyon having been forced to join Sarah on a morning walk), but secondly because the whole episode probes what the series has otherwise succeeded in normalizing.

Meredith Jones (2008) explores the perpetuity of the artificial, in both life and death, in her case study of television celebrity and pornographic actress Lolo Ferrari – famed for her extreme body modification. During her life, Ferrari underwent 22 enlargement procedures to increase her breast size to a 182cm silicone-enhanced bust. In Jones’ analysis of Ferrari’s hyper-femininity, one quote from Ferrari particularly stands out, in which she states: “I adore being operated on [...] I love the feeling of a general anaesthetic – falling into a black hole and knowing I’m being altered as I sleep” (Ferrari quoted in Jones 2008, 93). While Jones uses the quote to demonstrate the nexus of cosmetic surgery, consumer and medical culture, the manner in which Ferrari claims pleasure from her immobility and surrender during transformation, serves to craft a new and interesting space where surgical means of attaining beauty effortlessly connects with death care. To this effect, Tseëlon recognizes that the “aestheticisation of the dead” and the “beautification of the living” are both “designed to protect [...] from realization of some lack by creating an illusion of wholeness and immortality” (1995, 117). Jones also highlights the parallels between Ferrari’s comment and tales of the “supreme beauty of the sleeping, or dead” found in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* respectively (2008, 94). Indeed, while *Snow White* dies, she does not decay. As Jones puts it: “not breathing yet ‘fresh’” (ibid, 95). Indeed, Bronfen has also argued that *Snow White*’s transparent coffin “elicits an aesthetic viewing” returning us to the surveyed feminine body and the power of the masculine gaze explored in *Six Feet Under* through the preparation of Fiona’s body (1992, 102).

More generally, *Six Feet Under* captures how death is perceived as a “matter out of place”, a phenomenon that is separate from the composition of everyday life thus leading to the surrender of control to others deemed more equipped and professional (Douglas 2003). Protocols, conduct and convention provide substance and guide the grieving through an aberrant experience, filling the void at a time when individuals worlds have been emptied and drained. A key area where mourner conformity is expected and reinforced is in the area of restoration services. This aspect of the profession has sparked its own industry in specialised cosmetic products. For example, a cadaver will require non-thermogenic make-up as conventional make-up for the living is designed to be absorbed by the skin and applies more uniformly, whereas on the flesh of the dead it simply blotches. The artificiality of the surface veneer pervades most post-death rituals. An aptly named Australian florist company, ‘Absolutely Unreal’, recommends to its prospective customers that they “may wish to consider hiring artificial floral tributes” for funeral and service flowers. It appears that nothing should trigger thoughts of decay.

### **The Embalmed Corpse: Creating an ‘Object of Sight’ (Bronfen 1992)**

In many Western cultures, embalming (the injection of chemical solutions into the arterial network of the body in order to ‘disinfect’ and ‘slow’ the decomposition process) is presented as a normal and necessary procedure. However, in countries like the US where embalming is an expected part of most funeral arrangements it is not actually a requirement of law nor, as some argue, is there much legitimate need for it. Indeed, the highly toxic chemicals used in the physically invasive process of embalming pose a real health risk to those who perform the procedure. The premise that embalming sanitizes the body, which has become a source of contagion, to make it ‘safe’ for viewing is inaccurate. The procedure is primarily used to temporarily slow decomposition in order to preserve a more ‘life-like’ appearance. Embalming has been so convincingly marketed to the funeral-buying public that it became routine and ordinary within American society (Slocum & Carlson 2011). To this effect, embalming constitutes part of a broader range of temporary cosmetic restorative processes that seek to reduce the appearance of death (hypostasis) in order to preserve the last elements of an individual’s social identity (Chapple & Ziebland 2010).

In *Grave Matters*, Mark Harris (2007) provides a case study of the method for escalating funeral costs. In his account of the experiences of the Johnson family, responding to the loss of their only child, 18-year-old Jenny, Harris chronicles how a basic funeral package ranging between \$3,295-\$3,595 effortlessly increased to a total of \$12,376. The funeral director is revealed as leading the Johnson family through an itemized set of costs that are added gradually, using one decision to require further consequential obligatory purchases. As Harris highlights, because the initial funeral package offered to the family included a viewing, they then also had to agree to embalming at an extra cost of \$825, which in turn adds hair styling services (a beautician at a cost of \$90) and dressing and ‘casketing’ of the remains (\$50) to the

consideration. Harris is able to financially trace and chronicle the way dignity and presentational concerns permit funeral directors to be able to upsell supplementary services, such as 'professional funeral wear' where garments that have the back cut out for minimum disruption of the body and easy dressing (\$135). What is an emotional process for the family is used to drive a financial process for the funeral director.

Accounts provided by individuals of their first encounters with a dead body, in otherwise death denying cultures of the West, describe how separate and disconnected the dead appear to the living, often causing individuals to respond by staying with the body (McManus 2013).<sup>4</sup> Pre-funerary medicalised rituals violate that vulnerability in order to prepare the deceased for one last mode of social connectivity. For the grieving it is a final opportunity to be with the person that will be physically gone forever. It will also constitute a notable last memory of the deceased. The funeral director's charge is therefore to avoid having mourners recoil at the grotesqueness of the natural order of events connected with the decomposition of the body, for autolysis (or self-digestion) begins immediately after death as the body has no way of getting oxygen or removing waste. Muscle stiffness (or rigor mortis) also gives the body sheen, due to ruptured blisters, causing the skin's top layer to begin to loosen. In the last moments with the deceased artificiality prevails as a means of disguise and diversion.

### **Exhibiting the Body**

Typically, conventions relating to how the dead are laid out are "deeply ingrained in the specific death culture in which the corpse and its mourners are situated" (Mui 2016). For example, in modern Western societies laying out the dead often demands that the body is arranged so that corpse legs are extended, arms folded with hands placed on top of the chest - a demeanor that (again) is meant to reassure mourners that the dead are at rest. Yet, there are increasing examples of grieving families opting to preserve the memory of the deceased in 'living' postures that serve to denote the 'interzone' that the dead assume pre-burial or cremation where they may have passed away but have not yet passed on (Bronfen 1992). The dead remain in the presence of the living, rather than keeping death out of sight, in Charbonnet-Labat Funeral Home in New Orleans, USA, which has gained distinction for the manner in which it stages bodies in an 'out of the box' fashion in what might be described as death dioramas. The body of 53-year-old Miriam Burbank was posed sat at a table, cigarette in hand surrounded by her preferred alcoholic beverages as if sitting in the corner of a party. While in San Juan (Puerto Rico), Christopher Rivera, a boxer who was shot to death, was propped up standing in a fake boxing ring for his wake (Robertson & Robles 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> In a *The Rainbow of Her Reasons*, Ruth breaks the rules and leads Fiona's friends down to the Fisher Family and Sons mortuary to be with the body.



A further example of the way methods for protecting bodies from decay have motivated extravagant modes of public exhibition that give bodies a new life in death can be found in Gunther von Hagens' oft-referenced *Bodyworlds* exhibition. The exhibition showcases his technique of plastinating bodies that entails removing body fluids and replacing them with resins and plastics. Much like the viewing trends discussed above, the plastics have the effect of holding the body in a rigid statuesque form. What began as a method for the use and application within schools of anatomy has been converted into an art form, producing anatomized bodies for public spectacle. Lieboff reflects on the way *Bodyworlds* incites re-consideration of the sanctity of the body in death and the legal rights of the dead, stating that:

In our lives, law treats as axiomatic our status as autonomous free-willed agents. However, our ability to retain this autonomy [...] is taken away from us at our death—for instance, our choice[s] [...] may be overridden by others after our deaths (2005, 226).

Indeed, she observes that the Anatomy Act does not cover the purpose and function of *Bodyworlds*, and that while individuals may have donated their bodies for the process of plastination, they subsequently became “the raw material for transformation into basketball players, chess players, horse riders, and a chest of drawers” (ibid, 227). In other words, these bodies have been reconstructed in poses, roles and as objects that deny the free will and autonomy of the once living.

Taking the above examples and arguments and returning to Harris' (2007) account of the embalming process performed on eighteen-year-old Jenny Johnson's body, we are introduced to a set of practices that are equally invasive, intrusive, and involve the desecration of the body in the name of conjuring a representational likeness to the physical ideals of the living. Harris' description reads like a passage from Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* as he describes the process, instrumentation and techniques used on Jenny Johnson's body. For example, we are introduced to the sharp 2-foot long 'trocar' used to pierce the abdominal wall in order to siphon out its contaminants, which is required to be firmly driven into the body in an act termed 'belly punching'. Learning about some of the measures performed on the body provokes a response of physical empathy for what such actions would mean for a living, feeling, pain-sensing individual. For instance, the use of packing forceps to push “wads of cotton soaked in phenol into Jenny's anus and vagina”, gluing eyelids to an 'eyecap' placed on the eyeball, shooting barb-tipped wire into the mouth filled with 'mortuary putty' in order to draw it and keep it shut, “running a half-curved needle threaded with suture into each breast at a point just off the nipples and pulling the suture taut”, all evoke a sense of horror and body trauma (ibid, 17, 19). At the very least it requires the body to suffer indignity in order to achieve a 'peaceful' appearance to console the living.

## An Ending

Funeral directing relies in part on exploiting the way society has come to view human remains with the “utmost of abjection” (Kristeva 1982, 4). Indeed, the “commodification of the corpse” (Richardson 1987, 79) by a professionalised death care industry, has reformed the otherwise gloomy respect that “condemned [the body] to putrefaction, the dark work of destruction” (Foucault 1973, 125). Following on from medical management of death, which assumed authority and control over the process of death, professional death care took on the responsibility of managing the appearance of the dead and mourners’ access and interaction with the deceased. Thus, funeral rites have evolved to discourage families from having close physical contact with the deceased, and in the process created a new image of death which Bronfen describes as “idealized images of the deceased in such a way that permanently embalmed bodies and stable images displace and replace impermanent materiality” (1992, 87). In a culture where individuals define themselves, and are defined, by their body, the practices represented by *Six Feet Under* signal the predominant visual orientation of the death care industry and its impact on how we see the dead. *Six Feet Under* points to clandestine realities that are performed to perpetuate a pretence and create a deception that quells the fear of bodily death amongst the living. As a Gothic text, *Six Feet Under* exposes “corporeal instability, mutability [and] capacity for transformation” that exploits the desirability of the non-natural, artificial, contained and controlled (Aldana Reyes 2014, 57).

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## **“What Did I Do?”: Doubling Fear in *Batman: Arkham Asylum***

### **ABSTRACT**

*In this article, I show how the award-winning 2009 game Batman: Arkham Asylum draws on the specificities of the video game medium to engage with the Gothic interplay between science and the supernatural. The game uses the key motif of fear to construct this interplay – for instance, as the game unfolds, terrified criminals begin attributing almost supernatural qualities to Batman. The player, who controls Batman, knows that he has no supernatural powers at all; rather, it is the superstitious criminals, consumed by terror, who are becoming irrational. The game makes this initial comment on the relationship between science and the supernatural, and then challenges the player to retain their own poise, confronting them with an apparent breakdown in the spatial logic of the fictional world. At certain points throughout the game, Batman is dosed with fear gas by Scarecrow. He begins hallucinating, and the previous stable story-world is thrown into jeopardy. Players are confronted by impossible scenes that threaten the game’s rationalist foundations. After each Scarecrow sequence, scientific rationality reasserts itself, but a nagging uncertainty continues to haunt the player in much the same way as Batman is haunting criminals. The player, just like Joker’s henchmen, is tasked with clinging to the rational in the face of terror and epistemic uncertainty, and as such, this article argues that one of the classic themes of Gothic literature is thus explored through the specific configurations of the video game medium.*

**Keywords:** Batman: Arkham Asylum, video games, gameplay, spatiality, fear

*Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) opens with Joker in custody, being brought back to the asylum by Batman; but something is wrong. "He surrendered almost without a fight," Batman says, "I don't like it." True to form, Joker escapes seconds later, tearing off into the bowels of the asylum, releasing hordes of violent inmates and unleashing hell on Arkham Island. Most players can probably predict Joker's impending escape; since *Arkham Asylum* is a Batman game, it is fairly obvious that the Joker will escape. Developed by Rocksteady Studios, at the time a relatively new and unknown company, *Arkham Asylum* draws heavily on the wider cultural context of the Batman mythos, including many voice actors reprising their roles from *Batman: The Animated Series*. Such actors include Kevin Conroy as Batman, Mark Hamill as Joker, and Arleen Sorkin as Harley Quinn. Paul Dini, a key writer from *The Animated Series*, also wrote *Arkham Asylum's* script. The game further takes influence from the 1989 comic of the same name, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, written by Grant Morrison and illustrated by Dave McKean, which shows Batman returning to the asylum after the inmates break out of their cells and take over control. Those players who are familiar with the comic might anticipate the general plot of the game; however, even for those unfamiliar with these intertextual elements, Joker drops heavy hints as he is being led to his cell. "The night is young, Bats," he says during an elevator ride, and continues:

I still have a trick or two up my sleeve. I mean, don't you think it's a little bit funny how a fire at Blackgate [Prison] caused hundreds of my crew to be moved here?

Moments later, the power in the lift switches off, and the screen goes black. "What's he doing?" shouts a frightened guard. The player hears choking sounds, and another shout: "Get a flashlight! Get a light on him!" The power clicks back on and the scene is revealed: Batman has Joker by the throat. "What?" Joker gurgles, "Don't you trust me?" This early scene plays on our expectations since players expect that Joker will escape, so the story sets up false starts, misleading the player as to when the escape will begin in earnest. When the lights go out, players might think that Joker is escaping, especially given the choking sounds – perhaps a guard being murdered? But when the lights come back on, the player is taught that perhaps the scariest thing moving around in the dark is Batman.

In this article, I argue that *Batman: Arkham Asylum* offers a new approach to classic Gothic themes, such as the relationship between science and the supernatural. This new approach, I suggest, is largely informed by the specificities of the video game medium, which reconfigures the audience as players rather than just readers or viewers. One new aspect of this approach relates to the function of fear, which is no longer just experienced by the protagonist or observed by the reader; rather, the player

controls Batman and creates fear among Joker's henchmen through active gameplay. In *Arkham Asylum*, Batman is the thing that goes bump in the night. By way of counterpoint, the game at several points also threatens to come loose from its epistemological moorings. Throughout the asylum, Batman has three encounters with Scarecrow, who secretly doses him with fear gas. Batman subsequently has vivid and fantastical hallucinations that disconnect the player from the reality of the fictional world, breaking down the established spatial logic. The magical, fantastical, or even supernatural elements of Batman's hallucination serve as ruptures in the game's façade of scientific rationality. Ultimately these experiences are tamed: after each episode, rational order is seemingly restored, and Batman's magical experiences are recontextualised within a wider framework of scientific rationalism. Nevertheless, players might still be haunted by the spectre of uncertainty, the hints of the irrational or supernatural flitting around the edges of the game world, even as they continue to terrorize Joker's henchmen. This interplay between science and the supernatural aligns *Arkham Asylum* with a long tradition of Gothic texts, foregrounding the significant theme of fear in gameplay. Just as *Arkham Asylum* represents a new adaptation of the Batman mythos, then, it also represents the continuation of the Gothic genre in the twenty-first century.

