STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/issn.2156-2407
ISSN: 2156-2407

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 2
ISSUE DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf/v6i2
2020

STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

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“A Pleasure of that Too Intense Kind”: Women’s Desires and Identity in Stella Gibbons’s Gothic London

by Rebecca Mills

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.32
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Rebecca Mills

**Abstract**
Stella Gibbons (1902-1989) is best known for the rural novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), which Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik discuss as “comic Gothic.” In contrast, Gibbons's little-studied Hampstead novels *Westwood* (1946) and *Here Be Dragons* (1956) map a melancholic Gothic fragmented city, marked by the Second World War, in which romantic attachment and marriage threaten young women's comfort, self-sufficiency, and subjectivity. Excessive emotion and eroticism imperil women's independence and identity, while the men they desire embody the temptation and corruption of the city. Gibbons employs Gothic language of spells, illusion, and entrapment to heighten anxieties around stifling domesticity and sacrificing the self for love. The London Gothic geographies, atmosphere, and doubling of characters and spaces reinforce cautionary tales of the ill-effects of submission to love, while dedication to a career and community are offered as a means to resist Gothic desires and control Gothic spaces. This reading of space and female identity in Gibbons’s London novels is intended to extend and add nuance to scholarship of her works beyond *Cold Comfort Farm*, and contribute to the emerging study of the “middlebrow Gothic.”

**Keywords:**
Middlebrow Gothic; London; female identity; female desire; Stella Gibbons

Stella Gibbons is best known for the rural comedy *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), in which confident modern Flora Poste tidies and bridles wild passions and natures and renovates a decaying farmhouse into a site of productivity and order. The novel ends in nature girl Elfine's domestication and the disposal of the Starkadder family according to their best interests as determined by Flora, who is herself organized into marriage. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik discuss the “comic Gothic” of the novel, noting its “witty dialogue between the traditions of rural England and the city” (96). In contrast, Gibbons's little-studied London novels *Westwood* (1946) and *Here Be Dragons* (1956) present romance and marriage as threats to young women's comfort, self-sufficiency, and subjectivity. Excessive emotion and eroticism imperil these women's independence and identity, while the men they desire embody the temptation and corruption of the city. Gibbons employs Gothic language of spells, illusion, and entrapment to heighten anxieties around stifling domesticity and around subjugating the self to desire. The London Gothic settings and atmosphere, and the trope of the double, reinforce cautionary tales of the ill-effects of submission to love.

In *Cold Comfort Farm*, London is satirised as a sophisticated, orderly civilization, in contrast to the titular gloomy and chaotic Sussex farm. London, however, is in a state of wartime ruin and blackout in Westwood and structural and moral decay in the early 1950s setting of *Here Be Dragons*. The shadowed, uncertain city of porous borders, uncanny atmosphere, and fragmented spaces reflects the fragile psychic boundaries and identities of schoolteacher Margaret (*Westwood*) and tearoom waitress Nell (*Here Be Dragons*). The destabilising effects of desire on Margaret and Nell, as well as significant encounters with their romantic interests, are mapped onto a Gothic cityscape: misty Hampstead Heath, overgrown Highgate Cemetery, and streets illuminated by unnatural light. In both novels, love reflects this sense of disorder, and offers only illusion and dissolution. Meanwhile, disillusionment becomes a restorative process of resistance, resulting in the emotional and financial independence that afford Margaret and Nell a satisfying and regular life, as well as stable selfhood and a secure place in the city.

This reading of two of Gibbons's London novels is intended to extend and add nuance to scholarship of her works beyond *Cold Comfort Farm* and contribute to the emerging study of the “middlebrow Gothic.”
study of the “middlebrow Gothic.” Nicola Humble includes Cold Comfort Farm within the “feminine middlebrow,” and Westwood and Here Be Dragons certainly fit into this “literature of the middle classes, paying a meticulous attention to their shifting desires and self-images, mapping their swings of fortune at this most volatile stage in their history [the 1920s-1950s]” (3). Neither protagonist has a contented home life; as Humble observes, “the home is...an emblem of difficult and disturbing change” (111). Christopher Yiannitsaros argues for the “middlebrow Gothic” by combining this domestic preoccupation with a reading of the Gothic novel as a “nightmare or inverted reflection of the family home” , noting the “detrimental legacy of a particularly Gothicised form of Victorian parenting” in Cold Comfort Farm (14, 104). The concerns of the “feminine middlebrow” authors, however, extend beyond the home into the city, as Yiannitsaros notes in his brief discussion of the middlebrow Gothic “urban labyrinth” in terms of the “triangulation between [homosexual] sex, urban space, and the state” in Agatha Christie’s interwar work (154, 158). Similarly, Deborah L. Parsons examines the flâneuse in the work of modernist Virginia Woolf, but also her contemporary middlebrow authors Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamond Lehmann (among others). Although Parsons does not mention the Gothic, she remarks that after the Second World War, “the ordered London of neat squares and panoramic vistas falls into dreamlike ruins, rubble-strewn wastelands, and geographic fragmentation” (188). In Gibbons’s novels, this fragmented city acquires a distinctly Gothic shadow, which infuses the romantic, familial, and professional dilemmas of women, delineating an urban space for the feminine “middlebrow Gothic.”

The feminine middlebrow is often perceived as a “body of work in which domesticity is repeatedly an arena for feminine disappointment” (Hinds 294). The significance of the Gothic city in Westwood and Here Be Dragons complicates this domesticity-centric critical narrative, as the unstable city reflects the pressure and claustrophobia of the Gothic romance, while also affording the resolutions of the women’s narratives in careers and community, rather than unhappy homes or attachments. Both Margaret and Nell are disappointed in romantic terms, and by their families, but this disappointment is compensated by clarity and purpose. Margaret’s excessive emotion and unbridled imagination leave her in a precarious position both socially and psychologically; this uncertainty is reinforced by her fascination with the dangerous city and the uncanny houses she visits. Nell’s attraction to her seventeen-year old cousin John Gaunt threatens her innocence, common sense, and agency; he functions as “Virgil who was guiding her through London”—a Dantean London of dark desires (202).

Indeed, the title Here Be Dragons suggests unknown dangers and uncharted territory.

Gibbons’s unstable metropolis shares more with Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) and the modern war uncanny of T.S. Eliot than with the rural Gothic of D.H. Lawrence and Emily Brontë that she parodies in Cold Comfort Farm. This is not to say that Westwood and Here Be Dragons are not humorous. Indeed, the theatrical milieu of the former and the Bohemian rebels who enforce their own codes and rules in the latter are skilfully skewed. As Horner and Zlosnik argue, “Gothic’s tendency to [serious and comic] hybridity makes possible a mixed response to the loss of transcendence that characterizes the modern condition”; Gibbons’s satire here is inflected with mourning for lost innocence (3). Between 1939 and 1944, Gibbons published “A Woman’s Diary of the War” in the London parish magazine, St Martin’s Review. In 1942, she wrote, “My visit [to North London suburb] was an eerie and moving experience. I have never been to Pompeii but I’m sure I have now experienced something of the feeling that a dead city gives” (98). This elegiac eeriness and dislocation unsettles both Westwood and Here Be Dragons and informs Margaret’s and Nell’s parallel trajectories from innocence to experience to resilience.