Of course, Batman and the Gothic have already been closely associated with one another in contemporary scholarship. Justin Mack suggests that Batman was originally designed as an "edgy, mysterious character," with "dark gothic tones" (2014, 145). Alan Gregory further explores the Gothic theme of "the horror of physical difference" in Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* (2014, 27). His argument might easily be extended to engage with the physical differences of any number of Batman's enemies in different incarnations. The Batman mythos has also always been invested in the concept of the double. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet argues that Batman is "Superman's Gothic double" (2013, 96), while fans further suggest that key villains are dark reflections of Batman's psyche (Guerrero 2011; Weddell 2014; Coy 2016). Thus, the Riddler reflects Batman's intellect, while Bane reflects his brute strength, and Scarecrow his weaponization of fear. This theory has been further adopted in some scholarship; for example, Richard Reynolds writes that "the great Batman villains all mirror some key point in Batman's character" (1994, 68). The interplay between Batman and his doubles is typical of that motif, for as Linda Dryden observes, "the literature of duality is, at its most obvious level, a literature about identity" (2003, 39). Batman's villains thus form a sort of gallery of shadows, a long list of doubles and doppelgangers twisting and distorting elements of his character. Dryden further observes that "tales of doubling are, more often than not, tales about paradigms of good and evil," an observation that aptly frames the criminal/crime-stopper dynamic that lies at the heart of the Batman mythos (38).

Gothic doublings are especially present in the *Arkham* games, which position Joker as a dark reflection of Batman. The opening shot of *Arkham City* (2011), the second game in the series, depicts a fictional painting, 'Cain and Abel: The Duality of Man,' which features Cain carrying the body of his dead brother. At the end of the



game Joker dies, and Batman carries his body in a shot that intentionally mirrors the painting. The painting emphasises the duality of Batman and Joker, positioning order and chaos as two poles of human experience. The reference to biblical siblings Cain and Abel also implies a genetic proximity, a suggestion that the two characters are perhaps not all that different. The suggestion is carried further in *Arkham Knight* (2015), in which Batman is infected with Joker's blood, and is slowly transforming into a new Joker. Dryden's argument that in the Gothic "the double is a threat to the integrity of the self" takes on a new and rather literal meaning in this context (38). Despite being deceased, the Joker haunts *Arkham Knight*, appearing as a hallucination that encourages Batman to give in and complete the transformation. The game's echoic overtones of Robert Louis Stevenson's famous monstrous double Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde are thus only further complicated by Batman's active and knowing repression of his internal Joker.

The theme of fear has a similar prominence in the Batman mythos. It is clearly associated with the bat symbology in Batman's various incarnations. In the original 1930s *Detective Comics*, for instance, Bruce Wayne decides to adopt the bat persona after a bat flies in through his open window: "Criminals are a cowardly, superstitious lot," he reflects (Finger and Fox 1939). In Joel Schumacher's 1995 film *Batman Forever*, Bruce falls down a well after the death of his parents, where he is confronted by a bat in an almost spiritual experience: "The figure in the dark was my destiny... I would use its image to strike terror into the hearts of those who did evil". The 2005 Christopher Nolan film *Batman Begins* has a similar well scene, although it further associates bats more directly with the death of Bruce's parents. The Waynes are at the opera, and Bruce is scared by dancers dressed as bats; as he leaves with his parents into an alley, they are killed in a mugging gone wrong. In Nolan's version, the bat is thus explicitly associated with Batman's own fear, as well as his sense of guilt and responsibility over the death of his parents. It takes on a strong psychological significance as Batman takes his internal fear and projects it onto his enemies, using it as a symbol of terror.

### **Gothic Setting**

Although the Batman mythos has strong Gothic roots, different adaptations of Batman may incorporate Gothic themes to a greater or lesser extent. As an initial foray into the Gothic elements of *Arkham Asylum*, we might therefore draw on Jerrold E. Hogle's tripartite definition of a typical Gothic text, showing how *Arkham Asylum* interacts with each key point. According to Hogle, Gothic tales usually 1) take place in antiquated spaces, which 2) hold secrets from a murky past, and 3) include a haunting, which manifests unresolved crimes or conflicts (2002, 2). The first two points may be addressed by considering the setting and environment of *Arkham Asylum*, although before considering those elements directly, we must briefly consider some technical points concerning the nature of video game space.

As a medium, video games are, first and foremost, games. They are not simply read or watched like books or films – they are to be played. Space in video games is therefore not only representational, but also ludic. It incorporates both art direction and level design: it is both looked at and played within. I suggest that in *Arkham Asylum*, the visual and ludic elements of the game are somewhat at odds with each other. Visually, the asylum is a deeply Gothic location, as I will show shortly. In terms of gameplay, however, the space is a tool by which Batman and the player terrify and overcome Joker's henchmen. The player has a clear and comprehensive understanding of the asylum environment, such as is necessary to complete the gameplay task of neutralising Joker's henchmen. The ease and simplicity with which the player navigates the environment therefore contradicts the asylum's Gothic visual design. The space of the asylum, conceptualised as both visual and ludic, embodies the key thematic conflict at the heart of *Arkham Asylum*: the interplay between scientific rationality and the fantastic or magical that lies within the supernatural.

In purely visual terms, then, the game's environment meets Hogle's first criteria: the asylum is desperately antiquated, with one critic directly describing it as "Gothic" (Lavigne 2013). Its grubby interiors are matched by overgrown, crumbling exteriors, with bare trees, worn paving stones, and industrial wire mesh. The architecture is varied, reflecting a jumble of influences and semiotic intentions meant to evoke fear, antiquity, or unease. The buildings in the asylum take influence from nineteenth-century sources, and the Intensive Treatment building and the Botanical Gardens clearly draw on the Victorian combination of iron and glass. For example, the domed glass roof of the Botanical Gardens evokes Paxton's Crystal Palace or the Great Conservatory in Chatsworth, while the exposed girders and curved glass roof of the main lobby in Intensive Treatment evoke St Pancras Station. Meanwhile, Arkham Mansion bears architectural features intended to signify gothic antiquity, with some details harking back to High Victorian Gothic architecture. For instance, the Mansion's towers might be described as in the Gothic style, although many other features are either missing or inconsistent: the windows are set in rounded Palladian arches, rather than pointed, and there is precious little gabling. The slightly haphazard design of the Arkham Mansion is not uncommon, as video game developers are not always especially concerned with fidelity to architectural periods or styles. The Mansion is better understood as a cluster of architectural features intended to crudely signify antiquity. The towers are one of those features, while others include the statues of angels, the shutters over the windows, the antique clock tower, the Victorian gas lamp over the main entrance, and the Gothic quatrefoil tracery. Some of these features hark back to medieval castles and churches, while others evoke Gothic architecture, and others again details from the Victorian period. While stylistically incoherent, the Mansion is clearly intended to connote the legacy of Gothic antiquity.

The asylum also meets Hogle's second criteria, holding a number of secrets from the murky past. In the most literal sense, Arkham Asylum is filled with secret collectibles to be found by the player. These collectibles often include equipment or memorabilia attached to supervillains from the wider Batman universe (essentially

'Easter Eggs'), pointing to the ongoing existence of villains who do not feature in the game itself. Such collectibles include a poster for Iceberg Lounge, Penguin's club; the Riddler's cell, empty, but covered in green question marks; and posters for the election campaign of Harvey Dent, the infamous defence attorney who became Two Face. Significantly, the collecting process is a facet of gameplay, meaning that in this instance the criterion is met by the ludic structure, and not just by visual elements alone.

Other secrets from the murky past include the enemies Batman fights over the course of the game. As Batman travels through the asylum, he encounters a string of supervillains who must be defeated and returned to their cells. Batman has implicitly already defeated most of these villains before the events of the game, hence their imprisonment in Arkham Asylum. They must now be defeated again, re-enacting the conflict that brought them to the asylum in the first place. The supervillains represent memories that are dredged up and retraced over the course of the game, emphasising the themes of history and the past returning. The supervillains are not literally secret, of course, but they were locked away in the asylum, a place that arguably embodies a sort of communal forgetting. In the Batman mythos, supervillains typically terrorise and murder the inhabitants of Gotham City. Their imprisonment means that ordinary people may live their lives without fear of maniacal clowns and psychotic killers, so that they may, in a sense, forget the danger posed by Gotham's supervillains. Dryden describes how the Victorian Gothic "articulates a fear that civilization may not be an evolved form of being, but a superficial veneer beneath which lurks an essential, enduring animal self" (2003, 32). As a place of containment, Arkham Asylum represents precisely that veneer. Pramod Nayar further borrows Rod Giblett's argument that "cities have their own repressed spaces," and uses it to argue that the "urban stability" of Gotham in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* is constantly threatened by the "repeated return of the repressed spaces" (2009, 43). These repressed spaces are conceptualised as sewers and swamps, as rubbish dumps and underground locations, but in *Arkham Asylum*, the asylum itself is clearly another repressed space. It is the memory hole, the place of containment that allows Gotham citizens refuge from fear. Once Joker frees the inmates, Batman is forced to enter the place of communal forgetting and re-imprison those who have escaped, reliving memories from the murky past and ultimately preserving the safety in 'forgetfulness' for Gotham's inhabitants.

### **Gothic Gameplay**

For the third part of Hogle's definition, the haunting aspect, we turn more fully to gameplay. In video games, gameplay can have both an aesthetic and a narrative dimension, integrating in new and complex ways with more traditional modes such as text or audio-visual information. As Henry Jenkins notes, while games and stories are not identical, "many games do have narrative aspirations" (2004). In *Arkham Asylum*, gameplay feeds into the theme of fear, both as experienced by the criminals Batman hunts, and as experienced by the player as the game itself becomes unhinged.

This fear, both experienced and observed, feeds again into a wider theme pertinent to the Gothic genre: that of the interplay between science and the supernatural. I suggested earlier that fear was a major theme in the Batman mythos. Appropriately, one of the two major types of gameplay in *Arkham Asylum* revolves around terrifying Joker's henchmen. Combat in the *Arkham* games is divided into two types: stealth sections and beat-em-ups. The beat-em-ups are relatively straightforward: Batman enters a room filled with thugs and beats them up, using his fists, his gadgets, and special takedown moves. The stealth sections, titled 'Silent Predator', are large open rooms populated by enemies with firearms. The player must sneak around the environment and silently knock those enemies out without being spotted and gunned down.

In many instances, Batman seems almost supernatural to the criminals he pursues. Each time they discover one of their group choked into unconsciousness, they become increasingly distressed, culminating in sheer panic for the final lonely thug. At first, a typical dialogue exchange upon finding a body includes both hesitation and encouragement from different thugs:

Thug One: Oh God! I've found someone! Over here!

Thug Two [shaking their unconscious friend]: Wake up. Do ya hear me? Wake up!

Thug One: What are we going to do?

Thug Two: Shut up and keep looking!

Thug One: Batman? Can you hear me? Show yourself!

The pattern is repeated throughout the game with minor dialogue variations; typically, one thug will express fear, and another will encourage them to keep searching. When whittled down to two or three men, the dialogue will become more panicked:

Thug One: What do we do now?

Thug Two: We've got to find him or we're next. You hear me?

The tone becomes more personal as the thugs consider their own vulnerability. When only one thug remains, they often become frantic, believing that Batman is deliberately tormenting them. Common dialogue includes: "Why are you doing this to me?"; "I want out of here. This wasn't part of the deal"; and "Why is this happening to me? What did I do?" If the player moves Batman into view, this lone criminal will often panic rather than shoot, screaming "Get away from me! Get away!" The dialogue of the final thug suggests a sense of persecution, as if in their mind Batman has become larger than life, an almost supernatural predator punishing the thug for their crimes. In this sense, *Arkham Asylum* enacts the third of Hogle's three hallmarks of the Gothic genre, the haunting which manifests as punishment for unresolved crimes or conflicts, for as Hogle writes:

These hauntings can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, spectres, or monsters (mixing features from different realms of being, often life and death) that rise from within the antiquated space [...] to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts (2000, 2).

From the perspective of a terrified criminal, Batman must seem like a sort of monster. The bat motif in his costuming blurs the line between animal and human, mixing features from different realms of being. Further, the criminal has broken the social contract by escaping from prison. Batman appears as the guardian of the law, haunting and punishing the criminal for violating that contract. The haunting ends with Batman's eventual attack on the criminal, as he knocks them unconscious, returns them to a cell, and reinstates the social and legal contract. Batman thus constitutes an almost supernatural figure for many of Gotham's criminals.

However, while Batman might seem supernatural to his enemies, players are put in control of Batman, and therefore have insight into his sometimes quite mundane techniques. Players understand the range of technologies and tactics available to Batman, and the limits of his predatory skill. Over the course of the game, they come to understand how best to orchestrate a room full of armed criminals and take them out efficiently. While Batman's tactics might create a seemingly supernatural aura for the confused and terrified criminals, players understand the psychological and strategic elements that go into creating that terror. The Silent Predator mode therefore aligns the *Arkham* games at least partially with the work of Charles Brockden Brown. Markman Ellis argues that "Brown's gothic vanquishes supernaturalism as superstition but reasserts terror as a real category of human experience" (2000, 124). In the Silent Predator mode, the supernatural is similarly dismissed as smoke and mirrors, even as theatricality and psychology are affirmed as powerful methods of creating terror and the appearance of the supernatural. If the representation of space in *Arkham Asylum* creates a conflict between Gothic veneer and mundane gameplay, then the Silent Predator mode continues that conflict, functioning almost like Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* in that it shows the excessive emotion felt by people who let their imaginations run away with them.

I therefore argue that Batman, as portrayed in *Arkham Asylum* (and throughout the *Arkham* series), is a peculiar type of Gothic character. Some scholars of the Gothic define it as pleasure derived from terror; for instance, Ellis describes how in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and implicitly in many other Gothic texts, "terror operates on a secondary level, exposing the reader's curiosity about, and pleasure in, such feelings of terror" (2000, 3). Ellis further claims that Gothic texts are interested in "exploiting the emotions, both by detailing the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, and by asking that the reader identify with them" (9). One might say that Gothic texts are interested in the duality of observing and experiencing terror. They allow readers to observe the terrified thoughts of a protagonist, and also ask readers at times to identify with those thoughts. In *Arkham Asylum*, players take on the role of Batman and observe the terror felt by criminals as they are slowly picked off. At the same time, as I will argue shortly,

*Arkham Asylum* occasionally sets out to unsettle the player as well, allowing them to identify more personally with the fear felt by the criminals.

Of course, the Gothic in *Arkham Asylum* functions slightly differently due to its status as a video game. Because the player controls Batman, they are responsible for moving stealthily around the environment and disabling criminals without being noticed. In a sense, players are themselves responsible for creating a feeling of Gothic terror, as criminals stumble across their unconscious friends and become increasingly distressed. To some this structure might seem like reading Bram Stoker's *Dracula* from the perspective of Dracula: all the mystery and suspense is taken out of the equation. But this structural shift is precisely the game's spin on the Gothic genre. The game's chief insight is that if the Gothic is at least partially about observing terror, then there is no reason why players cannot observe terror that they themselves caused. Some might disapprove of the way in which *Arkham Asylum* reveals Batman's relatively mundane methods of sneaking around and ambushing unsuspecting criminals. However, I suggest that the thematic contrast between the rational, easily comprehensible mechanics of stealthy movement and their terrifying effect on uninitiated thugs furthers the long-standing Gothic tension between scientific rationality and the irrational, incomprehensible, and often seemingly supernatural elements of Gothic fiction.

This conflict between science and the supernatural can be found in Gothic writers such as Mary Shelley or Charles Brockden Brown. Ellis argues that both writers "located gothic themes within material that skirted the edges of reason and irrationality, nature and magic, scepticism and credulity" (2000, 123). The *Arkham* games operate with a similar ambivalence; they have pretensions towards scientific rationalism but are filled with fantastical and seemingly magical happenings and characters. For example, Killer Croc is an eleven-foot human-crocodile hybrid; Clayface can change his appearance at will; Poison Ivy can control and talk to plants. And yet these superhuman powers are explained away as mere scientific curios. According to the in-game biography files, Killer Croc has a "rare mutation," Clayface injected himself with the "essences" of "shape-changing, mutated villains," and Poison Ivy has a "modified genetic code". If, as Arthur C. Clarke famously said, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, then *Arkham Asylum* recognises that any magical or fantastical plot element can be explained away under the heading of sufficiently advanced technology. And of course, Batman himself is a detective and a scientist. Much of the story revolves around scientific procedures; for instance, Joker has returned to the asylum to retrieve Titan, a new super-drug that will turn his minions into hulking monsters. Batman synthesises an antidote to Titan during the events of the game, as well as tracking different characters across the asylum by following traces of alcohol vapour and tobacco. Each instance is draped in scientific rationale, for Batman's cowl is able to determine the chemical makeup of the whiskey and tobacco simply by 'scanning' them from a distance. This same cowl has x-ray vision, allowing Batman to see enemies through walls, monitor enemy heartbeats, and determine whether an individual is alive, again with a simple

scan from a distance. These technologies are, frankly, ridiculous, as are the supposed mutations of Batman's supervillain enemies. But the game insists on their scientific nature to preserve the veneer of a fictional world that is ultimately comprehensible from a rational and scientific perspective. This sometimes-flimsy insistence aligns the game with the work of Shelley or Brown, similarly skirting the edges of reason and irrationality, nature and magic.

### **The Ludo-Gothic**

The interplay between the supernatural and the scientific is given a final twist in the Scarecrow segments of *Arkham Asylum*. I noted earlier that the Gothic is both about observing and experiencing terror. If the Silent Predator sections are about observing terror (by instilling it in Joker's henchmen), then the Scarecrow sections are where players might experience terror, at least to some degree. In these sections, reality becomes unstable, and the player's relationship with the game-world is threatened by epistemic uncertainty. At three separate points in the game, Scarecrow doses Batman with fear gas, causing him to hallucinate. During these scenes, the game moves almost wordlessly from a realist mode of representation into a world filtered through Batman's infected mind. The shift is made more jarring by the fact that normally the camera sits over Batman's shoulder: we as players usually experience the world from an objective third-person perspective. The hallucination sequences are thus unexpected and terrifying slips into subjectivity, where the game-world is suddenly filtered through Batman's addled perspective. Edward Branigan describes this filtering as projection, a state akin to free indirect discourse where "a series of neutral spaces has been embedded within a subjective structure but is to be understood as a further expansion of character" (1984, 95). Benjamin Beil further explains that "projection is the third-person form of perception [...] both techniques create a subjective image" (2014, 164). In some classic Gothic texts, different spaces become extensions of character, such as the back and front facing doors in Jekyll's house representing his public and secret selves. These instances are not necessarily projection per se, as they do not depict a character extending their own thoughts and perspective into the environment. Nevertheless, the longstanding link between character and place in Gothic texts is worth noting. This example in *Arkham Asylum* more directly shows how a supposedly stable or objective third person view dips unexpectedly into the subjective. This effect can disorient players, dislodging them from a stable fictional reality and flinging them into an epistemological void.

The point is more clearly made with close reference to Batman's encounters with Scarecrow, where the Gothic mode invades the spatial logic of the game. The first encounter takes place in the Medical Facility, where Arkham's doctors attempt to treat their mentally ill patients. As Batman descends into the lower levels of the Medical Facility, he is dosed with Scarecrow's fear gas, although this fact is not made very explicit to the player. Once dosed, a series of events take place that may cause the undiscerning player to question their relationship with the fictional world. This questioning is a temporary disconnect from the rational, realist mode of the rest of the

game; it is, in short, a Gothic moment of terror. As George E. Haggerty notes, “when we begin to lose faith in our own ability to distinguish what is real, we are in a Gothic world ourselves” (1989, 168). At first the disconnect from reality is subtle. The normal Arkham Asylum logo on the television screen in the lift is replaced by a distorted image of Joker’s face, the camera takes on a slight tilt, and Batman’s eyes glow red. The disconnect becomes more pronounced as the player continues. When the player enters the morgue, for example, the mortuary chamber hatches start banging open and shut, and mysterious voices hiss and whisper for Batman to get out.

These seemingly supernatural events are quickly followed by a breakdown in the game’s spatial logic. When the player tries to leave the morgue, they find themselves entering back into the morgue. The player loses the spatial control that characterises the Silent Predator mode. If that mode revolves around utilising space to terrify and neutralise Joker’s henchmen, then here the tables are turned, as the game space breaks its own established rules and presents the player with impossible architectural configurations. Shortly after the player enters the morgue, Scarecrow leaps out and the screen turns to black. Once the lights come up again, the player finds themselves still in the morgue. But when they turn around, the back of the room has been ripped away, and a giant Scarecrow floats above an enormous vortex. The repeating morgue and the vortex-Scarecrow represent an instance of what Laurie Taylor terms the “ludic-gothic” (2009). Taylor argues that the ludic-gothic emphasises “a process of transgression for the game design” (2009, 55). Again, we see the distinction between the ludic and the merely visual elements of the game, for the Gothic visual design of Arkham Asylum is matched here by ludic-gothic gameplay. When Batman is hallucinating, the game transgresses against its own spatial logic, repeating space in impossible configurations and creating whole new areas. According to Taylor, ludic-gothic games erect boundaries, but also subsume those boundaries “into a process that undermines the transparency and hierarchy that technology brings” (ibid, 58). The player thus temporarily loses the spatial control that they rely on to defeat Joker’s henchmen, as the game space starts behaving according to different rules.

This new dream-space is disorienting to some extent, although even then the player is quickly given a ludic goal. They must reach a Bat-signal without being spotted by Scarecrow. This goal re-orientates the player, giving them a sense of purpose and grounding within the game. Because of this reorientation, the game’s ludic-gothic moments are more short bursts than extended sequences. Leaving the morgue only to find oneself returning into it is a clear breakdown in the game’s spatial logic, but Scarecrow’s dream-world is a ludic space that makes its own sort of sense. The truly Gothic moments are the moments of transgression, the fleeting liminal moments where the player is confused and disoriented, between worlds rather than firmly in one or the other. The actual dream-world itself is not all that disturbing, especially in the second and third Scarecrow encounters, as well as during subsequent playthroughs. In the second Scarecrow encounter, for instance, the player is returning down a corridor they have already explored in Arkham Mansion. The corridor carries



on much longer than it should, and that moment of elongation, that confusion and uncertainty, is precisely the Gothic effect. When Batman finally reaches the door out of the corridor and enters Scarecrow's dream-world for a second time, the player is not necessarily surprised. They can recognise a pattern: if Batman is hallucinating, Scarecrow is probably just around the corner. Again, the truly Gothic moments are those precious few seconds where the spatial logic of the world dissolves and the player is cast into uncertainty.

Once the player has completed each Scarecrow encounter, they are restored to a stable fictional world, and given evidence to demonstrate the shift back. For example, during the first sequence, Batman saw Commissioner Gordon dragged off by a shadowy figure, and soon after discovered his body slumped against a wall. After leaving the morgue, the player rediscovers the body is not Gordon after all, but one of the prison guards. The game explicitly draws attention to this moment as control is taken away from the player and the camera zooms up to the body. Batman says, "It wasn't Gordon! Crane's gas must have affected me more than I thought". This brief sequence proves to the player that reality is stable again. The game introduces a scientific and rational explanation, explaining away traumatic experiences as mere chemical hallucination. As suggested above, the Scarecrow scenes are not true supernatural events, as the realist mode always eventually reasserts itself. Nevertheless, the segments also create some long-lasting doubts for players. The game has shifted quite quickly from an objective third-person perspective to Batman's projected interior state. Players may have observed some early warning signs, but what if those signs were missing? Going forward, players cannot be sure that what they are seeing is totally real.

Of course, these lingering uncertainties are not justified by anything else in the rest of the game. The moments of Gothic terror, of displacement within a fictional world, are explained away as mere chemical reactions. This explanation is itself a typical Gothic trope, for Hogle argues that although Gothic texts oscillate between reality and the "possibilities of the supernatural," they usually resolve in favour of one or the other (2002, 3). David Punter also describes famous Gothic novelists Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis as both realist and anti-realist writers, a contradiction which encapsulates something of *Arkham Asylum* too (1996, 74). On the whole, *Arkham Asylum* comes down firmly on the side of scientific rationalism. Indeed, the player's main enemies, Joker's henchmen, are ultimately not rational enough. They succumb to their fear in the face of the unknown. Even with this message, *Arkham Asylum* is captivated by the possibility of the supernatural. The game space lurches from the rational into the impossible and contradictory, throwing the player into confusion. Even when those experiences are explained away as mere hallucinations, the supernatural still haunts the game. It flits around the game's margins, a vague shadow, never fully materialising, but harboured by suggestive Gothic elements that hint and imply something is amiss.

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## **The Shocking Real: Abject Animals in Isaac Rosenberg's Poetry**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Soldier poets in World War I, who lamented the loss of innocence, immersed in nostalgia, and who were devastated about what they witnessed during the war, captured the destructions around them in their poetry. Earth was sometimes depicted as bloodthirsty and yet also often as a compassionate mother receiving her fallen soldiers. Isaac Rosenberg, who was an English poet and artist of the Great War, situated his language and themes to amplify the horrors of war and the degeneration of humanity during it. The article studies, through Kristevan lenses, the use of animals in war poetry generally, and Rosenberg's war poems particularly. Gothic elements in war poetry extend beyond describing the wretchedness of war and its horrors, and Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches," "Dead Man's Dump," and "Louse Hunting" have not been thoroughly examined as war ecogothic poems. The animals in these poems, this article argues, are examples of the ecogothic forcing the soldiers to re-examine their roles in the war and reassess their collapsing identity in the face of death.*

**Keywords:** World War I Poets, Gothic, Ecogothic, Animals, Abjection

In our current age of environmental consciousness, it can often be an expectation that writers and critics will be able to offer analysis of humanity's relationship with nature in some way, since creative modes of representing nature have evolved from early idyllic depictions of the pastoral to presenting it as a victim of humanity's insatiable quest for natural resources that is quite literally destroying Earth. In 2013, William Hughes and Andrew Smith compiled a book of essays titled *Ecogothic*, which was the first collection to focus on how particular literary works have combined ecology with the gothic and horror genres, and how this is further reflected in such works through humanity's relationship with animals. Hughes and Smith emphasise the comparative connection between the ecogothic, with "its presumptive dystopianism", and the works of the Romantics, which they argue "illustrates how nature becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological" (2013, 3). Affixing ecocriticism onto the Gothic brings forth representations of landscape that are not simply dystopic tropes, but rather in such works there is an effort to see nature through the prisms of gender, class, and race. The ecogothic turn in ecocriticism similarly coincides with the development of metaphorical and symbolic understandings of the uncanniness of animals *vis a vis* humans, exemplified by monstrous animals such as werewolves popularised in the Victorian period onward. Perhaps there is no better example demonstrating the uncanny relationship between human and animals than that illustrated by Jacques Derrida in *The Animal Therefore I Am* (2008), where he deconstructs what an animal means to modern readers, displaying it as a construction based on what the human is not. In othering the animal and then endorsing it through acknowledging their essentiality, there is a double questioning and a double construction of their subjectivity against us. Derrida shared this moral quandary by voicing his inferiority in relation to the animal Other in front of an audience in 1997, and by having his little cat stare at him while naked, Derrida states he is sure that he is in the presence of "an existence that refuses to be conceptualized" (9). The animal, in this case, reveals to Derrida some truths about his existence and what it means to be a human, and thus redefines human-animal linguistic interaction. The nature of human/animal interaction is the quintessential focal point of animal studies and to a lesser extent also within the field of ecocriticism. However, to establish an ecogothic spectrum between human and animal, the former keeps the latter at bay lest it disrupts what has been regarded as the norm for humans. Conceptualizing the animal 'without' in the Derridean sense and the impact they have on humans is far from being a one-dimensional, one-way interaction.

Beyond the monstrous and sublime animals portrayed in poetry during the Victorian and Romantic age, the Georgian period saw an increase in the idealisation of nature, but this soon evaporated with the onset of World War I. More specifically, the Great War poets held conflicted ideas of nature, which often reflected national

glorification or natural destruction as a consequence of war. Soldier poets in World War I, who lamented the loss of innocence, immersed in nostalgia, and who were devastated about what they witnessed during the war, captured the destructions around them in their poetry. Nature was sometimes depicted as a bloodthirsty force and yet also as often as a compassionate mother receiving her fallen soldiers, and the dying of animals and humans together is a prominent motif that haunts such soldier-poets' works. With this in mind, elements of the Gothic became inseparable from the poets' experience of war and the tropes they used to write about it. In particular, this article focuses on the work of English poet Isaac Rosenberg. Unlike Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, or Siegfried Sassoon, Rosenberg is not considered a major war poet, in fact he was the only poet who was a Private during the war, whereas these others famously occupied higher military ranks. Coming from a Jewish Russian immigrant family steeped in poverty in the East End of London, Rosenberg was excluded from such circles because of his background, socio-economically and religiously. In contrast, Brooke was widely considered to be a hero of the Great War and 'The' war poet, praising in his poetry the glory of England and the righteousness of the war despite not being involved in combat or the conflict in general (he died from blood poisoning caused by a mosquito bite aboard a ship on his way to battle). Rosenberg, in contrast, died in combat on April's Fool Day in 1918, seven months before the Armistice was signed. Rosenberg's socio-economic context, his lived experience of isolation, created a poet with a sense of cynicism absent from the war poetry of his aforementioned contemporaries. With the realisation of the absurdity of life, immortality, fame, war, and especially man's will that war brought, Rosenberg produced a different set of imageries in his war poems to that of his contemporaries. His death on April's Fool Day was a suitable way to end the life of a poet who lived his life and career in obscurity, seizing the chance to mock England's futile war while giving his life to it.

The article examines, using Kristevan analysis, the depiction of animals in war poetry, through a study of Rosenberg's war poems specifically. Gothic elements in war poetry extend beyond describing the wretchedness of war and its horrors, and Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches," "Dead Man's Dump," and "Louse Hunting" have not yet been thoroughly examined as *ecogothic* war poems. The animals in these poems, lying side by side with humans in the trenches, this article argues, are examples of the *ecogothic* forcing the soldiers to re-examine their roles in the war and reassess their collapsing identity in the face of death. The famous "Sardonic rat" of Rosenberg's 1916 poem "Break of Day in the Trenches" is one such example that will be explored to show how the poet utilised this human-animal relationship amidst the chaos and man-made annihilation of war (1949, 73). The rat becomes the superior being despite being depicted as abject and inferior. The rat, as it were, points out to Rosenberg, or the soldier-poet, human degradation. Reading Rosenberg's 'lesser creatures' - rats and lice - through Kristevan lenses drawn from *Powers of Horror* (1982), reveals Rosenberg's language and images parallel significantly with how Kristeva introduces the abject, which symbolises the eruption of the Real. In other words, this article seeks to bring together the poetry of the Great War, the *ecogothic*,

and the abject, to suggest a different reading of the human relationship *vis a vis* the animal along the boundaries of 'without' and 'within'.