Sara Wasson describes Gothic Second World War London as “a hallucinatory, claustrophobic and labyrinthine realm,” where searchlights and blackouts made the “redemptive light [of progress and civilization] vanish,” and encouraged reversion to “crime, transgression, and peril” (Urban Gothic 2, 12). Westwood’s night skies are sliced open by “searchlights sweeping and probing” above an “enormous labyrinth of dark streets” (116). In Here Be Dragons, London’s lights are back, but they are morbid rather than reassuring. John Gaunt takes Nell through the metropole at night: “[G]reen lamps sprayed out their poisonous soft light into the night—or the lilac ones cast their corpse-colour on the faces of the dark anonymous shapes waiting patiently below” (76). This juxtaposition of the funereal “lilac” and “corpse” recalls Eliot’s The Waste Land, as well as emphasising Gaunt’s own macabre qualities. Indeed, Gibbons shrouds Gaunt’s nocturnal habits and sadistic and controlling nature in vampiric associations, heightening the threat he poses to Nell. These are not settings where romance can thrive; there are few happy couples and homes in the novels. The darkness and unhomely lights of the city are dissipated, however, when Margaret and Nell have their epiphanies of purposeful spinsterhood: the conquering of the Gothic city is implicated in the rejection of dangerous Gothic modes of love.

These novels are exceptions in Gibbons’s oeuvre of this period, which tends towards romantic comedy, or in Aristotelian terms the restoration of familial, communal, and romantic order
after misunderstanding. Lynne Truss describes Westwood as “an interesting companion to Cold Comfort Farm, being concerned just as much with the eternal struggle between romantic illusion and common sense” (x). This tension is central to the Gothic, although not limited to that mode. In Westwood and Here Be Dragons, romantic illusion is uncanny and unwholesome, associated with ensnaring spells and delusive charm. Margaret obsesses over playwright Gerard Challis (and his home, the mansion of Westwood in Highgate): “The spell of his personal beauty so enchanted her that she found it difficult to keep from watching him,” while Westwood’s “charm was so strong that she felt any sacrifice was worthwhile to keep her right to visit” (340-341, 292). When Challis condescends to Margaret, she feels “a pleasure of that too intense kind,” which is sometimes countered by sensation of “eating sickly sweets” (209, 203). In Here Be Dragons, the narrator notes, “Love must be a powerful agent indeed; [Gaunt] wondered for an instant what it must be like to lie helpless under that spell” (256). John Gaunt resists emotional attachment himself but uses his charm to change and challenge Nell’s identity and lifestyle. When he leads Nell down a dark corridor in a decaying building, she realizes “there was not going to be much ordinary happiness between herself and her cousin John” (64). Intense hero worship and desire, then, resonate with the excessive sensibility of the Gothic. This excess, as well as the decadence and disorder suggested by “sickly sweets” and dark corridors, suggests Eugenia Delamotte’s observation of a “concern about the boundaries of the self” in Gothic romances (13). The unwholesome and disorienting nature of Margaret’s and Nell’s desires indicates this concern about boundaries. For Margaret and Nell to create stable selves, they must reject the enchantments woven by their objects of desire and their own tendencies towards masochistic self-sacrifice and, thereby, resist subsuming their own lives and needs to those of the men they love.

Desiring these specific men threatens Margaret’s and Nell’s agency and subjectivity, but the emotions of unrequited love and yearning in themselves are also coded as seductive but dangerous. In Here Be Dragons, the addiction of desire is a cautionary tale. Benedict, an English poet, is helplessly addicted to Gardis, a troubled young American woman. When he tries to leave her for a wholesome English girl, he is unsuccessful:

And he knew that if he were unwise enough to turn round now, and see her face, there would instantly rise up to hover between them the false cruel ghost, crueler than any torture inspired by true love, who haunts lovers when love is dying: the ghost born of memory and regret and the longing to be once more enslaved. (210)

Loveless desire is a tortuous enslavement, while unhappy love is equally painfully and negatively charged and haunted. Middle-aged domesticated marriages are as painful and haunted as youthful romantic affairs. Margaret’s mother had been an “ordinary pleasant girl,” but after decades of marriage to Margaret’s unfaithful father, “the ghost of that girl, puzzled and bitterly unhappy, sometimes looked out from her face” (25). These Gothic spells and ghosts transform romance into bondage, but they also link love and desire to the shadows and melancholic spectrality of the cityscape.

Desire breaches spatial as well as emotional boundaries. Margaret penetrates the wrought-iron fence of Westwood mansion and onto the fringes of a “charmed circle” of aristocratic artists, but venturing beyond her own class and milieu endangers her independent identity—the title Westwood invokes the archetypal danger of the forest. Nell’s passage through dark doorways and corridors in Here Be Dragons is a symbolic crossing of boundaries: “Nell looked past [Gaunt] down the passage. It was black and it smelt. ’I suppose if you’ve been living here it can’t be too bad,’ and she stepped over the threshold” (64). The threshold is inherently a liminal space; here, it represents Nell’s position between innocence and experience. The uninhibited sexuality Nell witnesses between Benedict and Gardis at the end of the passage is a shock to her middleclass morality, as is the “[m]ould, and damp dust, and decay and worse” that suggests death (68). This smell suggests that experience may become moral and mortal corruption.

**Fog and Desire**

The London fog is “floating in visible wreaths” in Westwood and “an invasion of ghosts” in Here Be Dragons (87). In both novels, mists and fog are spatially and emotionally destabilising; they lend an uncanny atmosphere to the city, and the suggestion of funeral wreaths and spectrality to the men and relationships that Margaret and Nell desire. Mists and fogs also isolate Hampstead and Highgate from central London at key points. This distancing reflects Faye Hammill’s description of Gibbons’s position on the “fringes of metropolitan literary culture,” which she connects to “her life in the North London suburbs” (Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture 177). According to biographer Mark Gerson, Gibbons lived on Oakeshott Avenue, between Highgate Cemetery and Hampstead Heath (featured in both novels). Elsewhere, discussing Gibbons as an “intermodnist,” Hammill argues that “the suburb offered an ideal vantage point for exploring both urban modernity and countryside traditionalism, and for observing both literary
modernism and the vestigial Romanticism of popular rural fiction” (“Ex-Centricity” 76). The tensions between the rural and the urban suggested by Hammill do appear in these novels, which foreground wild spaces within the city, but it is questionable whether Gibbons considered Highgate and Hampstead to be suburbs. In Westwood and Here Be Dragons, she calls them villages, stressing their “romantic and charming” streetscapes, as opposed to the “dull, neat suburbs” and dark labyrinthine city (Westwood 47, 301). Gibbons’s cartography is fluid and inconsistent; this categorisation challenges organising principles of centre/periphery. Indeed, Margaret gazes from Highgate “across London, that beloved city, that wounded, unmarital group of villages,” further disrupting an orderly understanding of the metropolis, while emphasising vulnerability rather than steadfastness in the face of the Blitz (424).