Focusing on abject animal imageries in Rosenberg's poetry introduces a new perspective to studies on poetry of the Great War. Gothic elements have been elucidated upon in war poetry in England, and in American literature during the Civil War, for the association between the Gothic and the war was not lost on writers of that generation. For instance, in *Her Private, We*, Frederic Manning fictionalises his experience during his enlistment in the war depicting soldiers as "unhouseled ghosts" (1988, 117). Stylistically speaking, the poets made use of a gothic repertoire in their representation of the war. As Jahan Ramazani (1991) has argued, there was a considerable shift from pastoral poems into writing anti-pastoral and anti-elegiac ones. The poets recoiled from conventions that delineated between gothic elements and war horrors, and additionally introduced some elements of satire and irony, both of which presented unconventional tropes of the gothic to express the irony of the war which was perceived as an "absurd event" (Puissant 2009, 4). The poets of the Great War, Ramazani argues, "save[d] a genre of pathos for an era of irony" (1991, 582). Moreover, Sandra M. Gilbert illustrates how gothic and antipastoral elegies were the dominant forms of self-expression for the soldier poets, she states:

the earth that ought to have been (as in pastoral) a consoling home for the living and a regenerative grave for the dead had become instead a grave for the living and a home for the dead (1999, 184).

Similarly, Gilbert argues that Rosenberg's representation of the landscape was not "regenerative" but "degenerative," affirming how Rosenberg and other poets of his generation gothicised a war experience that appeared to offer no great turning point or hope for humanity (ibid, 185).

In addition to antipastoral and anti-elegiac elements of war poetry, the twin lenses of ecocriticism and Gothic studies can together shed new light on how nature, death, and dying were handled by soldier poets. The recent expansion of Gothic studies into such areas has resulted in multiple publications that coalesce with animal studies, such as Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* (1989), Cary Wolf's *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (2003), Giorgio Agamben's *The Open, Man and Animal* (2002), and many others. Therefore, it is a worthwhile exercise to consider the application of these new methodologies to the poetry of the Great War. Admittedly, it was easier for the soldier-poets in question to shake off realism or pastoral elements in their poetry after they witnessed the absurdity of the war and the degradation of civilization first-hand. For this reason, their defiance, including Rosenberg's defiance against certain poetic forms, manifested itself in mystifying the Other, a figure that is usually a source of fear in Gothic texts. The Other is simultaneously read as part of their society, themselves, and the anxiety that pervaded war poems since it was something which distinctively changed not only the nature around them, but also forever tarnished their beings. This

article therefore seeks to address the specific imageries regarding human interaction with animals, literal or symbolic, against the background of the gothic horror of the Great War which has not yet been fully elaborated on in current scholarship. It argues that the Other in Rosenberg's poems manifests itself in the form of abject animals, and proposes that considering the abject alongside the ecogothic adds another dimension to the psychological turmoil the soldier-poets experienced during and after the war.

Kristeva defines the abject moment as one in which we come face to face with the shocking Real in corpses, blood, body fluids, defilement or other types of wretched matter, explaining that:

the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject [...] Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us (1982, 4).

War poems acknowledge the eruption of the Real in war, the dead men, the downtrodden animal, the stench of death, and the deterioration of mankind; however, when coming so close to such images of the abject, "meaning collapses" (1982, 2). The soldier-poet witnessed the abjection of animals, reflecting, at the same time, the decay within the poet and the disarray of his society. More specifically, the sardonic rat of Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" is one such example that reminds the soldier-poet of the realities the latter has chosen to suppress, and thus, meaning is collapsed only to give space for other meanings. The rat has drawn the soldier-poet's attention to the pettiness of war and the fragility of man and literalises the absence of difference between humans and animals. The border between sanity and insanity has been disrupted by the rat who comes and goes at its own will and forcing, at the same time, the watcher to behold truths transcending the darkness of the trenches. Jerrold E. Hogle affirms the connection between the abject object or non-object with the gothic describing the confrontation with the abject as "hovering between logically contradictory states"; it is a "betwixt-and-betweenness" that we strive to propel out of our understanding of identity (2012, 498). Everything the soldier-poet believes in regarding the war, and the existential questions it raises, evaporates as the rat's existence and sardonic attitude stand contradictory to everything the soldier-poet himself stands for. The shocking element of the abject in the Gothic is when we get too close to the Real, and Kristeva attests that the best language to express the abject is in poetry, for it is "a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges" (1982, 38). Rosenberg, in this aspect, introduces the abject animal in his poem to shed light on how this very same abjection has become inseparable from humans. The animal, a rat, regarded for so long by humans to be a lesser creature, illustrates the abjection of humanity lost during the Great War. There is a constant rejection and exclusion of the abject for the self to appear pure and rational. The abject 'lesser' animals in Rosenberg's poems are there to force the soldier-poet, and the readers, to restructure meaning, to challenge the period's nationalistic sense of pride, and to see the horrors of war from a soldier's perspective.



Unlike the classical trope of Romantic and Gothic literature where man partakes on a journey of mastery to tame nature, to understand it, and then to dominate it, Rosenberg's animals are like the soldier himself: overwhelmed, fatigued, and, eventually, dead. In this case, the abject, that is man and animal, is at the mercy of a different prism of ecogothic where manmade destruction subjugates nature and turns it into a grotesque manifestation of the prevailing power hierarchy. The animal representations in Rosenberg's poetry do not reflect the dark side of nature as much as they shed light on the horrifying side of human nature and industrialism. Rosenberg, the soldier-poet in the trenches, can only see and smell corrupted nature around him sprouting forth hideous creatures that make manifest the malicious desire fuelling the war. The tropes of the ecogothic when read in Rosenberg's poetry reveal the ways in which he translated the horror of the war into poetry that employed grotesque images to maintain the visceral reality without cliché. In our contemporary period of environmental awareness currently marked by debates over climate change, it is impressive to read how Rosenberg's poetry combines the violation nature and humans alike well before ecocriticism marked its importance in academic discussion. Ecogothic, in this content, then, is not about what horrors nature hides from us, but it is a reflection of how humanity and its greed have sullied it beyond measure.

### **Abject Animals in "Dead Man's Dump" and "Break of Day in the Trenches"**

Gothic narratives aided the soldier-poets in describing the violence of the Great War, in which mutilated bodies, sham glories, and psychological trauma are the lasting memories for the surviving soldiers. In the edited collection *War Gothic in Literature and Culture*, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke have collated essays that reveal the affinity between war and gothic narratives, and the production of a "War Gothic aesthetic" that harks back to the Romantics during the French Revolution (2016, xiv). Soltysik and Hantke further place emphasis on the influence of gothic tropes in World War I literature, even though the American Civil War is often most associated with gothic war literature as a genre. Rosenberg's poetry is rife with gothic tropes, for example, "Dead Man's Dump" includes imagery that maximise the physical and psychological horror to the point where the battle scene is as grotesque as the reason for the fight:

A man's brains splattered on  
A stretcher-bearer's face;  
His shook shoulders slipped their load,  
But when they bent to look again  
The drowning soul was sunk too deep  
For human tenderness.  
They left this dead with the older dead,  
Stretched at the cross roads. (1949, 81)

In this poem, not only are dead humans piled on top of each other, but elements of ecogothic are also present. The goriness of the description stretches through time and

place on the battlefield, where old and new lost souls are only a heap on the ground for earth to keep. In a way, the fallen bodies are a testimony of a brutal war whose hunger has swallowed humans and spat them out to rot in the land. "Dead Man's Dump" illustrates elements of the ecogothic through its depiction of Earth, which is personified, and depicted as bloodthirsty and awaiting the falling soldiers to shed their blood for Earth's own pleasure:

Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your bowel  
Seared by the jagged fire, the iron love,  
The impetuous storm of savage love.  
Dark Earth! dark Heavens! swinging in chemic smoke,  
What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul  
With lightning and thunder from your mined heart,  
Which man's self dug, and his blind fingers loosed? (1949, 81)

The personification of Earth is a common theme found in war poetry, especially in Rosenberg's poetry. In the stanza extracted above, elements of the gothic are clear in this personification through the imageries of Earth's "bowel / Seared by jagged fire," and of its "kissing" the soldiers with "lightning and thunder" from its "mined heart". Nature in "Dead Man's Dump" is not benevolent nor is it sympathetic to the fate "self dug" by man himself. Although Earth, personified as the femme fatale in these lines, welcomes the fallen young bodies, it has not been spared from degradation and pollution created by man's chemical war on its surface. Both man and 'Mother Nature' seem to be unable to escape the war without it leaving a permanent scar on their bodies. In this case, Rosenberg's forward thinking about Earth precedes recent ecocritical studies.

"Break of Day in the Trenches," written in 1916, is one of the most analysed of Rosenberg's poems. It begins with a gothic-like atmosphere of darkness crumbling away only to show "A queer sardonic rat" in the trenches. Since rats were a sight often seen in the trenches, other poets like Herbert Asquith in his "After the Salvo" (1917) deal with this creature's relationship with the soldiers, however the treatment of the animal is different between the two poems. Whereas in Asquith's "They go, the gray rat and the brown:/ A pistol cracks: they too are dead," (ibid) Rosenberg's rat baffles the soldier-poet as it is free to come and go as it pleases between the two enemy lines:

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.  
Now you have touched this English hand  
You will do the same to a German  
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure  
To cross the sleeping green between. (1949, 73)

"The roles of the soldier and the rat have become inverted," suggests Fred Crawford, as the soldier is trapped in the trenches while the rat is moving freely, unencumbered

by futility of the war that is about to end the life of the soldier-poet (1988, 197). Jon Silkin reads the movement of the rat as representing “the absurdity of the situation by permitting that rat, a supposedly lesser creature, to do what the men dare not” (1972, 277). John Lehmann comments that all the rat cares about is how to survive, as it appears indifferent to the two enemies (1982, 120). Nevertheless, the rat further complicates the relationship between the watching soldier and the being-watched creature with this image:

It seems you inwardly grin as you pass  
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,  
Less chanced than you for life,  
Bonds to the whims of murder,  
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,  
The torn fields of France (1949, 73)

Not only have critics heavily examined the descriptors “queer” and “sardonic,” but also the “grin” that the lesser creature displays in defiance of the superior human. Silkin reads this grin as follows:

The relationship between the rat and the man is a hierarchal one, but it is also a mirror that answers much more than reflecting merely what is presented to it. The grin is the answer, the point at which man has almost lost the capacity to save himself, and tragedy must issue from such loss of potentiality (1972, 279).

The injured sense of pride begins with the rat mocking the “haughty athletes” and ends with the soldier asking the rat to look him in the eye and see nothing but “the shrieking iron and flame/ Hurlled through still heavens” (1949, 73).

The analysis of the rat should not stop at the symbolic level by reading it as representative of the devastation of the war alone, since Rosenberg’s poems have not been studied through critical lenses such as the ecogothic and the abject. When Yeats was compiling his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, he intentionally left out war poets, for they only wrote poems about “passive suffering” (1936, xxxiv). They did not have, according to Yeats, a “modern vocabulary” that would have made their poetry and suffering meaningful (*ibid.*, xxxv-xxxvi). Yet, strangely enough, war poets continue to be read and taught, even to this day, despite Yeats’ dissatisfaction. Rosenberg painted the horror of war in a satiric way, bringing together humans, animals, and the earth itself as sites of destruction in the war that should have ended all wars, and I argue that it is this image of the sardonic rat that marks Rosenberg as a pioneer in the representation of the gothic animal’s influence on, and abject relationship with the soldier-poet. Rosenberg’s poetry, as many critics attest, departs from Georgian literature and is closer to the gothic aesthetic of his predecessors, the Romantics. Regarding the rat as a gothic element further confuses the boundary between human and animals, since in *Dangerous Bodies: Historicizing the Gothic*

*Corporeal*, Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues that in order to have a sense of the gothic, there should be a “consensual formation of a monstrous alterity,” where “the existence of otherness in the world is most apparent through its corporeality,” and this creation of the monstrous other is the central element through which the monstrosity manifested in the other’s body causes “confusion and the blurring of boundaries out of which liminality manifests as an object of fear” (2016, 3). The free movement of the rat and its intentional oblivion to enemy lines constitute a monstrosity in an animal deemed as a lesser creature. In Rosenberg’s poem, the rat is “an object of fear” for the soldier-poet in that it appears superior, and the grin further testifies the grotesqueness of the monstrous rat and the sense of alienation that the soldier-poet feels, especially that the rat seems to be unaffected by the destruction of war, unlike the rats in Asquith’s poem who “too are dead” (1917). Instead, the sardonic rat is the only living thing in the trench, thus intensifying the metaphorical (and eventually literal) death of the soldier’s humanity in the horror of war.

### **Lice in “The Immortals” and “Louse Hunting”**

Lice are other lesser creatures that have made their way into Rosenberg’s poetry to be representative of the abject animal. In “The Immortals,” the soldier-poet is defeated by a lice invasion on his body and clothes (1949, 78). To imagine the soldier who turns his hand red as he is ripping his skin off to kill the lice is a gothic image in the utmost sense since the soldier’s fear has become realised in the face of his defeat against lice:

I killed and killed with slaughter mad;  
I killed till all my strength was gone.  
And still they rose to torture me,  
For Devils only die in fun (1949, 78)

The killing in the battle against the louse is more important, more essential, to the soldier-poet, for this battling with the vermin echoes the soldier’s looming defeat in the larger battle of the war. The dirty, devilish louse haunts Rosenberg’s soldier-poet persona in “Louse Hunting” where the pronoun is no longer “I” but “we” as a whole group of soldiers are all partaking in a war against the lice (1949, 79). The imagery in this poem exaggerate the act of hunting the louse so that it appears more significant for the soldiers than their war with the enemy. The soldiers’ limbs are lit on fire as the lice are sucking the life out of them, and to strike back the soldiers come together to defeat the abject in the form of the lice:

Then we all sprang up and stript.  
To hunt the verminous brood.  
Soon like a demons’ pantomime  
The place was raging.  
See the silhouettes agape,  
See the gibbering shadows  
Mixed with the battled arms on the wall.

See gargantuan hooked fingers  
Pluck in supreme flesh  
To smutch supreme littleness (1949, 79)

The pantomime show of the soldiers afflicting more harm and pain on their flesh intensifies the hopelessness of their defeat. The abject louse has awakened their bodies and senses to disturbing existence when the soldiers before were “half lulled/ By the dark music/ Blown from Sleep’s trumpet” (1949, 79). Kristeva considers an encounter with the abject as an eruption of “primal repression” that has found “an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection” (1982, 11). This eruption is manifested in the louse, for the act of hunting them has violently tossed the soldiers into witnessing the abject, since the soldiers refuse to believe that they are being attacked and defeated by verminous creature when the soldiers’ role is supposed to be one of courage and honour. The poem’s juxtaposition between the “supreme flesh” and “supreme littleness” of the human and animal indicates man’s illusion of superiority in the relationship, similar to the encounter between the sardonic rat and the “haughty athletes” soldiers. The more the soldiers are stripped away from their delusions of masculinity, nationality, and righteous war fantasies, the more the war against rats and lice becomes an eruption of primal repression.

But why does the soldier-poet feel threatened by grotesque and lesser creatures like rats and lice amidst actual war? Beyond the symbolisms of these lesser creatures, the primal confrontation with these abject animals create in the soldier-poet a sense of confusion that renders the human closer to the animal, and inferior to its powers, and herein lies the essence of the horror. Similarly, Kristeva further shows the relation between the abject, blood, and animal where the latter “inherits the propensity for murder of which man must cleanse himself” (1982, 96). The comical literal and symbolic fight against the lice additionally accentuates the inseparability of the lice from the claimed bodies of the soldiers. The war-like image of the soldiers ferociously fighting against lice, as they do fellow humans in battle, is an example of the abject/abomination relationship revealed to exist with the ‘lesser’ creatures of war. If the soldiers had won their battle, they would have safeguarded their humanity and superiority; however, “Louse Hunting” and the “Immortals” clearly show the survival of the lice instead. Ironically, the soldiers are consumed with their attack to defeat the lice, while the original enemy is absent yet ever-present in these poems of war. The soldier-poet’s sense of patriotism weakens, and instead he is preoccupied with lesser creatures and not with the enemy. As a result, the degraded and abjected presence of the lice, in a way, has helped the soldier-poet shift his blind commitment from the war to recognising his own debilitating body.

## **Conclusion**

From Rosenberg’s sardonic rat mocking the soldier to Derrida’s cat shaming the critic for his nakedness, there is a growing awareness, and apprehension, of humanity

coming face to face with the animal Other as a potential equal. In this article, I have argued that the role of the abject Other helps the soldier-poet redefine himself against the backdrop of a raging war. I have read Rosenberg's poems to highlight elements of the ecogothic where both animals and humans equally suffer during the war. This examination shifts the focus from the soldier to fully observe the animals mentioned in the poems. In doing so, I have argued how the animal-centred poems provide a new way of studying gothic elements in World War I poetry. Consequently, the liminality of the soldier's identity is enhanced as he realises his distance from the man-made chaos and the indifferent animal. Whereas this imagery bears resemblance to werewolves functioning as identities of differences, the soldier-poet's humanity is questioned not for being different, but for being unable to live up to the Enlightenment assumptions of what it means to be a human. I have also argued how the gothic animal functions as a site of defiance of ideals held for so long about the rational human, and Rosenberg, in this respect, is a modernist who not only lamented the wretchedness of man and society, but also re-examined tropes of interaction between the human and the animal portraying the latter as having the upper hand and able to flee man's self-destructive tendencies. The Gothic Other, in this sense, is the monstrous that forces the human to face realities that would shake the power hierarchy of human over animal. Michel Foucault pertinently describes the pattern in Gothic narrative as always about "the abuse of power and exactions" (2004, 212). Rosenberg's rats and lice alter the purpose of their role in these poems, and in the soldier-poet's experience, as abjected bodies awaken the soldier-poet's understanding of injustices in the war they are fighting. The soldier-poet, through his poems, refuses to applaud the national carnage unfolding before him.

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## **“Orphans of ticking time”: Armand’s Experience of Immortality as Duration and Desynchronization in Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles***

### **ABSTRACT**

*This article aims to explore how Anne Rice’s vampire Armand experiences immortality and their perception of temporality as infused by the past. Because they are frozen in time, Rice’s undead are disconnected from the fabric of everydayness that characterises human existence. I will argue that for Armand, immortality is experienced as duration, with an utter desynchronization from the mortals’ world, and a lack of empathy that underpins the vampire’s liminality. By relying on Henri Bergson’s theories regarding duration, on Thomas Fuchs’s concept of desynchronization between individuals, and on Amy Coplan’s conceptualisation of empathy, I propose a reading of immortality as a displacement and a loss of the notion of temporality, which leads to the vampire’s loss of meaning. Armand’s relationships with both humans and vampires, presented in *The Vampire Chronicles* can be read as the vampire’s attempt at a vicarious understanding of change and a struggle to reconnect with the chronoculture of the humans. If Armand’s liaisons are meant to give meaning and sequence the vampiric eternity, these have their own consequences on humans’ sense of time.*

**Keywords:** vampire, immortality, duration, desynchronization, empathy, Anne Rice, Gothic

As metaphors for eternal beauty and history, vampires symbolise the disturbance of a linear and coherent sense of time in which the notion of everydayness dissolves into that of timelessness. Different representations of the vampire in popular culture – such as Anne Rice’s Lestat, Louis, and Armand; Jim Jarmusch’s Adam in *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) and Len Wiseman’s Selene in *Underworld* (2003) – depict immortals that feel disconnected from the human world, more attuned with the past rather than the present. Anne Rice’s narratives explore at length the illusions of immortality contrasted by the subsequent self-loathing at taking human lives. In doing so, Rice utilises the Gothic to convey the horror of displacement and loss of meaning that the undead experience as they no longer perceive the passing of time in an ever-changing world of the living.

In addition to mirroring humanity’s fears and anxieties regarding death, intentional contamination, and parasitism, the figure of the vampire is intrinsically connected to the past. Simon Bacon and Katarzyna Bronk read the vampire in relation to the concept of “undead memory” as “a way in which communities not only record the times they are living in, but also how the present is joined to and contains memories of the past” (2013, 2). Furthermore, in “‘Old things, fine things’: Of Vampires, Antique Dealers and Timelessness”, Sorcha Ní Fhlainn advances the idea that vampires generally “present themselves to the outside world as keepers of the past” (2013, 183). Since the undead, and Rice’s vampires especially, carry the past with them as a haunted artifact, it is important to explore how they experience immortality and timelessness in relation to memories that seem more vivid than the present. This experience of the past as bleeding into the present is one of the aspects underpinning Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville’s concept of “living Gothic”; more specifically, it reveals living practices that expose “the Gothic’s obsessions with death and the mutability of the past” (2014, 2). The “living Gothic” is important for my following discussion because it provides an approach to subjective experiences and an exploration of how “those characteristic ‘gothic’ feelings of finality and immortality” permeate the vampires’ existence liminal to the socio-cultural fabric of the world (ibid, 2). Rice’s entire series *The Vampire Chronicles* can be considered as an example of the “living Gothic” because events from the past, whether in the form of dreams, ghosts, or memories and stories, return to haunt and influence the present. Through a plot that at times works in a concentric manner, stories are relived and retold by different vampire narrators who offer subjective accounts of events while adding crucial information that invites new interpretations. As Leigh McLennon (2015) observes, Rice operates “a retroactive change to the facts of continuity” in which the present cannot unravel without a repeated looking back into the past.

In this article, I focus on Armand’s subjective experience of eternity to show that Rice’s vampires are at odds with their immortality and their perception of

temporality because they have literally fallen outside the order of time. Although they enjoy eternal life, the undead observe the passing of time in retrospect, that is, after the change in eras and the advancements in technology have already occurred. As a result, the human world becomes more and more incomprehensible, while the undead grow utterly desynchronized from the modern times they live in, trapped in a liminal limbo of timelessness. This means that vampires need humans not only for the blood that sustains them but also for making sense of the coming of every new age. Therefore, this article seeks to examine how the Rician vampire experiences immortality in comparison to human temporality. More specifically, I propose an analysis of Armand's accounts of eternity and his relationships with both humans and vampires presented in Rice's novels *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), *Queen of the Damned* (1988), and *The Vampire Armand* (1998). By applying the concept of "living Gothic" in exploring how Armand perceives timelessness, this discussion will highlight duration, desynchronization, and lack of empathy as living experiences that underpin the vampire's liminality. In doing so, I propose a reading of Armand's relationships with humans as intermediaries to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The vampire's displacement into an ultra-modern age has become "a narrative device" that, as Sorcha Ní Fhlainn argues, is meant "to set up the vampire's alienation, at first marked by his/her extreme difference, and eventual confluence with contemporary culture, as a physical monument or object from the past" (2013, 187). In this sense, the vampire's challenge is to overcome its anachronistic nature and secure a place in mortals' society. While most of Rice's vampires struggle to cope with their supernatural existence and find some sense of meaning in eternity, Armand is one of the most compelling vampire characters because he describes at length how he feels the burden of falling out of time. To understand Armand's temporal liminality, his struggle to grasp the ever-revolving centuries of the human world, I argue that it is necessary to explore his relationships not in terms of eroticism but as processes of resynchronization to the state of the world at a certain point in time. This so-called tuning to a seeming chrono-culture supposes a reaggregation or a grounding of the vampire into the human world of the nineteenth century per his relationship with Louis, and of the twentieth century by his relying on Daniel, as well as Sybelle and Benji.

### **Duration and Desynchronization**

Rice's undead are depicted in a temporal suspension that resonates with Victor Turner's concept of the liminal period as "an interval [...] when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun" (1982, 44). Turner's theories allude to the Gothic especially since, in the liminal stage, the novices are associated with ghosts and gods, and even animals on account of being "dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world" (ibid, 27). Similarly, vampires are reduced to a state of volatility, and, arguably, of spectrality because their bodies are frozen in time and hence not subject to change. As such, vampires are no longer

able to experience time from within the temporal fabric of the world. They are locked in infinity as a continuous string of present moments permeated by meaningful memories of the past. If Bram Stoker's *Dracula* considers eternity to be an ally in comparison to the evanescence of the "Crew of Light" – "time is on my side" (2006, 275) – Rice's vampires have a more complex perception of time: first as a blessing, but as centuries pass, a gradual and unbearable curse.

Henri Bergson's conceptualisation of *durée* or duration is key for understanding how Rice's vampires, and especially Armand, perceive eternity as timeless contrasting the evanescence of humans' temporality. Bergson differentiates between duration as a subjective experience and time understood as measurable and equivalent to space. His idea of "pure duration" refers to "a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines" (Bergson 2008, 104). Conversely, time regarded in scientific terms is that "which our clocks divide into equal portions" (*ibid*, 107). As we shall see, for Armand, the perception of time coincides with the experience of duration as past and present are superimposed by means of memories as opposed to a meaningless present.

If Armand refers to vampires "as poor orphans of ticking time [who] know no other means of measure but those of sequence," and if the "tale can't be told without one link being connected to the other," it can be inferred that Rice's undead do not perceive time as spatialised and measurable, but refer to it as interconnected events and emotions (Rice 1998, 290). This coincides with Bergson's difference between duration and time in relation to the opposition between qualitative and quantitative processes. What results from the accumulation of moments perceived qualitatively is the intensity of the sensation, and not the measurable quantity that Bergson assigns, in fact, to the source of the sensation. This aspect emerges as Armand describes his experience of time as duration because events are linked, superimposed, but by no means discrete and countable. For example, when asked by David to recount and dictate his story, Armand finds it difficult to serialise events and resorts to emotions to organise his memories: "Let me be the one to cry and to rant and to rail. [...] Ah, I'm so disorganized, so browbeaten by what I remember" (Rice 1998, 25). Not surprisingly, Armand begins his story with his painful memory of being a slave sold to the Turks before Marius saves him and takes him to his Venetian palazzo.

Although vampires do not count time, they do refer to humans' time measurements to convey their age. For example, Armand is said to have existed for four hundred years in *Interview*, and five hundred years in *Queen of the Damned*. If as Bergson argues, "time, understood in the sense of a medium in which we make distinctions and count, is nothing but space" this would mean that Rice's vampires do acquire some sense of time as they accumulate years in immortality (Bergson 2008, 91). However, this spatialisation and quantitative rendition of time to convey the vampire's age is annulled in Rice's narrative through the metaphor of the whirlwind for immortality. This contradiction appears when Armand refers to his existence: "after five hundred greedy years in this whirlwind" (Rice 1998, 94). Rather than

structuring the vampiric eternity, this reference to time is overshadowed by the lust for blood and the indeterminacy of the whirlwind, which confirms the idea that Rice's vampires endure in a liminal existence.

For Maria Beville, the Gothic is "a way of living; a way of seeing; and [...] a way of remembering" (2014, 54). Armand's obsession with the past illustrates the corollaries of immortality:

I'm trimmed in memories as if in old furs. I lift my arm and the sleeve of memory covers it. I look around and see other times. But you know what frightens me the most – it is that this state, like so many others with me, will prove the verge of nothing but extend itself over centuries (Rice 1998, 14).

Here, Armand's condition is even more problematic in the sense that the coexistence of past and present is not simply structured or triggered by associations, but memory functions like a superimposed artefact that highlights elements of the past. Armand finds himself in an empty present that only enhances the reminiscence of the past to such an extent that his sense of time is constituted by a replay of memories.

In *Interview with the Vampire*, Armand seems to be utterly alienated from the nineteenth century, which is the time he lives in, or rather witnesses liminally. His discussion with Louis abounds in temporal metaphors that point to his perception of duration as a continuous flow where memories are retrievable and invoked by present sensations. In his attempt to grasp the present, Armand temporalizes other vampires and humans, relying on them as sensual referents of time. This idea first emerges in his discussion with Louis, when Armand refers to Claudia as a temporal sequence:

She's an era for you, an era of your life. If and when you break with her, you break with the only one alive who has shared that time with you. You fear that, the isolation of it, the burden, the scope of eternal life (Rice 1976, 280).

The term "era", which refers to the quality of a particular period of time rather than the actual number of years it comprises, is essential for understanding how Armand perceives Louis's relationship with Claudia as a mere episode within eternity. Armand recognises Louis's anxiety as the fear of timelessness, characterised as the unbound and meaningless time, and it is a fear to which every vampire is prone to succumb.

Armand introduces yet another problem: "How many vampires do you think have the stamina for immortality?" (Rice 1976, 280). Here, he refers to the falling out of time, an idea rooted in the incongruity between the physical unchanged state of the vampire and the tides of centuries that refashion the human world. In other words, we have the image of a vampire that is earthbound and stands still in a sea of change: "all things change except the vampire himself; everything except the vampire is subject to constant corruption and distortion" (Rice 1976, 280). The disillusion with

the present can be read as an aspect of the living Gothic: if vampires no longer participate or relate to the objects or features of the human time, they can only connect to their vivid reminiscences. Interestingly, Armand does not perceive change as progress, but as “corruption” and “distortion”, which suggests that the contemporary world – the nineteenth century in *Interview* and the twentieth century in *Queen of the Damned* – is meaningless and incomprehensible.

Hopelessness, alienation, and an acute sense of guilt regarding the act of killing that is both abhorrent and necessary are recurrent tropes in Armand’s generalisation on how vampires experience eternity:

One evening a vampire rises and realizes what he has feared perhaps for decades, that he simply wants no more of life at any cost. That whatever style or fashion or shape of existence made immortality attractive to him has been swept off the face of the earth (Rice 1976, 281).

This loss of meaning and the subsequent suicidal tendency can be read in line with Thomas Fuchs’s concept of “melancholic depression” detailed in his article “Melancholia as a Desynchronization: Towards a Psychopathology of Interpersonal Time” (2001). Fuchs argues that individuals who cannot reconcile with the feelings of guilt or loss develop a “complete desynchronization” with their social environment; which in turn leads to “melancholic depression” (ibid, 182). Melancholia, according to Fuchs, results from the “uncoupling in the temporal relation [...] of individual and society” (ibid, 179). From this perspective, Rice’s vampires experience moments of utter disconnection from the world, which prompts them to question the reason for their existence. The effect of desynchronization is signified by despair, also referred to as a so-called terminal point in which a vampire would commit suicide: “And nothing remains to offer freedom from despair except the act of killing. And that vampire goes out to die” (Rice 1976, 281).

Armand counterbalances timelessness, melancholic depression, and the subsequent suicidal tendency by attempting to establish a re-synchronization with human temporality by means of his relationships with either human or vampire intermediaries. Although at first sight this turn towards humans for making sense of timelessness can be interpreted as another parasitical consumption of meaning, Armand’s *modus operandi* bears certain similarities with Fuchs’s idea of “synchronization” among individuals. More precisely, Fuchs argues that individuals normally undergo a constant process of “synchronization” by means of what he calls the “microdynamics of everyday contact” with others (2001, 181). This synchronization, according to Fuchs, occurs at a non-verbal communication level but also as a tuning in to others’ timeframes which leads to “the feeling of being in accord with the time of the others, and to liv[ing] with them in the same, intersubjective time” (ibid, 181).