The fog, then, emphasises the liminal and precarious position of these villages within the city—they are sites of security and community under threat from both nature and modern civilisation. This layered spatiality is key to the middlebrow Gothic mode suggested here, as the romantic and domestic concerns of the middlebrow are mapped onto the villages of Hampstead and Highgate, which are surrounded both by the wild nature of the Heath and the decay and decadence of London. Margaret finds Gerard Challis’s dropped ration-book on a misty autumnal Hampstead Heath, and John Gaunt stalks Nell through the “choking mist” of Fitzjohn’s Avenue as she walks towards Hampstead (25). The history and the intertextual association of these sites are as important as their cartography. Margaret’s excessive Romantic sensibility is enhanced by Hampstead’s John Keats and Highgate’s Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Indeed, Gibbons’s precise “Then autumn came, with mists” (2) faintly echoes Keats’s opening line, “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” in “To Autumn” (1819). Margaret’s “feeling for nature” is ecstatic; “she found spring flowers and autumnal woods too beautiful to be borne,” suggesting the Romantic response to the sublime (49). Nell’s fog is not sublime; it is uncannily “writhing yellow mist” (24). While Keats is the patron saint of Margaret’s raptures, Nell’s journey carries hints of Dracula’s fog-shrouded London. The links between Dracula and Hampstead support the reading of John Gaunt as a (psychologically) vampiric and sinister figure. The fact that both Margaret and Nell first encounter the objects of their desire in the fog means that it not only signifies the blindness and obscurity of this desire, but also embeds these men within the Gothic city—they embody its threat and treachery. Challis represents a poisoned chalice; Margaret drinks in his attention, only to find her excessive emotion “sickly” and her independence threatened, while Gaunt preys on Nell’s innocence and devotion at the cost of her secure subjectivity and agency. As a remedial measure, to counter the fog, both men eventually appear in bright light, which dispels the illusions they cast and enables psychic wounds to heal and borders to be repaired.

Margaret’s enraptured response to the Romantic fog on the autumnal Heath is emblematic of her passionate character. This capacity for passion, however, undermines Margaret’s happiness and self-sufficiency. Fred Botting observes that “Negative aesthetics [in the Gothic mode] is double: deficiency, the absence, exclusion or negation of knowledge, facts or things; and excess, an overflow of words, feelings, ideas, imagining” (6-7). Botting refers to horror as well as passion here, but the basic structure of the double “negative aesthetics” can be applied to Margaret. She is composed of negations and excesses, with little solid ground between them: “She had not a vocation for teaching”; she is “charmless,” and in her friendships there is the “sense of something wanting” (27, 21, 123). What Margaret has in excess is feeling: “she had no poise; she cared too much about Art, about Love, about the World and the War, and everything,” as well as the tendency to lose herself (82; emphasis in original). The practical effect of Margaret’s lack of understanding of the metropolitan world and upper-class social circles, when coupled with her excess desire and emotion, is that she is left vulnerable both to exploitation by those she admires and to interior conflict that threatens to negate her own agency and subjectivity. Challis, as the married but philandering lord of Westwood manor, ought to embody a traditional Gothic threat to our heroine’s virtue, but instead he is a threat to her identity.

Challis is attracted by beautiful young naïve women he can influence, and Margaret is too plain for him. Although he enjoys Margaret’s unquestioning hero-worship, he pursues her beautiful friend Hilda under a false name, neglecting to inform her that he is a married grandfather. The threat to Margaret that Challis poses therefore comes insidiously from within Margaret’s own excessive imagination and emotion; she “had at first dreamt of letting her ideal love for Gerard Challis so fill her life with selfless beauty that it should transform all her ways of feeling and thinking” (330-331). Botting writes that a

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1 Nick Hubble considers “intermodernist narrative free from the association of high or low (or middlebrow) culture” (167). For more on the intermodernist approach and framework, see Kristin Bluemel’s introduction to Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain (2009).
consequence of “negative aesthetics” is that “One might lose reason and the clearly demarcated sense of self and world it sustains, but the loss might also entail the excitement of shedding the restraints of reason and being invigorated by passion” (7). Gibbons figures that excitement and passion undermine reason and the clearly bordered self. It is therefore Margaret’s desire to be “selfless” and transformed by Challis that Gibbons marks as hazardous. His influence is attributed to “glamour,” meaning “a delusive or alluring charm,” and his appearance is eerie (OED). “His face was in shadow by contrast with the brilliant day outside, and his eyes seemed bluer than usual and were shining with a strange reflected radiance” (205-206). Challis’s erotic effect is also threatening: “[H]e turned to her once more with his grave searching look, and she experienced a delicious tremor” that leaves her in “exquisite confusion” (137). This orgasmic tremor undermines Margaret’s psychic stability.

Being under another’s influence physically, spiritually, and intellectually, is, for Gibbons, a negation of subjectivity and agency. Challis’s influence is particularly pernicious because, while his speeches (and plays) are nonsense—“Suffering is the anvil upon which the crystal sword of integrity is hammered”—their masochism and melodrama threaten the impulse towards simple happiness and sanity that Gibbons encourages (223)2. Ultimately, Margaret rejects Challis’s pronouncements and the demands of his family, for whom she has become an unpaid babysitter, and asserts her agency and self-reliance with the help of her mother Lady Challis. She thereby switches her allegiance from a delusive figure of masculine authority to steady matriarchal feminine wisdom. This epiphany takes place not in the hazy wilderness-within-the-city of Hampstead Heath, or in the “labyrinth of dark streets” of Blitz London, but in bright daylight in an orchard in Bedfordshire, where the season of mists can be translated into mellow fruitfulness (116).

Nell finds the London fog “pleasantly exciting” rather than glorious; Nell can be read as sense to Margaret’s sensibility (24). She has an “excellent sense of direction,” and she is pragmatic and bourgeois rather than artistic (24). Unlike Margaret, Nell is sexually and romantically inexperienced. Her meeting with Gaunt in the fog inspires a “shock of helpless delight,” a seismic quake rather than a tremor (27). Anxiety about this helplessness, as well as the figure who inspires it, is figured via the Gothic tradition of the vampire, with echoes of Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) in particular. Like Dracula’s

ship emerging from an unseasonable August sea-mist on the coast of Whitby, Gaunt emerges onto Fitzjohn’s Avenue from “a freak March fog” (291). Nell’s first glimpse of him is shrouded in uncertainty: “She glanced across into the yellow dimness. Could she see someone there? a tall black someone? She thought that she could just make out a white face. And then, as she looked, it was no longer there” (24). This dark figure with the white face parallels Mina’s vision of “a livid white face” emerging “out of the mist,” and, as Van Helsing explains, Dracula “can at times vanish and come unknown” (Stoker 241, 221). Gaunt and the fog that hides his approach, then, are both threatening; Nell’s entrapment in desire is foreshadowed by the “yellow haze which shut her in like a writhing impalpable wall on all sides” (25).

Charitably considered, Challis does not intentionally exploit Margaret’s hero-worship, and his spell succeeds due to Margaret’s own weaknesses. Gaunt’s vampiric associations, however, make him an actively malicious, if not malevolent, figure. Gaunt’s very name reinforces his vampiric threat; the etymology of “gaunt” includes “a yawn, a gape”—both openings, or frames for nothingness (recalling the fog), as well as an open mouth (suggesting the bite). Commonly-understood meanings include “haggard,” as in Shakespeare’s thin and ill John of Gaunt in Richard II, but archaic usage also included “Hungry, greedy, ravenous” (OED). This nomenclature, then, reflects Gaunt’s hunger to dominate Nell and to control his milieu: “This moving about of human beings and influencing, if only in small ways, the pattern of their lives, was what he liked doing best next to wandering, in a dream, yet observing and hearing all that was going on about him, through London’s streets” (172). Gaunt’s waking dream here recalls the vampire’s trance, while his often sadistic manipulations of Nell’s lifestyle and appearance, and his friends’ romances, are a psychological form of the vampire’s mesmeric powers.

Gaunt, then, is part flâneur, part Dracula; London is his domain, and the villages-within-the-city of Highgate and Hampstead lie particularly within his sphere of influence. As Jamieson Ridenhour summarizes, Dracula’s purpose is [T]he bringing of Gothic Other, the fringe-dwelling degenerate, into the realm of the progressive Britisher. Whereas Lucy as vampire confines herself to true Gothic sites on the outlying districts of London—Hampstead Heath with its wild landscapes and history of highwaymen and crime, and Highgate Cemetery’s lushly overgrown and wooded lanes—Dracula seems intent on

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2 Truss remarks that a comic element in Westwood is that Margaret cannot help disagreeing with Challis and then being horrified at her own presumption (xi).
penetrating into the center of the city. (72-73) As an unemployed and artistic Bohemian with no fixed address, between school and National Service (a legacy of the Second World War), Gaunt is a “fringe-dweller”; as a novelist creating a “map of London, carved in pouring molten crystal words,” he captures the city (152). Gaunt’s interlude with Nell in Highgate Cemetery reinforces the Gothic overtones of Gibbons’s spatiality as well as his morbid nature; Gaunt prefers darkness and often complains about “beastly strong light” (31). We are told that, as a boy, he was found “floating over a squashed frog in the road,” which suggests sadistic tendencies (11). Indeed, he views Nell as a predator views a helpless creature: “[Your bones are] awfully small, aren’t they, Nell, like some delicate bleached baby rabbit...” (27). The greatest threat to Nell’s peace of mind is the helplessness caused by her intense awareness of John’s masculinity: “She had taken such unconscious pleasure in the sight of John’s white skin, ... and sleepy-looking eyes whose colour she could not distinguish, by this light, that the image was still floating before her mind’s eye...” (26). “Floating” further embeds Gaunt within the mist and the vampire tradition, as Gibbons emphasizes the connection between eroticism and disorientation. Nell’s “excellent sense of direction” has been thrown off course by the Gothic atmosphere and John’s charm.

The fog invites a Romantic haze for Margaret, and a gas-lit Victorian London for Nell. In both cases, the fog and the men it conceals pose a threat to temporal and spatial situatedness. The cityscape reflects this threat; ungovernable nature undermines London’s civilization and modernity. In Westwood, as a result of the Blitz, “Weeds grow in the City itself; a hawk is seen hovering over the ruins of the Temple, and foxes [raided] the chicken roosts in the gardens of houses near Hampstead Heath” (1). The rural, here, is threatening rather than idyllic and signals a breakdown in order.3 Similarly, *Here Be Dragons* links pastoral nature to death rather than idyll, alluding to Matthew Arnold’s elegy “Thyrsis” (1865) in the chapter title, “And with the bloom go I!” This refers to Gaunt’s foreshadowed early death about fifteen years later, as well as the end of Nell’s innocence via Gaunt’s final betrayal. Set in Highgate Cemetery, this chapter contains Nell’s and Gaunt’s final amicable conversation. In Highgate Cemetery, nature challenges monument, paralleling the proliferating weeds from Westwood: “The tombstones were almost buried in green plumelike weeds sweeping across them, dark rich moss obliterating once-beloved names glazed in the mild air” (279). This erasure undermines the immortality promised to John and his place in Nell’s memory. Nature, then, is as devouring, disorienting, and uncanny as desire.

**Reflections and Shadows**

In both novels, Gibbons develops the threats and vulnerabilities revealed by the fog via the Gothic trope of the double. Mirrors, shadows, and temporal dislocation destabilize identity, spaces, and history. Paralleled and fragmented characters and sites embody and map “all the possibilities, which, had they been realized, might have shaped our [protagonist’s] destiny, and to which [their] imagination still clings” (Freud, 11). Along with Dracula, then, the Victorian women’s Gothic haunts these novels, specifically “the split between the docile Victorian heroine and her mad double” (Gilbert and Gubar xxxviii). But the double also reinforces the fragility of modern identity. As Catherine Spooner observes, “Initially, the rise of the double is clearly due to the emergent notion of the individual in modernity. It is only when value is invested in a unique, coherent subjecthood that fear can be generated through its duplication or disintegration” (293). In Westwood, doubled spaces threaten to trap Margaret into stifling domesticity, even as their mirrored surfaces undermine her “unique, coherent subjecthood.” In *Here Be Dragons*, American girl Gardis embodies both incoherent subjecthood and active sexuality. This combination of negatively-coded attributes reinforces the cautionary link between desire and “disintegration” in this novel. Gibbons’s employment of Gothic images and spaces to illustrate the breaching and reparation of the “boundaries of the self,” then, is informed by a modern preoccupation with unstable subjectivity (Delamotte 13). As Julian Wolfeys writes, “the comprehension of the Gothic is expanded through an understanding of the role Gothic effects have to play in the constitution of a modern, fragmented subjectivity” (13). This layering of the traditional and modern Gothic to examine women’s identity and emplacement within the home is crucial to the “Gothic middlebrow.” Yiannitsaros argues that Christie’s Gothic engagement with nineteenth-century literary culture suggests “a contradictory interplay of simultaneous desire and distance characteristic of the ‘middlebrow’ fiction produced by women writers of this time”; a similar dynamic is evident here (6). Gibbons emphasises the awkward position of Margaret and Nell and their generation; they are poised between the old world and the new, inheriting the anxieties of both—the sensitive conscience and class-consciousness of the Victorian novel and the hollow and splintered subjectivities of modernism.

Westwood-at-Highgate is mirrored by “Westwood-at-Brockdale.” The former is an elegant historic mansion; the

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3 For more on uncanny nature during World War II, see Sara Wason’s *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (2010).
latter is a pretty cottage in the fictional suburb of Brockdale—“the coincidence struck [Margaret] as uncanny” (257). Margaret visits the cottage to look after Linda, the daughter of Dick Fletcher, her father's journalist colleague. He is a potential husband until he marries his housekeeper; his home represents the “unrealized destiny” of caring for somebody else's children, an opportunity and destiny also offered by the Challis household. Both Westwoods and futures threaten entrapment and a surrender of agency and employ uncanny imagery to reinforce this threat. The surface glamour of the mansion conceals its interior decay—public rooms gleam with marble and mirrors, but back corridors are traditionally Gothic: “cells and caverns [...], with the concavities of worm-eaten wooden staircases above them” (108, 131). A “faint odour of cold marble and wood smoke” further suggests an unhomely combination of hotel and mausoleum (131). Westwood-at-Brockdale is equally unhomely: “That miniature fairy palace of eternal childhood that was no true childhood just because it was eternal!” (265). This uncanniness is problematically linked to Linda, described via early-twentieth-century terms for cognitive disability and Down syndrome. She seems to exist only to develop Margaret's character: “[T]he vacancy in Linda's eyes and her vague, unfinished movements made [Margaret's] flesh faintly creep. The child was [...] very different from a normal child, and the fairy prettiness of this house that was both her world and her prison did not make Margaret feel any less uncomfortable” (257). Margaret's physical reaction here is the inverse of the “delicious tremor” of Westwood. Overcoming her “pity and revulsion” towards Linda in favor of unsellable kindness becomes a praiseworthy sign of evolving empathy and self-mastery (256). Margaret’s closeness to Dick Fletcher is inflected more ambiguously, however: “[S]he was doing what she had never done in her life before; controlling her own feelings in order to make the occasion pleasant for a tired man” (264). Later Margaret feels that the “sugary prettiness” of the house would “stifle” her, a metaphor for the subservience and claustrophobia that the emotional labour of marriage would entail (382). This metaphor also invokes the sensation of too many “sickly sweets” that disrupts her heroine-worship of Challis.