Either as a Faustian pact, a parasitic or rather queer connection, the trope of the human intermediary for the vampire is recurrent in Gothic narratives, such as in Stoker's *Dracula*, where the Count needs Harker to purchase estates in England, or in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* where the vampire is left in the care of Laura's father by a precipitated mother. In King's *Salem's Lot* Straker, however, Barlow's emissary, acquires the old Marsten house and the shop. In *Interview with the Vampire*, Rice follows the established traditional theme of the vampire who gains access to the home and by extension the mortal world through a human proxy. This is emphasised by the vampire's desire of estate ownership, which, according to Louis, motivated Lestat to approach and transform him. However, Armand relies on humans or other vampires to facilitate his understanding of time and the changes it brings about. In *Interview* he enlists Louis, whereas in *Queen of the Damned* Armand relies on Daniel, the human journalist who interviewed Louis, and in *The Vampire Armand*, we find him again gravitating around Sybelle and Benji, in what seems to be yet another symbiotic relationship that gives him a sense of time.

### **Louis - "the spirit of the age"**

Armand can only witness the *mal de vivre* that takes over Paris in the nineteenth century without really grasping how humans experience it. When confirming Louis's fears that vampires do not fit in a category of evil because God never answered or punished the coven at *Theatre des Vampires*, Armand recognises in Louis the same nihilism that he was observing in the human world. In addition to being an observer of the signs of decadence in nineteenth-century Paris, Armand is involved in its artistic simulation. The theatrical representations of his group *Theatre des Vampires* reflect society's corruption and interest in artificiality, excess, as well as in the blurring of moral categories. Armand needs Louis as a poet of decadence, a personal Baudelaire, that would make the correspondence between the image of decay in the mortal world and the experience of that decay:

It is through you that I must make my link with this nineteenth century and come to understand it in a way that will revitalize me, which I so desperately need (Rice 1976, 283).

This means that despite being actively involved in reproducing and recasting aspects of the *maladie du siècle* on stage, Armand does not fully grasp how humans experience it. He opposes the vampires of the theatre company who, in his view, "reflect the age in [...] decadence whose last refuge is self-ridicule, a mannered helplessness", to the way Louis "reflect[s] its broken heart" (Rice 1976, 284).

By insisting that he needs Louis to reconnect with the nineteenth century, Armand privileges the temporal plane and, to a certain extent, ignores the spatial one. Admittedly, Armand can navigate the city space at will, but he forgets that Louis comes from New Orleans. Therefore, Louis's experience of the century would not accurately render the one of mortals in Paris. What Armand requires is not really a

guide to the century, but a first-person account of the experience one has when moral categories such as Louis's distinction between good and evil collapse.

Armand's mantra directed at Louis, "I must make contact with the age [...] you are the spirit, you are the heart", suggests that he attempts to establish a parasitic relationship with Louis in order to "feed on" the latter's hypersensitivity and finally attain the much-desired sense of the age (Rice 1976, 284). Contrary to Louis, what Armand lacks is empathy, more specifically the capacity of understanding what the nineteenth-century humans feel. If Armand does not have empathy for mortals, he recognises it in Louis as a hypersensitivity. In this sense, Amy Coplan's conceptualisation of empathy is particularly important in reading Armand's attempt to gain a perspective of humanity by relying on another. According to Coplan, empathy consists of a "complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation" (2011, 5). Armand is unable to empathise with humans because he remains a cold observer, endowed with a "vampire detachment" (Rice 1976, 250). To overcome this detachment, Armand attempts to "attune" to Louis's experience, and gain his perspective of the world in a process that appears to be consistent with what Coplan defines as "other-oriented perspective-taking" (Coplan 2011, 10). This would explain Armand's focus on Louis's emotions: "Tell me what you feel now, what makes you unhappy" (Rice 1976, 250). Armand tries to understand and absorb Louis's feelings, which in turn would provide a glimpse of the discontent in the mortal world. This attempt does not mean that Armand identifies with Louis or that Armand develops a certain degree of sensitivity. However, it does signal a conscious process of empathising with Louis because of the latter's deep connection with the mortal world, a connection that Armand wishes to re-establish in order to understand what experiencing the century feels like.

### **Daniel - "the Devil's Minion"**

In *Queen of the Damned*, Daniel Molloy is said to be obsessively looking for Lestat, intruding into his abandoned house, and playing the recordings of Louis's interview. However, it is not Lestat who answers to this technological conjuring but Armand. Not surprisingly, Armand turns Daniel into an experiment of a vicarious reconnection with the world of the humans. Armand explores the modernity of the twentieth century by following, or rather haunting, Daniel around the world. As a result, Daniel becomes a so-called guide for Armand who is adamant on understanding humanity based on the journalist's different choices in terms of the cities he visits or of the books he reads. The vampire's scope enlarges to obtain a greater understanding of the twentieth century, to which Daniel represents an open window.

Armand feeds on Daniel both for meaning and for blood, while parasitising the latter's sense of time: "You will tell me everything about this century. [...] You'll sleep when the sun rises, if you wish, but the nights are mine" (Rice 2008, 97). What is interesting about this process of resynchronization is that Armand requires Daniel to



adjust to the vampiric temporal rhythm by turning human everydayness into a parasitical *everynightness*. Armand attracts Daniel towards the vampiric liminal existence, which raises the question of whether the vampire adapts to the human world, or if it is in fact the human who adheres to the vampiric lifestyle. Armand also assumes ownership of Daniel's nights, to a certain extent invading his temporality. Even without being transformed, the journalist's sense of time is tampered with, if not reversed, and unbound from the cyclical succession of night and day.

The liminal encounters with Armand have a disorientating effect on Daniel, who slowly descends into madness and later attempts to escape from the vampire's influence by running away. Madness, as Louis Sass suggests in his *Madness and Modernism*, is a "condition involving decline or even disappearance of the role of rational factors in the organisation of human conduct and experience" (1992, 1). He further associates madness with multiple levels of lack in spatialising or ordering ideas logically, in exercising free will, and in detachment from the instinctual drives. The same distinctive characteristics, doubled by the distortion of internal and external time, can be observed in Daniel's case as he develops a complex symbiotic relationship with Armand. Echoing Harker's "brain fever" (Stoker 2006, 95) triggered by the traumatic event of discovering the Count in his coffin, Daniel's madness is presented in tones of uncertainty and a disrupted sense of reality:

Daniel lived only in two alternating states: misery and ecstasy, united by love. He never knew when he'd be given the blood. He never knew if things looked different because of it [...] or because he was just going out of his mind (Rice 2008, 101).

Daniel loses both sanity and clarity with regards to his environment partly because of the reverse in his sense of time, but mainly because of the vampire blood that he consumes. If TV series such as *True Blood* (2008-2014) or *Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) depict vampires giving injured humans small amounts of their supernatural blood in order to save them, Rice's narrative presents the descent into madness as a negative effect when humans repeatedly receive vampiric blood.

Conversely, Armand relies on Daniel in order to interact with the world in what appears as a form of possession: "[t]hat telephone, I want you to dial Paris, I want to see if it can really talk to Paris" (Rice 2008, 92). Here, Daniel functions as an intermediary body that operates a reality-testing for the vampire. Armand is later depicted as obsessed with manipulating other objects invented by mortals, gluttonously consuming signifiers of the human world in what appears to be a second step to his re-synchronization:

First it was kitchen blenders, in which he made frightful concoctions mostly based on the colours of the ingredients; then microwave ovens, in which he cooked roaches and rats. [...] Then it was telephones. [...] Finally, television

caught him up utterly, so that the flat was full of blaring speakers and flickering screens (Rice 2008, 98).

Armand consumes knowledge by (mis)handling human-made objects as an activity that immerses him into the mortal world. The progression of the objects that he manipulates bears certain similarities to Stoker's Renfield, who incorporates different forms of lives. By forming a trophic chain of flies, spiders, and sparrows, Renfield "absorb[s] as many lives as he can [...] in a cumulative way" (Stoker 2006, 70). In a similar pattern, Armand consumes the meaning of one signifier after the other, which later leads to his desire to possess humans' valuable objects from paintings to gems, planes, and boats. But behind Armand's gluttonous desire to consume and possess objects lies a superficial understanding of the twentieth century and its consumer society.

The gradual appropriation and recirculation of worldly objects enables the vampire to synchronize only superficially to human temporality. From this perspective, the fact that Armand claims to be "ready to enter this century in earnest, [because] he understood enough about it now" is highly problematic (Rice 2008, 101). It is not the temporal construction of the world or the fear of death that Armand understands, but the excess and the lure of consumption. In addition to the flawed synchronization that Armand has with the twentieth century, and although he achieves a level of materialisation and anchorage in the human world, the vampire grows desynchronized from Daniel.

Daniel's madness and his runaway periods point to the destructive effects of the parasitical relationship, for as Armand attains some degree of (mis)understanding of the century, Daniel's sense of time becomes increasingly deformed. Although Armand finally transforms Daniel into a vampire because he was dying, their relationship disintegrates. If as a human Daniel was Armand's intermediary to reality-testing, as a vampire Daniel is referred to as "a minion who saw [Armand] all the more clearly as a monster" (Rice 1998, 357). As such, Daniel's role changes drastically: he no longer reflects the human world, but the monstrosity of the undead one. Armand, however, explains the distance that grows between him and Daniel through an evocative metaphor of desynchronization: "[o]ur souls were out of tune" (Rice 1998, 357).

### **Sybelle and Benji**

Attracted by Sybelle's playing the *Appassionata* repeatedly and with a precision that he describes as "thundering beauty", Armand finds himself summoned by Benji's call for help, and so, despite the sun, he kills Sybelle's brother who could not bear her obsessive playing and wanted to take her life (Rice 1998, 306). However, after saving Sybelle, Armand exposes himself to sun, is burnt, and rendered powerless. What keeps him alive is Sybelle's *Appassionata* and its three movements. Later, Sybelle and Benji literally save Armand when they answer his call and provide him with an evil

victim. The human duo is particularly interesting because they strike the balance between duration and everydayness. If Sybelle loses herself in her music with its variations and repetitions, her twelve-year-old Arab friend and caretaker Benji appears to be very resourceful, especially as he uses cocaine to lure a victim for Armand.

Sybelle's compulsive playing of the three movements in the *Appassionata* provides a musical and temporal context to Armand's story in *The Vampire Armand*. But a closer look at the connection between each of the three parts of Beethoven's sonata points to a symbolical disruption of chronological time. Logically, the three movements of the *Appassionata* correspond to the past, present, and future, respectively. However, the fact that Sybelle plays it repeatedly can be interpreted as the representation of duration since notes and parts of the song bleed into each other. It should be noted that Bergson illustrates his conception of duration by referring to the notes of a song. He suggests that "the notes of a tune, [are] melting, so to speak, into one another" (Bergson 2008, 100). Like the interlaced notes that give the melody, the three movements in Sybelle's mindless playing diffuse into duration. In this sense, Sybelle's piano functions as a *perpetuum mobile* by which she ensures the flow of music and timelessness.

Armand is immersed in the quality of duration that he perceives in Sybelle's playing and he distinguishes the essential parts of the *Appassionata* as well as the alterations introduced by the piano player: "I knew how no two musical phrases she played were ever the same" (Rice 1998, 306). What Sybelle does by her obsessive playing of the *Appassionata* is to melt the past, present, and future – the triad that structures human existence – into a flow of emotions that echo vampiric eternity. Sybelle's sonata, considered in its three parts, relates to human existence; but its repetition, its variation, and continuity resonates with Armand's sense of immortality.

In securing the company of Sybelle and Benji, Armand makes another attempt at re-entering the twentieth century. The two most-cherished mortals provide Armand with a certain degree of synchronization to the human world because they entertain the idea of timelessness created by Sybelle's playing, and the sense of everydayness that Benji ensures. In fact, Armand describes Benji as a practical person who skilfully handles the bank, the personnel of the hotel where the trio lives, and takes care of Sybelle's routines, such as eating or clothing. Benji grounds Armand in the twentieth century and is responsible for the trio's exploration of the world by "wandering to the picture shows [...] to the symphony and the opera" (Rice 1998, 357). These successive cultural activities provide Armand with the much-desired connection to the world.

Armand's relationship with Sybelle is based on tacit mutual respect, especially as the vampire becomes immersed in the duration created by her performance: "[g]radually, I have become part of Sybelle's music. I am there with her and the phrases and movements of the *Appassionata* (Rice 1998, 359). Sybelle's music also

functions as a spatial indicator for Armand, the intimate connoisseur. After telling his story to David, Armand manages to locate the house where Sybelle and Benji were, only by listening for the sound of the sonata. At this point, Armand distinguishes the different parts of the *Appassionata* as successive discrete sections marked by new variations. Interestingly, Armand recognises the change in Sybelle as she plays the *Allegro assai*, the First Movement of the sonata: "It was played with an unusual ringing preciseness, indeed, a new languid cadence which gave it a powerful and ruby-red authority which I immediately loved" (Rice 1998, 373). Sybelle's song echoes her transformation as Armand observes the disintegration of duration into the component parts of the sonata, and even the precise notes of her playing. Symbolically, "as the *final bars* [of the Third Movement] were played out", Armand realises that the difference in the performance of the song actually represents the transformation of the piano player (Rice 1998, 375, emphasis added).

By entering the vampiric timelessness, Sybelle acquires a sense of precision in her playing that dissipates her obsession with time concealed by the repetition of the *Appassionata*. Although as an immortal, Sybelle continues to play the same sonata, for Armand, the duration of her performance is truncated, reduced, just as her and Benji's human lives are ended through the transgression to vampirism. If Marius, the immortal who turned them, argues that he offered Sybelle and Benji eternity because of the love they have for Armand, the latter condemns the deed and the fact that his human companions were severed from "their world and their time" and "their hour" (Rice 1998, 383). Sybelle's passing into eternity is marked by the interruption of her human life and implicitly of her compulsive playing. As a result, Armand finds himself again desynchronized from his *protégés*, and disconnected from the sonata that he cherished as a glimpse of timelessness fused with the evanescence of the human life.

## Conclusions

Armand's temporal liminality is a key element that illustrates the vampire's desynchronization and displacement from the human world as aspects of the living Gothic. The difference between duration and time that Bergson advances is important in understanding how Rice's vampires perceive timelessness as opposed to human temporality. Because Armand's existence is suspended in a void present, and because he is endowed with forever intermingling states of consciousness, it follows that he, and by extension the Rician vampires, can only perceive time in duration, infused by the past and by the sensations that they experience. In reading Armand's relationships as periods of time fragmented from eternity and given meaning by companions, we can realise the extent of Armand's displacement and his struggle to reconnect with a world he no longer comprehends. The first failed attempt with Louis exemplifies Armand's attempt to grasp the nineteenth century through channelling Louis's empathy for mortals. With Daniel, a tragic liaison that disturbs the human's sense of time, Armand gains a (mis)understanding of the twentieth century's obsession for owning and consuming objects. With Sybelle and Benji, Armand acquires a certain

balance between the duration of her obsessive *Appassionnata* and Benji's sense of practicality. However, as it can be seen in his relationships with humans, Armand's liminality can be parasitical and highly contagious. As Armand reaches out to humans for a sense of time, the latter tragically lose theirs.

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## **“Horror Occupied Her Mind”: Misinformation, Misperception, and the Trauma of Gothic Heroines**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Gothic heroines actively investigate the mysteries at the core of their narratives, but this process is complicated by their experience of trauma. According to modern theorists, trauma creates gaps in experience because it is something that happens too suddenly to be integrated into linear reality. By using contemporary theories of trauma to read seminal Gothic texts, I intend to show that the often-bemoaned narrative defects of the Gothic genre are actually sophisticated representations of the traumatic experience before there was a modern discourse to describe this phenomenon. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily St. Aubert’s narrative is riddled with traumatic gaps in her experience that frustrate her ability to accurately understand what has happened. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Moorland’s fascination with Gothic novels warps her perception and creates gaps in the narrative that actually end up causing her trauma. Both Ann Radcliffe and Jane Austen use the disjointed narrative structure of the Gothic genre to represent the fragmenting experience of trauma and offer a critique of the eighteenth century cult of sensibility.*

**Keywords:** Trauma theory, Sensibility, Gothic heroines, *Northanger Abbey*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

“When she recovered her recollection, the remembrance of what she had seen had nearly deprived her of it a second time. She had scarcely strength to remove from the room, and regain her own; and, when arrived there, wanted courage to remain alone. Horror occupied her mind, and excluded, for a time, all sense of past, and dread of future misfortune...”