One of the ironies of the novel, and these parallels, is that the frozen time of the suburban cottage is echoed in the Highgate mansion, which Margaret does not realize—Challis's plays repeat plots, and his extra-marital affairs repeat the same patterns. At Westwood-at-Brockdale, Linda's wind-chimes emit a “silvery tinkling”; at Westwood-at-Highgate, “the clock silverly struck one” (254, 184). Mansion and cottage, then, share a stasis and disconnection from the everyday world—although at Westwood-at-Highgate this is framed as tradition rather than claustrophobic stagnation. Indeed, Challis's daughter Hebe presents herself as a “little girl dressed up,” despite her three children, as if mimicking her father's inability to mature and parading Gibbons’s description of Linda's arrested state (420). Margaret, then, ricochets between Westwoods, trapped in a hall of mirrors, her value in both houses primarily utilitarian.

But amid these dazzling silvery surfaces, a shadow links Margaret to the Victorian “docile heroine.” In the sewing-room at Westwood, a women's space between the public glitter and the worm-eaten back corridors, Margaret finds that “It was pleasant to think of women sewing here in the sunlight throughout the last two hundred years; the shadow which the seated, peaceful figure threw upon the wall changing in the course of time” (191). Here the continuity of sewing women represents privilege and peace, a pleasant rather than stifling domestic destiny. Nevertheless, Gibbons balances her recommendation of domesticity and its productive pleasures with a warning against excessive subservience to the demands of others; an elderly maid at Westwood collapses and dies, exhausted by her lifetime of service. “If you go to Hebe [as a live-in nanny] you will be swamped,” says Lady Challis (444). The challenge for Margaret, then, which foreshadows the challenge Nell faces in Here Be Dragons, is learning the anti-Gothic values of “ordinary happiness” and peace, while embracing life outside the home, beyond the shadow of the angel in the house.

Margaret is trapped between households that offer a borrowed and potentially stifling domesticity, while Nell is threatened with a destiny of destructive passion and dissolution, even death. Gaunt explicitly signifies submission: “She was quite sure that, if she did [admit her feelings for him], she would go into slavery” (289). The unhappy and vindictive Gardis embodies the harmful consequences of submitting to desire, making her Nell's double. Nell's English country-bred wholesomeness contrasts with Gardis's corruption and fragmentation: “[Gardis was] hopelessly—yes...the analyst had informed her parents that nothing could be done—immature, unintegrated, inharmonious, schizo—helplessly, in short, split. She had grinned, and said that she did not care if she were; you got more fun that way” (101, emphasis and ellipses in original). Gardis is split between drifting “bad little girl” and elegant and emplaced “Miss Randolph of Widemeadows, Long Island” (230-231). These two selves coexist uneasily, fused only by desire and (self-)destructive impulses. Gardis's sophisticated, overt sexuality is a foil for Nell's innocence and virginity; Gardis's “small feverish hands” contrast with Nell's “cool freshness” (67). Gardis's modernity mocks...
Nell's morality and regard for convention, and while Nell develops from a lovesick teenager to a worldly entrepreneur, Gardis remains in stasis as a heavily made-up, tousle-haired, dirty-trousered “deliberately straying child” (101).

Gibbons repeatedly reinforces Gardis’s foreignness and position as an outsider, to the point of racist othering—she is a “baby girl-goblin” and a “baby golliwog-witch” (217, 18). Gaunt compares Gardis to Poe’s Ligeia, emphasising her uncanniness and Gothic disruptive power. Nevertheless, Ligeia suggests victimhood as well as vampirism: Ligeia is “most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion” (Poe 96). This rending reflects Gardis’s “split” condition. Gardis’s feelings for Benedict shift between adult desire and infantile—or indeed vampiric—need. When he is about to leave her, she feels not “love or the other thing, it [is] like being terribly hungry” (229). This makes Benedict dominant. His primary feeling towards Gardis is “an unbearable pang of pity” for her vulnerable little-girl-self, which leads him to dedicate his life to her, and their mutual misery, ensuring that Gardis remains “helplessly split” (232).

The “shock” experienced by Nell when she first meets John in the fog is a possible first step towards Gardis’s fragmentation; she embodies Nell’s potential to become corrupted and “split”—were Nell to choose sex and the modern disordered existence that Gaunt, Benedict, and Gardis lead. A decaying mirror augments the positioning of Nell and Gardis as doubles and highlights this danger:

> There was a mirror on the wall, so old that its last traces of beauty had been broken down into the strange repulsiveness attaching to domestic objects of great age; [...] Yet its degradation was not quite complete: the few patches of silver left on the blotched surface returned the fragmented images of the two girls with touching purity and faithfulness. (68)

Like the wall of the sewing-room at Westwood with its feminine silhouettes, this mirror contains traces of the past. The emphasis here, however, is on fragmentation rather than preservation. It is unclear whether the remaining silver suggests a surviving truth in Gardis or whether Nell is the silver surrounded by corruption. Either way, Nell must resist the fate of her double.

The city of London reflects the potential dislocating and corrupting effects of Gaunt’s lifestyle. Jerry White remarks that: London... embodies in its purest form modern international capitalism in all its superficial brilliance and lure. This is a world where decent people are sucked in, used up and spat out. There is a kinder London, and there are ways of coping with its speed and steel and shine. But for the innocent it is a dangerous soul-stealing place. (5)

White notes that this “sense of danger never left the coming-of-age novel [such as Here Be Dragons]” (5). Indeed, Nell’s encounters with metropolitan decadence tarnish her innocence, while her nocturnal wanderings in Gaunt’s wake dislocate her sense of identity. In a dimly-lit espresso bar, choking on cigarette smoke and surrounded by dirt, drunkenness, and drug users, Nell sees a girl: “She was just wondering if the girl felt as out of things as she looked, when she saw that the far wall was a mirror” (79). This delayed recognition is a further “shock,” another step towards disintegrated subjecthood. Nell in her tweed is out of place in this transgressive night side of the city. The “dark, grimy and indescribably melancholy street” of the espresso bar where unemployed and unproductive youths linger over a single cup of coffee forms a counterculture to the glamour of the streets “starry with the winking and glittering of advertising slogans,” symbols of commerce, productivity, and modernity (80, 77). This split between gleam and dirt, then, suggests the urban Gothic by challenging the notion of modern London as a cohesive and stable entity. Ultimately, however, Nell attains a position of control—of herself, her emotions, and her environment, as she looks forward to the “relief” of “peacefully sharing her life and work with [her old school-friend] Elizabeth” in an espresso bar they manage together (261). Their café is an upscale version of Gaunt’s grimy haunts; it implies a shift from the ladylike tearoom where Nell first works to an anonymous urban service culture and a “coping with [London’s] speed and steel and shine” (White 5). Perhaps it also suggests the loss of individuality to capitalism rather than desire.

Margaret and Nell may be surrounded by cautionary mirrors of passionate relationships, but marriages and domesticity are equally flawed. Margaret observes the “worry and sordidness and pettiness of being married” in her parents (13). Nell watches “the body of someone who had given way unrestrainedly to Love being lowered into the grave” after Miss Berringer, her boss at the tearoom, commits suicide after an affair with a married man (280). In both novels, then, pervasive uneasiness about love and marriage is translated into Gothic imagery that reinforces themes of breached spatial and psychological boundaries.

**Spaces for Resistance**

If love is uncanny and unhappy, particularly for women, remaining unattached becomes the Heimlich alternative. Clare Kahane writes,
The female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism. Yet if it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of female fantasy, representing the pleasure of submission, it also encourages an active exploration of the limits of identity. Ultimately, however, in this essentially conservative genre—and for me this is the real Gothic horror—the heroine is compelled to resume a quiescent, socially acceptable role or to be destroyed. (342)

Both novels conclude with a rejection of Gothic desires and domesticity. Margaret’s and Nell’s concluding focus on their careers offers an alternative to the conservative conclusion proffered by Kahane, as well as to the stifling and trivial domestic sphere that worries middlebrow writers. For Margaret and Nell, resistance results in financial independence as well as a restoration and integration of identity, emotion, and intellect.

This progress from rupture to stability is reflected in the spatialities of the novels. The disruptive dynamics of female desire and male (self)-possession parallel the porous boundaries between nature and the metropolis, and Gothic tradition and uncanny modernity. The illusion and decadence of the male protagonists are reflected in hollow and chilling luxurious interiors in Westwood and decaying streets and lodgings in Here Be Dragons. The novels end in illuminated spaces; their protagonists assert control over their environments and destinies, finding stable pieces of ground where Gothic desires and threats can be resisted. Margaret finds enlightenment and peace in the middle of fecund nature, in an “unfamiliar world of mossy branches and rustling clusters of dark-green leaves through which blows faint scents of bark and sunned fruit” (440). It takes John’s final pointless lie to change Nell, not that he realises this. He seeks a favourable image of himself in her, but he does not realise “how greatly Nell [is] in fact altered” (314). It is implied that she has become less “faithful and forgiving,” but at least she is whole (315).

Margaret is dazed by the glow of the leaves and the fog of Hampstead Heath, dazzled by the glitter of Westwood-at-Highgate, and bemused by the silvery prettiness of Westwood-at-Brockdale. At night, London is a “silent, darkened city with its endless maze of houses,” punctuated by air raid sirens and searchlights (116). Nature in daylight, then, offers sanctuary from deceptive and dangerous spaces. Margaret resists Challis’s charms when she admires wildflowers in the country, while he finds her ridiculous. She finally asserts her taste: “You couldn’t have anything lovelier than that field of buttercups, she thought rebelliously; what does he want?” (321). Margaret’s growing ability to find beauty in the ordinary rather than the sublime or intense is underscored here. The disenchantment and rebellion triggered here is amplified when Margaret finds him picnicking with Hilda in Kew Gardens, and learns he has been lying to Hilda: “It was as if she had been reverencing someone who did not exist” (406). Disillusionment turns to contempt: “I suppose it wasn’t until this afternoon that he came out into the open. As if he were tracking something! Ugh!” (412). Challis is no longer a beautiful visionary hidden in the shadows; the light reveals him to be an ordinary, sordid predator. After the melodrama of this meeting, Margaret “began to take more pleasure in her teaching” (417). The shattering of her illusions leaves Margaret with a wound, however, until her conversation with Lady Challis in an orchard in Bedfordshire inspires her to accept her life as a single woman, develop her interests in art and history, and turn her energies towards her community rather than an individual: “So Margaret left the shade of the tree and went out to meet the procession [carrying fruit], and joined it, and helped” (448). Margaret’s journey towards clarity is supported by her love for nature; her passion for the shadowy Challis fades in the light of day.

Nell’s disillusionment is a journey from the smoke and mirrors of seedy cafés and crumbling lodgings to a “closed door whose shape was outlined with a thread of gold light” (312). The process from blindness to illumination begins in a café in Highgate where “they could hardly see, through the smoke” (285):

The charm of his voice was on her, as it had so often been during the past six months. But now it was September … and Benedict, … and Miss Berringer? The ones who had yielded completely? How was it with all of them? She did not look at him, but only listened; she wanted to look, but something inside herself was stirring faintly and rebelliously, under the spell. (285)

The influence of these cautionary examples of unhappy and destructive love is key to Nell’s rebellion. Nevertheless, she colludes with John to escape National Service and rushes to Paris where he claims to be hiding. When she arrives, she finds no sign of him—he lied to her. She returns home, exhausted: “The room, now, was dreamlike too. Only her anger burned and burned and was real…Well, now she did not love him any more” (310). This burning anger is cleansing; it destroys the floating image of vampiric Gaunt—and Nell herself becomes a space for resistance. Gaunt resurfaces in a neighbouring cottage. Nell stands in the doorway, the final threshold of her rite of passage, observing him stroking a cat, oblivious to her troubles and
exhaustion. In the final chapter, Gaunt gazes at Nell through the window of her espresso bar, a shift in focalization that shows her on the inside, taking ownership of a space in the city, and him on the periphery. This is no longer Dante’s London: it is hers.

Jenny Hartley observes that women’s war writing can often be read as a “fiction of affirmation,” “resistance writing,” with women writers “conscious of writing history,” and willing to “join the collective enterprise” (9, 10, 9). Nevertheless, Hartley notes, there were reservations about this communal project: While women writers felt part of wartime Britain, their co-option into the war-machine had two inescapable qualifications. War, although potentially emancipatory for women, could never be their congenial habitat. It brought separation, suffering, and death; and its values and codes of behaviour were inimical to many women. (11)

Westwood ends with its heroine Margaret renouncing hope of personal and romantic happiness in favour of communal service; throughout the novel, the routines of air raid sirens, rationing, and blackout evoke a resigned if not resilient communal spirit. In Here Be Dragons, social hierarchies are less certain, communal spirit has dissipated, and ideals of duty, bravery, and morality have lost significance for the young generation. National Service is an inconvenience to be dodged rather than an assurance of peace and military strength. Monuments to the past, such as Highgate Cemetery, are unkempt and threatened with suffering, and death; and its values and codes of behaviour were inimical to many women. (11)

References

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Who Owns the City? China Miéville’s *The City and the City* as an Urban Gothic Dystopia

by Ljubica Matek

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.9
Who Owns the City? China Miéville’s *The City and the City* as an Urban Gothic Dystopia

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**Abstract**

This article considers China Miéville’s novel, *The City and the City*, from the point of view of geography of space, suggesting that capital is the dominating force that shapes urban reality. The novel both builds on the traditional Victorian Gothic ideas of the city as a place of dual existence and exploits the topoi of detective fiction, but instead of focusing on the individual and the issues of psychological doubling and existential plights of a detective, it is more concerned with the modes of production and the way that capitalism continuously re-invents itself by its use of space without making itself known. The plot elements and aesthetics of detective fiction add to the mystery of murder, of the twin cities’ identity, and highlight the false consciousness of the masses, which enables the ideology’s effectiveness.