— *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Radcliffe 2008, 249).

Far from helpless damsels in distress, gothic heroines are active agents investigating the dark secrets at the heart of their narratives. In Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, first published in 1794, Emily St. Aubert searches the dark corridors of the castle of Udolpho for her aunt who has been secreted away by the gothic villain Montoni. In Jane Austen’s gothic parody novel, *Northanger Abbey*, first published in 1817, Catherine Moorland scours the decidedly un-gothic Northanger Abbey for evidence that Captain Tilney imprisoned and murdered his wife. But despite their best efforts, these women often fall short of solving their narrative mysteries which are usually resolved by someone else, and in this article, I argue that this difficulty can be attributed to the fragmenting effect that trauma has on narrative. Using modern theories of trauma, I intend to show that the fractured, involuted narratives that characterise the Gothic genre are representative of trauma, and Gothic heroines are agents struggling to operate within such a narrative.

### **Gothic Trauma**

The word trauma comes from the Greek “*ρᾶγμα*” meaning a physical wound, but psychoanalysis expands the term to include “psychic injury” caused by “emotional shock” (Felman and Laub 1991, 67). Throughout this article, the term trauma will be used to refer to psychological trauma which is the result of an overwhelming experience that compromises one’s ability to cope with the emotions that arise from that experience. Psychological trauma is incredibly subjective and not all people who experience a potentially traumatic event will develop psychological trauma. In the case of Emily St. Aubert and Catherine Moorland both women experience very different traumas centred around the institution of marriage. Emily is being forced into a marriage with Count Morano, who could imprison or murder her, while Catherine Moorland is trying to secure her future with a good match. It might seem like Emily’s trauma is more legitimate because it involves the threat of actual physical harm, but the psychological distress Catherine experiences at almost losing a potential suitor reflects the bleak realities of the marriage ‘market’ that characterise Jane Austen’s fiction. According to Shoshana Felman’s and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), and Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), trauma results in a split



between the conscious self and the traumatised Other that does not allow trauma to be accessed by the conscious self. This split creates gaps in memory that frustrate the survivor's ability to construct a coherent narrative of their trauma. These gaps are the result of trauma's "paradoxical temporality" since trauma is an event that happens "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" or to be integrated into linear reality (Belau 2001, 5; Caruth 1996, 4). Because of this, trauma can return in the form of unconscious repetition, becoming an event that "in effect, does not end" (Felman and Laub 1991, 67).

The gothic genre focuses thematically on the phenomenon of trauma, but it also represents the experience of trauma by using a disjointed narrative structure. The Gothic has been considered a fragmented genre since its inception with Horace Walpole's seminal novella *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which established "the pattern for later writers, who work with techniques of interruption, deferral, ellipsis, framing, to splice stories into bits and pieces and disrupt superficial narrative unity or linearity," to produce texts that are "fragmented, interrupted, unreadable, or presented through multiple framings and narrators" (Grove 1997, 18; Kilgour and Kilgour 2013, 2). Gothic scholars have addressed the narrative fragmentation of the genre in a variety of ways. For example, Frederick S. Frank argues that Walpole's seminal novel:

dramatize[s] to the full the mandatory conditions of gothic conflict and crisis, as signified by the narrative's collapsing structures, evil enclosures, supernatural hyperactivity, strangely pleasing disorder, and attractively packaged anxieties of genealogy, fate, and identity (2002, 440).

While Anthony Johnson posits the breaches and disjointed structures of gothic fiction "impart a colour to our imaginative response which extends beyond the locality of the verbal surface" (1995, 11). Stephen Bernstein interprets the "convoluted or labyrinthine," structure of gothic narratives as a result of the genre's concern with "the revelation and setting right of hidden wrongs from the past, and the slow way in which these wrongs are exposed over time through coincidence and a providential fatalism" (1991, 151). Jerrold E. Hogle attributes the genre's confusing narrative structure to the Gothic's "uneasy conflation of genres, styles and conflicted cultural concerns" (2002, 14). Maggie Kilgour sums up recent scholarship that reads the Gothic's "fragmentation as a response to bourgeois models of personal, sexual, and textual identity, seeing it as a Frankenstein deconstruction of modern ideology" (2013, 7).

However, these perspectives overlook trauma as the potential source of narrative disruption in gothic texts. I argue that the conventions of the Gothic genre mirror the characteristics of trauma, including traumatic repetition, fractured storylines, and unexplained gaps in time, creating a sophisticated representation of trauma before there was a modern discourse to describe this phenomenon. Specifically, the narrative ruptures of Gothic novels are able to reproduce traumatic

time, a moment that is too full and unable to hold the excess of temporality trauma creates. Writing about Holocaust survivors, Lawrence Langer calls this phenomenon durational time (1995, 15). Unlike linear time, durational time, Langer explains:

exists this side of the forgotten, not to be dredged from memory because it is always, has always been there [...] [a] constantly re-experienced time, [that] threatens the chronology of experienced time [...] [that] leaps out of the chronology, establishing its own momentum, or fixation (1995, 15).

The gothic genre – filled with pasts that will not die, multiple presents that can never be resolved, and infinite futures that can never be realised – embraces this kind of temporal excess that allows it to represent the experience of trauma as one “out of time” for traumatised individuals (Langer 1995, 15). An example of this can be found in *The Castle of Otranto* when Conrad is crushed to death by a giant helmet. Peter Otto describes the incident as suspending the characters of *Otranto* in a “moment of standstill, in a time and space where impossible objects become tangible, persist in time, and proliferate, as if we were witnessing the multiplication of infinities” (2015, 693). Otto’s description of infinite time in a single moment resonates with the phenomenon of trauma as an event outside time that multiplies and repeats. By interpreting two seminal Gothic novels, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Northanger Abbey*, through the lens of modern theories of trauma, I hope to show how Gothic heroines are operating in a narrative fractured by trauma, and that the often-bemoaned narrative defects of this genre are sophisticated representations of the traumatic experience before modern theories of this phenomenon emerged.

### **“She Dropped Senseless”: Trauma and Unconsciousness in *The Mysteries of Udolpho***

Critics have already examined the literal gaps that occur in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* where the author interjects poems into her prose. Mary Favret reads these poems as “chaotic” interruptions in Radcliffe’s text that disrupt the plot (1994, 162). Anna Laetitia Barbauld particularly lamented the scant attention readers paid the poems since they were “always impatient to get on with the story” (1810, viii). Leah Price and Ingrid Horrocks have since interpreted these narrative gaps as either meditative spaces for the gothic heroine, or Radcliffe offering her reader a variety of discourses. Price argues that Radcliffe’s “verse points outward from the gothic novel, breaking and braking the narrative,” to provide the reader with the “self-control needed to resist ‘impatient’ greed for the plot” (2000, 94-97). According to Horrocks, Radcliffe’s quotations “work as a form of sympathetic expansiveness and appropriation [...] releasing [Emily’s] mind from the trauma the gothic plot inflicts on it” (2008, 517).

Unlike these poetical interjections that create a safe harbor from Gothic trauma, there are other gaps in Radcliffe’s text that represent the trauma and confusion of the protagonist Emily St. Aubert. Radcliffe uses unconsciousness to represent the gaps in

Emily's experience left by her trauma which include the death of her father and her impending marriage to Count Morano. The resulting narrative is fragmented, leading Emily to misperceive reality. Emily's lapses into unconsciousness are a common dissociative response to trauma. Trauma "produces an overwhelming need to escape what is, in reality, inescapable" (Waites 1993, 14). Unable to flee the experience, the victim of trauma will shut down mentally and emotionally in order to escape. Abram Kardiner describes this phenomenon in his observation of traumatised World War I soldiers. One patient "had been subject to lapses of unconsciousness lasting for twelve hours to eleven days" (Kardiner 1941, 63). Like this soldier, Emily employs unconsciousness as a defence mechanism that absents herself from the site of trauma. Upon learning that her father is dying, Emily is seized by "a slight convulsion" and then sinks "senseless in her chair" and when he dies she is found "lying senseless across the foot of [his] bed" (Radcliffe 2008, 87).

Emily's repeated lapses into unconsciousness also exemplify how trauma denies the victim access to crucial information. Radcliffe dramatizes this process when Emily attempts to read her dead father's papers which he commanded her to burn without examining them. As she seeks out this information, she sees the countenance of her dead father in the room and "she rushe[s] forward into the chamber, and [sinks] almost senseless into a chair" (ibid, 103). The ghostly countenance of Emily's father represents her trauma which bars her from accessing information as she falls unconscious. She is only able to read some of the information that the papers contain in an unconscious state:

Her eyes involuntarily settled on the writing of some loose sheets, which lay open; and she was unconscious, that she was transgressing her father's strict injunction, till a sentence of dreadful import awakened her attention and her memory together. She hastily put the papers from her (ibid).

The moment she becomes conscious, crucial information is denied her because "the memory" of her trauma "is repressed and remains unhealed," making it inaccessible to the conscious mind (Felman and Laub 1991, 67). As a result, both Emily and the reader get only a fragmentary view of the paper's contents that impresses both with feelings of confusion and misgiving.

The gaps in information left by trauma lead Emily to misperceive reality and this is most apparent in Emily's encounters with the object hidden behind a black veil in the castle of Udolpho. Emily first encounters the veiled object in a disused wing of the castle when her maid Annette runs away in terror with their only lamp, literally and figuratively preventing Emily from casting a light on what is behind the drape. It's exactly what is unknown about the object behind the veil that makes it so terrible, following Edmund Burke's principal of terror and obscurity that holds "when we know the full extent of any danger [...] a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (1767, 99). To this end, Annette gives fragmented and incomplete information on what lurks behind the veil, supposing it to be a picture with "something very dreadful

belonging to it – and that it has been covered up in black *ever since* –” emphasising its connection to an unknown traumatic event (Radcliffe 2008, 233). The absence of what is behind the veil allows it to function as an empty signifier for Emily’s trauma, one that she can fill with her own anxieties about her uncertain future as Montoni’s prisoner. As a signifier of trauma, the object behind the veil also exemplifies what David Sandner calls “the ‘absent presence’ of the supernatural and its obscure nature is able to evoke terror in the reader (2016, 91). Radcliffe more directly connects the veiled object to Emily’s trauma by having her seek it out a second time to escape her anxiety over her forced marriage to Count Morano. Annette’s comment during their first encounter with the object that “these dismal galleries and halls are fit for nothing but ghosts to live in; and I verily believe, if I *live* long in them I shall turn to one myself!” is also a dismal foreshadowing of Emily’s fate should Montoni successfully marry her to Count Morano (Radcliffe 2008, 232). Instead of resolving the mystery, Emily’s discovery of what the veil is hiding only causes her more trauma. As result, Emily’s last two encounters with the object behind the veil are cut short by unconsciousness. In the first, Emily proceeds:

with a timid hand, lifted the veil; but instantly let it fall – perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture, and, before she could leave the chamber, she dropped senseless on the floor (ibid, 249).

During her final encounter, she pulls back the curtain to reveal:

a corpse, stretched on a kind of low couch, which was crimsoned with human blood, as was the floor beneath. The features, deformed by death, were ghastly and horrible, and more than one livid wound appeared in the face (ibid, 348).

Despite seeing what is behind the veil, Emily cannot comprehend it and falls “senseless at the foot of the couch” (ibid). The enormity of the traumatic experience forces Emily to absent herself through unconsciousness. By absenting herself from the site of trauma, Emily leaves absences in the narrative that frustrate the reader’s ability to make sense of what she has seen. Combined with the incomplete information she has been given on the disappearances of Signora Laurentini, the heiress Udolpho, and her aunt Madame Montoni, this leads her to misperceive the “corpse,” which is actually a hyper realistic wax figure, as the remains of one of these missing women (ibid, 348). While it turns out that this conclusion is incorrect – Montoni has secretly imprisoned his wife until she decides to sign away her estates to him and Signora Laurentini is living in a convent under assumed the identity of Sister Agnes – it points to Emily’s own fears of being locked up, abused, or murdered by her future husband Count Morano. The “partly” wax model also symbolises the fractured body of Emily’s own narrative, for confronted with the embodiment of disintegration and decay, Emily cannot “endure to look twice [...] [and] after the first glance, let the veil drop” (ibid, 662). Emily’s inability to look at the body behind the curtain represents her own inability to grasp the trauma that has fractured her narrative.

The ghost of Signora Laurentini who haunts Emily's narrative represents the originary lack trauma creates and reveals Emily's own fears of being absented in an unwanted marriage to Count Morano. The spectre of Signora Laurentini embodies the gaps left in experience by trauma because as a ghost she is present yet absent, evoking Derrida's concept of the trace, defined as "a sign (signifier and signified) derives its meaning from its difference from other signs" and thus always contains a trace of "what it absolutely is not" (1978, 394). The trace as a "mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present" resembles absences left by trauma (Derrida 1976, xvii). A potential ghost and missing mistress of *Udolpho*, Signora Laurentini represents the gaps left by trauma and she is simultaneously present and absent in Emily's narrative. Annette describes how Signora Laurentini went walking in the woods one night and was never seen again, but has been seen by vassals in the castle at night. Emily rebukes Annette by pointing out the impossibility of both things being true: "You say nothing has been since known of her, and yet she has been seen!", and her maid exclaims, "Holy Mother! Speak to the spirit!?", revealing that Signora Laurentini is not a physical person but a ghost (Radcliffe 2008, 238). This exchange provides comic relief, but it also illustrates the physical power trauma has to fragment narrative. Signora Laurentini's present absence haunts the text of *Udolpho* and represents Emily's fears of becoming one of the living dead through marriage. The "strange history of Signora Laurentini" recalls Emily's "own strange situation [...] in the power of [Count Montoni] [...] who had already exercised an usurped authority over her," by pressuring her into marriage to Count Morano (ibid, 240). Emily fears that, like Signora Laurentini's husband Count Montoni, her new husband will imprison or absent her in marriage. Emily's fear about the missing Signora Laurentini also speaks to the potentially common fears of the female reader of Radcliffe's gothic novel at the time of publication. Like Emily, these young women may have feared what will become of them once they entered the institution of marriage, that they too may be locked up or done away with by their husband.

Radcliffe's representation of trauma is part of a greater critique of the cult of sensibility that became popular in late-eighteenth-century sentimental novels. These novels feature characters who were prone to sensibility which was an acute response to emotionally moving experiences that included fainting fits and weeping. A reaction to the Age of Enlightenment's focus on reason as the primary source of legitimate knowledge, the cult of sensibility posited that emotions could also be a source of understanding. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), John Locke theorises "Ideas in the Understanding, are coeval with Sensation; which is such an Impression or Motion, made in some part of the Body, as makes it be taken notice of in the Understanding" (1975, 60). Building on this idea, sensible people were believed to be more sensitive to the hidden intellectual and emotional depths of experiences than others. But the extreme reaction of sentimentalism to Enlightenment rationalism met its own backlash from writers who saw the emphasis on one's own emotions as both hysterical and narcissistic. Ann Radcliffe uses the Gothic novel as a vehicle for critiquing excess sensibility by deploying supernatural elements to arouse "pleasurable emotions of fear and terror" then explaining them rationally to show

how sensibility can “[reduce] the mind, leading the imagination astray, away from reason” making it “more susceptible to the irrational, to superstition” (Smith 1973, 577-8). In doing so, Radcliffe is able to represent the traumatic experience of her Gothic heroines as one of overwhelming emotion that fractures narrative coherence.