**Keywords:**

City; urban Gothic; space; capitalism; China Miéville

Among the various issues with which twenty-first-century Gothic deals, the city and the urban tend to take a prominent role. While medieval motifs remain a major creative source for much of contemporary Gothic, a turn toward urban spaces and contemporary themes, inaugurated by Victorian Gothic, still affect the genre today. Moving away from the distant medieval past and isolated castles, fin de siècle both Gothic and fantastic literature set their stories in the urban present and discuss contemporary issues (Dryden 19). In fact, the literary move from the rural to the urban setting reflects the actual process of urbanization, resulting in depictions of the city as a place of desperation, vice, illness, and death (Matek 154-65). In addition to this, Victorian Gothic delves into the anxieties resulting from living in a modern metropolis, predominantly those that, as Alexandra Warwick suggests, have to do with “the existence of the self in the modern urban landscape and the relation of the self to the others who inhabit it” (36). The preoccupation with these issues results in an awareness of the fact that people can easily hide or get lost in a large city because the multitude of the city dwellers seem to largely be unconcerned about the others’ lives and destinies. In addition, “[i]ssues of duality – split personalities, physical transformations, mistaken identities, doppelgängers – were found to be manifested in the social, geographical and architectural schisms of the modern city” (Dryden 19), as proposed in various fin de siècle texts, but perhaps most famously in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The sublimity and uncanniness emerging out of a sense of isolation in a crowd and the impossibility of fixing one’s own or the other’s identity have colored the atmosphere of Victorian Gothic and, subsequently, also of the urban fantastic and the contemporary urban Gothic, as they contributed significantly to their development due to their recurrent uses of the dark, gloomy city as the setting.

The Victorian idea of the city as an alienating and dangerous place that fosters lies and deceit is a recurrent one and includes visions of the city as the one represented in James Thomson’s 1874 long poem *The City of Dreadful Night*: “The City is of Night; perchance of Death / But certainly of Night” (lines 1-2). Without referring to them explicitly, Thomson’s poem illustrates the concepts of the Gothic and the uncanny as related to the city and as they are understood for the purpose of this article. According to David Punter and Glennis Byron, Victorian Gothic domesticates Gothic figures, spaces, and themes so as to locate its horrors within the world of the contemporary reader. This results in the appearance of criminals, madmen, and scientists as protagonists and the transformation of the setting into the contemporary bourgeois domestic world and the new urban landscape (Punter and Byron 26). More than a century later, the contemporary reader’s setting is still predominantly urban, which is why Miéville’s urban

1 As well as fantasy; see, for example, George R. R. Martin’s epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. 
Gothic dystopia borrows much from its Victorian predecessors. Moreover, the contemporary urban Gothic explores issues that were also central to Victorian Gothic, which displayed “a particular interest in questions of identity and the transgression of boundaries” (26).

In line with the ideas of multiple and uncertain identities and transgression is the concept of the uncanny, which is seen here as describing the notion of something familiar that under specific circumstances becomes frightening (Freud 220). Freud develops the concept originally introduced by Ernst Jentsch to mean that one “is not quite ‘at home’ or ‘at ease’ in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a lack of orientation is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident” (Jentsch 8). Such “intellectual uncertainty” is a result of great sensitivity, and not everyone can sense the uncanny quality of a person or a situation, implying that it takes someone sensitive, observant, and intelligent (a “detective”) to recognize the essence of what is uncanny and solve the mystery presented in the narrative (Freud 220; Jentsch 8).

With this in mind, the paper focuses on China Miéville’s novel, *The City and the City* (2009), and reads it as an urban Gothic dystopia, representing the city as a site of production, distribution, and use of goods, as well as income and wealth. In the novel, Inspector Tyador Borlu leads the investigation of the murder of a student, Mahalia Geary. What may seem like a straightforward detective story is complicated by the fact that the murder victim lived in the city of Ul Qoma, whereas her body is found in its “twin” city of Beszel – a city that shares the territory with Ul Qoma – and yet both of them have separate languages, governments, customs, and traditions. The citizens of the respective cities are not allowed to look at people or buildings in the other city, let alone cross borders between them. Miéville’s unusual conceptual premise of overlapping yet separate cities, in which people are taught to reject most of what they can see with their own eyes, is additionally complicated by the fact that Ul Qoma experiences economic rise, whereas Beszel suffers recession; in this analysis, the cities’ economic inequality is seen as crucial. The rise of the city (that is, urbanization) is inextricably linked with industrialization and, subsequently, with capital and its accumulation. As the headquarters for many factories, companies, and banks, the city’s identity is largely economic in nature, but its nature is also exploitative, excluding, and dangerous. The city’s literal and symbolic dual identity is both intriguing and menacing as it is revealed that its entire existence relies on falsehood and is designed to enable the circulation and accumulation of capital. The citizens and their lives turn out to be unimportant, a mere backdrop for the actual driving force that is capital, which is only interested in its own multiplication.

**The City, the Detective, and Noir**

Although only aesthetically, as suggested by Andrew McKie, Miéville’s novel echoes Borges, Robbe-Grillet, and Kafka, to whom it owes the nightmarish and somewhat labyrinthine world in which the search for the murderer takes place, it seems that the novel is equally closely linked to detective fiction from which it borrows various aesthetic and formal topoi and shapes them anew. In fact, like the urban Gothic, the detective story also has its roots in the Victorian era, although it should not be forgotten that even certain early Gothic novels, such as Ann Radcliffe’s, presented their mysterious tales “in the guise of a criminal narrative” (Worthington 32). The parallels between (Victorian/urban) Gothic and detective fiction are not strained, but rather quite natural as both genres deal with death, murder, instincts, and desires; their narratives work toward some kind of resolution or understanding of the crime/mystery, and both employ an urban setting. According to Mary Evans, “[t]he city is therefore always a place in which we have to discover, detect and hopefully ‘un-mask’ the people with whom we come into contact. Ordinary, day-to-day life becomes a matter of detection” (42). In other words, life is the process of acquiring knowledge about the city – a place that is at the same time familiar and unfamiliar. As argued by both Jentsch and Freud, it takes a special individual to sense the uncanny (the unfamiliar in the familiar) and thus to discover (any given) truth, which explains why British detective, spy, and crime fiction features an amateur detective who is very often more effective in detection than professional policemen and why urban Gothic often takes the form of a hybrid Gothic-detective narrative. In line with this, the intelligent detective protagonists are usually wholly unconventional in their personal lives⁵, often struggling with mistakes, and possibly even crimes, that constitute their troubled or dark past (Evans 47).