### **“The Terrors of Expectation”: Gothic Misperception in *Northanger Abbey***

In Jane Austen’s Gothic parody *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Catherine Moorland is a Gothic heroine in training who often mistakes the mundane for the horrible because of the Gothic novels she reads. Just as Emily’s inability to see beyond the black veil creates terror, Catherine similarly reads gaps in information as indicators of Gothic trauma. The trauma Catherine fears centres on the marriage of General Tilney and Mrs. Tilney, who died suddenly. Catherine reads the General’s absence of tender feeling towards his wife as sure proof that he must be a Gothic villain, and she scours *Northanger Abbey* for some clue of Mrs. Tilney’s unhappy imprisonment or demise. Catherine’s anxieties about the death of Mrs. Tilney, who passed away due to a sudden fever and not at the hands of her husband’s supposed villainy, speaks to her own anxieties about securing a happy marriage with Henry Tilney. Ultimately Catherine misperceives Gothic trauma in everyday domestic spaces, pointing to the real potential for trauma in the novel: that Catherine’s Gothic sensibilities will lead her astray and endanger her courtship.

Catherine’s discovery of a stack of papers in the black and yellow Japan cabinet in her room at *Northanger Abbey* illustrates how gaps in information lead Catherine to misperceive reality. Like Emily St. Aubert’s incomplete encounter with her father’s papers before she destroys them, the papers represent a gap in Catherine’s knowledge that then leads Catherine to misperceive their contents. Referencing the Gothic trope of the found manuscript, “a lost or hidden document that reveals dreadful secrets concerning the fate of its author, before crumbling away before the crucial point is made”, Catherine thinks this “precious manuscript” details the suffering and death of Mrs. Tilney (Spooner 2006, 38). Catherine’s misperception of what the papers contain causes her to experience psychological trauma. Struck with terror, Catherine drops the papers and takes shelter in her bed. A violent storm ensues and to Catherine “every blast seemed fraught with awful intelligence (Austen 2006, 174). Possessed by Gothic fancy, Catherine thinks she hears:

the lock of her door [...] agitated, as if by the attempt of somebody to enter. Hollow murmurs [that] seemed to creep along the gallery, and more than once her blood was chilled by the sound of distant moans (Austen 2006, 175).

Instead of a manuscript detailing Gothic terror, by the light of day the papers relate a narrative of domesticity, containing a washing bill for a list of bed linens as well as men’s clothing. By burying “sheets of paper marked with abbreviations of her own courtship plot in the Gothic interiors” of *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen indicates

that courtship rather than imaginary gothic fears, are the true concern of her novel (Baudot 2011, 337).

Just as the papers in the cabinet represent the domestic realities of the courtship plot, Catherine's discovery of what lies in a mysterious chest illustrates how her Gothic fancy puts her domestic future at risk. The heavy chest is a literal absence in the text, and Catherine's Gothic education leads her to misperceive its contents. Catherine assumes the chest's "imperfect remains of handles" must have been "broken [...] prematurely by some strange violence" suggesting that she fears the gothic criminality that must lurk beneath the façade of General Tilney's respectable marriage (Austen 2006, 168). Her failure to read the chest is made literal when she describes being unable to make out "a mysterious cipher" on its lid (ibid). Opening the chest, Catherine does not discover evidence confirming General Tilney's crimes, only the frightfully dull evidence of domesticity in the form of "a white cotton counterpane, properly folded, reposing at one end of the chest in undisputed possession!" (ibid). The white counterpane has symbolic implications for Catherine: like her previous discovery of the laundry bill listing men's clothing that "underscores the presence of the body underneath the clothes, the body responsible for their needing to be cleaned," the counterpane recalls her own body and its essential function in producing children in the marriage bed (Baudot 2011, 336). The white cotton counterpane is one of many "artefacts of [Mrs. Tilney's] life" that simultaneously functions as a remnant of the past while providing a glimpse into Catherine's potential future as Henry's wife (Robinson 2006, 218). White and spotless, the counterpane signals the absence of marital trauma at Northanger Abbey, and its place on the marriage bed symbolises what Catherine seeks in a good marriage to Henry Tilney as one that will bear children. It also, then, reveals the true horror at the heart of *Northanger Abbey*: the trauma of Catherine being *denied* a good marriage to Henry Tilney, and thus her future family.

Jane Austen illustrates how an insistence on reading Gothic trauma onto gaps in the narrative have the potential to create real psychological distress. Furnished with an incomplete account of Mrs. Tilney's death by her daughter, Catherine sets out to discover Mrs. Tilney's room, expecting perhaps to find a Gothic cell where the poor woman was imprisoned or mistreated until she died. Instead she finds a well-appointed room with a comfortable bed, painted chairs, and sunlight streaming in through the windows. The realisation that there is no Gothic villainy to uncover transforms Catherine's moment of discovery from one of seeming empowerment to that of humiliation as Henry admonishes Catherine, explaining she must realise that in England "murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions [were] to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist" (Austen 2006, 203). By filling in the gaps Catherine has misperceived as gothic indicators of trauma, Henry Tilney exposes the foolishness of her fanciful thinking and creates real psychological trauma for Catherine, who runs away with "tears of shame" streaming from her eyes at the prospect of having lost Henry's interest as a potential suitor (ibid).

As with her predecessor Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen's representation of trauma in her Gothic parody criticises sentimentalism, and is in line "with the numerous satirical essays deriding 'terror fiction' that proliferated in the last years of the eighteenth century" (Johnson 2003, ix). Gothic novels may have predisposed Catherine to see murder and the supernatural at every turn, but Austen also reveals that Catherine's gothic prejudices are exaggerated versions of real character flaws. This underscores Paul Morrison's argument that Jane Austen's "realm of manners is already and always structured as a through-the-looking-glass form of the gothic" (1991, 12). For example, Catherine wrongly suspects General Tilney of "either murdering or shutting up his wife", but after Henry informs Catherine why his father sent her home – she was not as rich as he first supposed and therefore unfit to marry his son – she realises "she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (Austen 2006, 256). In allowing Catherine this awakening, Austen legitimises the Gothic as a "mode of comprehending contemporary socio-political reality" (Morrison 1991, 10).

Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe both use the Gothic to critique the excess of emotion associated with the cult of sensibility, but reading these works through the lens of contemporary trauma theory reveals that they also use the eruptive frames of Gothic narratives to represent the terror and confusion inherent to the traumatic experience. The gaps left by trauma frustrate Emily St. Aubert's ability to understand her own experience while Catherine Moorland's gothic sensibility threatens her perception of reality and her marriage prospects. The application of modern trauma theory to these seminal Gothic texts deepens their criticism of the trauma inflicted on women by patriarchal institutions and invites future scholarship on the Gothic genre's ability to effectively represent the traumatic experience via narrative absences and a disjointed narrative structure.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Sean O'Brien. *Quartier Perdu and Other Stories*. Comma Press, 2018.  
240 pp. eBook. ISBN: 978-1905583706**

*Reviewed by Katharine Hawkins (Macquarie University)*

“With its air of long-established decline and time suspended”, poet Sean O’Brien’s collection *Quartier Perdu and Other Stories* presents a thoughtful, macabre saunter between worlds that is a delight to read (2018, 145). Presented in three volumes, the eighteen short stories that make up the collection present a consistent and, at times, unsettling undercurrent of temporal and subjective displacement. Each story introduces a new journey to in-between realms; there’s an acid-fuelled encounter with forest witches, a stiff upper-lipped Charon steering his barge through the flooded London Underground, and an academic’s encounter with the Devil himself. *Quartier Perdu* weaves together tales of liminality that make for narrators that are more uncertain than unreliable.

It is this uncertainty that makes any iteration of the Gothic enticing, because it represents a refusal of a sterile rationalism that anchors one to the straight and narrow, and to the noxious gleaming of linear progress and pragmatism. O’Brien’s stories perfectly exemplify this refusal, extending soil-dampened, cobwebby hands out of the dank recesses of obscurity and enticing the reader away from the recollection of normative reason and ontological absolutes. Regardless of setting, one is left with a narrative vertigo that Derrida might describe as *hauntological*: neither here nor there in time, place or identity, but nonetheless present between the porous, shifting boundaries of language, genre, and characterisation. For this reason, *Quartier Perdu* is well named; its stories portray the lost quarters of experience, selfhood, and language through narrative trap streets that beckon one away from the well-lit path of the straight and narrow. Indeed, the consistent themes of crossings-over, of shifting subject positions, and altered perspectives suggest power dynamics being turned in

upon themselves, with protagonists emerging as changed beings – if they emerge at all. There is no static selfhood, no inviolate sense of identity, or objective knowledge to be found here.

The subversive threads of Gothic anti-rationalism that are woven through these stories manifest as esoteric, forgotten, or otherworldly presences or locations that speak to an inversion or skewing of classical reason and beauty. One of the best examples of this is in the co-option of Grecian imagery in the story *Verney's Pit*. Here, Persephone's descent into the Jungian underworld of a flooded quarry presents a viable alternative to the confines of bourgeois middle-age, and marriage to tedious men reciting Cretan poetry. Another instance presents us with the obligatory, uninspired, and apathetic academic moping about on a Greek island before his voyeuristic observation of the local women is turned to helpless terror in the presence of a sea god. As someone who is always pleased to see the erosion of tweed-wearing pomposity, the incursion of ancient Elder gods, She-Sun deities, and ravenous forest-Fae is always a welcome treat.

However, it should also be noted that throughout the first third of the collection there is a consistent theme of femininity as embodying or introducing that incursion. In many of these stories, women are gin-bearing seductresses, Baba Yaga-esque cannibals, or angry spectacles dripping with pomegranate juice, to recall just a few examples. It would not be wholly unfair to suggest that perhaps – given the inclination of the Gothic to resist the coercive duality of Enlightenment reason – women in *Quartier Perdu* are the heralds of this resistance? A dubious honour if uncritically conveyed, yet there is nothing in O'Brien's work of the misogyny that typifies the monstrous femininity that has historically skulked about the margins of the Gothic and horror genres.

The devolution of a protagonist into madness, disorder, and confusion after the intrusion of a strange artefact or eldritch presence is by no means a new or even original element in any supernatural fiction, and it is here that one could make the obvious comparison to Clive Barker's short horror stories, save for the fact that *Quartier Perdu* has none of the macabre cruelty or ghoulish excess that so-often characterises contemporary Gothic Horror. While this ensures that O'Brien's phrasing is concise enough to suit the short story format, his style is far from Spartan; his poetic roots emerge through rich imagery and natural-feeling dialogue that is peppered with references to literary classics and mythology. Throughout the collection, there are consistent, clever linguistic doublings that suggest temporal and subjective displacement where objective narrative and subjective certainty begin to break down, "in this place, you are no more real than anything else" (2018, 107).

This becomes particularly evident in the second volume, through the exploration of the creeping tension between natural chaos and human attempts to bring reason to the realm of the ungovernable. Towards the latter half of the collection, O'Brien's tone becomes more pointed and political: aiming darkly comedic, grimly

satisfying darts at the cruelty of literary critics and the cold pragmatism of coercive state institutions that would seek to eschew the 'non-relevant' arts from academia. But beyond the tongue-and-cheek critiques there also lies a mournful observation of the consequences of well-meaning yet misguided attempts to illuminate the dark. Particularly relevant here is *Swan, 1914*, which recalls Lovecraft's warning that we shall one day strive so far as to uncover maddening truths that shall inevitably lead us shrieking and blinded back into the dark. What emerges from this tension is not so much a disavowal of the (supposed) impartiality of science or reason, but rather the arbitrary dichotomy that is constructed between them and the murky realms of death, faith and the unknown. As always, the Gothic is no respecter of such boundaries, and the poetry of *Quartier Perdu* slinks beautifully through the gaps between them.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Simon Bacon, editor. *The Gothic: A Reader*. Peter Lang, 2018. 264 pp. eBook. ISBN: 978-1-78707-270-1**

*Reviewed by Gwyneth Peaty (Curtin University)*

*The Gothic: A Reader*, edited by Simon Bacon, is a collection of twenty-eight essays exploring the Gothic as a field of study, including its modalities, sub-genres, and core themes. As Bacon notes in his introduction, it would be impossible to cover everything associated with the Gothic in one book; what this text offers is an “introductory roadmap” for both scholarly and casual readers (1). That said, the scope and rigor of this comprehensive collection elevate it beyond a basic survey of Gothic geography. Chapters are divided into six topic areas: Ideologies and Imperialism, America and the Gothic, Gothic Territories, Gender and Sexuality, Media and Mediums, and Gothic Futures. From Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) to Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2015), texts examined embody the mutability of the Gothic as a mode that travels through time, space, media, and culture. Contributors include both established scholars and emerging voices, resulting in a dynamic collection that provides an exciting snapshot of contemporary Gothic studies.

For those looking to clarify and explore a wide range of sub-genres within the Gothic, this *Reader* is a well organised resource. For instance, chapters within the Ideologies and Imperialism topic area address Victorian Gothic, Imperial Gothic, Postcolonial Gothic, War Gothic, and Transatlantic Gothic. Part 2, America and the Gothic, includes discussion of American Gothic, Southern Gothic, African American Gothic, and Zombie Gothic. Moving through these essays will give readers a clearer understanding of the historical milieus in which the Gothic has emerged and flourished. As multiple contributors note, these influences continue to shape the form and function of Gothic texts into the future.

It is important to point out that this *Reader* does not aim to provide exact definitions of core Gothic themes (were such a thing even possible). Instead, each author uses one key text to explore and unpack their subject, building understanding through original analysis. For example, Johan Höglund's chapter uses Richard Marsh's *The Joss: A Reversion* (1901) to interrogate the nature of Imperial Gothic. "*The Joss*" Höglund argues, is a "perfect example of the ways in which Imperial Gothic is torn between a celebration of imperial categories and practices, and a furtive recognition of the terrible greed that motivated colonialism" (20). In this way the essays present original research while tracing the outlines of Gothic sub-genres in an accessible manner.

A particular strength of this collection is its international outlook. The Gothic Territories topic area includes chapters on Mexican Gothic, Australian Gothic, and Japanese Gothic, alongside chapters on Gothic Subcultures and Suburban/Domestic Gothic. This acknowledgement that the Gothic is a global phenomenon is important and appreciated. Such observations open the field to fresh contributions and insights, broadening existing definitions and widening the potential scope for research. As Katarzyna Ancuta points out in her chapter on Japanese Gothic, it is important to remember that:

preoccupation with otherness, death, monstrosity, perversion of norms, or dysfunctional relationships is not the domain of one culture, but [...] these concepts rely on the terminology and reflect a set of values that are culture specific and should not be taken for granted (103).

For those keen to explore the Gothic as it evolves in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the *Reader* offers a wide selection of essays exploring contemporary sub-genres, including Gothic Comics, Postfeminist Gothic, Gaming and the Gothic, Female Gothic, Queer Gothic, and Neoliberal Gothic. With the collection sitting at 260 pages, there are too many excellent chapters to discuss them all. Each reader will have their own favourites. My personal standouts include Enrique Ajuria Ibarra and Luis Daniel Martínez Álvarez's chapter on Mexican Gothic, and Elana Gomel's discussion of Quantum Gothic in Koji Suzuki's *Edge* (2012).

In summary, the overall standard of *The Gothic: A Reader* is very high. The essays are rigorous but accessible, and the book is well presented, with colour illustrations and photographs throughout. It will be an excellent resource for students, researchers, and general fans who would like to understand the Gothic's many forms in greater depth.

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