However, detecting and “knowing” are not only related to identity and the identification of a criminal, but also to wealth and capital. According to Evans, early crime-writing of the 1840s shows that the urban world acquired its own morality, and that crime and its literary representations are inextricably linked to both the city and capital as “later writers, and certainly from

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2 For example, Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the prototype for all future quirky, dark, and exceptionally intelligent detectives, such as John Le Carré’s Harry Palmer, and Colin Dexter’s Inspector Morse, to name a few. The trope has taken over other media and national literatures, too (e.g. Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, the detective protagonist in Chandler’s novels and subsequent film noir adaptations, Jo Nesbo’s Harry Hole, or even Dr. Gregory House of *House, M.D.*, an American TV series).
Sherlock Holmes onwards, grasped the essential point that major crimes such as murder for material gain are more likely to occur among those who have been blessed with wealth” (5). The detective himself is not untouched by the influence of capital, since a modern detective should be “an independent young gentleman of independent income, which ensures impartiality and the leisure to pursue investigations” (Frisby 57). While this may have worked for the likes of Holmes and Poirot, the contemporary detective’s relationship with capital is much more complex as he struggles with both money and relationships. This is why Miéville’s protagonist seems to resemble the disheveled Philip Marlowe more than the gentleman-detective epitomized in the characters of Holmes and Poirot, whose appearance, education, and speech only emphasize their upper-class origins. And while the influence of the early British detective fiction tropes is clear, the contemporary reader (who is also likely a viewer of films) will soon recognize the novel’s similarity to the more contemporary offspring of early detective fiction – film noir.

Apart from the characteristic visual atmosphere of film noir and its various psychological, political, and existential plots, film noir and the Gothic in its urban variety share an important quality: the ability to be popular and politically subversive at the same time (Spicer xlvii). Andrew Spicer suggests that it is not easy to define film noir because it is a retrospective phenomenon that evolves over time, preventing one from compiling a list of conclusive criteria (xxxvii, xl). Nevertheless, the dark, brooding city as the setting seems to be a constant:

Most noirs take place in dark, nighttime cities, their streets damp with rain that reflects the flashing neon signs where the alienated, often psychologically disturbed, male antihero encounters a deceitful femme fatale leading to his doom. [...] its characteristically dark, malign, morally ambivalent, and unstable universe, where existence is understood to be meaningless and absurd. (Spicer xl)

In line with this, The City and the City features a typical detective protagonist, Inspector Tyador Borlú – an experienced senior detective unburdened by family responsibilities and loosely involved with two different women – who takes over a case that will change his life forever.

The novel opens with Borlú investigating a murder scene, and the victim represents an atypical femme fatale, as she complicates the plot by the schemes she was involved in prior to her murder and which Borlú needs to clarify in order to solve the crime. Love or sexual relationships are thus eliminated from the narrative as the focus lies elsewhere – namely, in the economic circumstances that inform the life in Besźel and Ul Qoma, the two cities referred to in the novel’s title, and that, conveniently, make up one of the interpretative layers of noir. In fact, Spicer also highlights the connection between the genre and relevant economic circumstances in a particular context by suggesting that film noir is “popular cinema elevated to art but also [...] popular art that was oppositional, exploring the dark underside of the American dream” (xlix), much like the Gothic explores the underside of humanity by means of various transgressions and its distinctly dark settings. The “dark” setting of the novel refers to its almost imperceptible underlying driving force, that is “[c]apitalism as a mode of production, a totality which has never been systemised or achieved, is never ‘over and done with’, and is still being realized” (Lefebvre, The Survival of Capitalism 7). In fact, the mythology of the American Dream and the idea that success and wealth are available to anyone who works hard enough for what they want is underlying to global capitalism. The ideology behind it, however, erases the obstacles that are on the way and that prevent vast groups of people from ever succeeding since the mechanism of capitalist economy is designed in order to help the rich get richer. With capitalism gone global, it is no wonder that the noir transcends its original geographical and national borders and becomes a worldwide, “continuously evolving cultural phenomenon” not only as a means of aesthetic representation, but also as a political “vehicle through which that mythology can be critiqued and challenged” (Spicer xlix). Similarly to the Gothic, the noir questions the issues of power and its spatial and monetary distribution, which makes the two far more compatible than would seem at first. Such a potent combination of the architectural, psychological, economic, and political available in both (urban) Gothic and detective narratives, particularly the noir, can easily explain why writers (and other artists) are drawn to explore and represent the city as a noir locus of fantastic occurrences.

**The Dual Nature of the City**

In an interview, Miéville contends that the old form of the urban uncanny – for example, the back streets and forgotten shops – is being replaced by new uncanny or forgotten places such as: “the kind of large warehouses that have been built in the late Eighties at the edge of an industrial estate next to a McDonalds [sic]” (Schmeink 28). Likewise, the locality of his novel is a mixture of the old and the new: an archeological site in an eastern European twin city, its intertwined city streets, and the building of a large corporation. Thus, The City and the City seems to successfully incorporate both the early notions of the fantastic double, and the ideas of the city as (inevitably) a place of political and economic existence by depicting a radically totalitarian urban setting created and supported by a multinational corporation. The space of
the two cities (which, in fact, are one) is thus turned into a zone of conflict between two different cultures and nations competing for resources and economic success. The depiction of their uncanny similarity and the invisible borders between them symbolize the gap between classes. In fact, rather than speaking of a lack of resources, whatever they may be – natural, financial, and so on, that creates a radical split between the two cities – it becomes clear that the novel speaks of the issue of access and restrictions of access to the resources that are a consequence of uneven distribution of (political, financial) power. Hence, the doubling between the two cities that is highlighted as “real” emulates the relationship between those who have power and those who do not. The power, Miéville’s novel suggests, lies in the hands of those who create and benefit from the global economy – multinational corporations that have the power and means to extend or deny the right to the use of particular (geographic, financial, human) resources – rather than in the hands of politicians or the people themselves, as would be expected in an alleged democracy.

With this, Miéville adds a new dimension to the stories of doubles. Typically, the stories of doubles are concerned with the psychological implications of doubling, such as duality of human nature, the tension between instincts and reason, and even the pathology of a split personality. Consequently, the protagonists of fin de siècle urban fantastic texts, such as Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and even certain late twentieth century films such as David Lynch’s Lost Highway, are seen to undergo a psychological crisis effected by the appearance of their doubles. They try, with more or less success, to understand how the doubling occurred and what it means for them as individuals (Matek 161-174). In other words, the central issue is one of identity. In Miéville’s novel, however, the central dialectics is not between an individual and its double, but there is a tension between two whole groups of people (two cities, two nations), which requires the reader to go beyond the issues of individual identity in order to make meaning of Miéville’s complex novel. In fact, what seems to be a conflict between a city and its hateful but inevitable counterpart, turns out to be the conflict at the level of land-labour-capital relation, that is “the constitutive trinity of capitalist society” (Lefebvre, The Survival of Capitalism 8). The cities exist within one another. Their streets and avenues are situated on the same ground and often intertwined, “crosshatched,” making it necessary for their inhabitants to be taught from early on how to purposefully ignore, or “unsee” what in reality is there but should not be seen. The citizens are carefully trained and thoroughly indoctrinated so that they comply with not being able to trust their own senses and cognitive faculties. In turn, they accept the schizophrenic (and completely arbitrary) scenario according to which Beszél and Ul Qoma are indeed two separate cities (city-states, to be exact), even though they are situated on the same ground and share the same city map: “On a wall a largescale map of Beszél and Ul Qoma. To avoid prosecution, the lines and shades of division were there – total, alter, and crosshatched – but ostentatiously subtle, distinctions of greyscale” (Miéville 46).

In effect, each of the cities is presented to their citizens as each other’s heterotopia – Beszél and Ul Qoma interrupt each other’s continuity; they are a city within a city, mirroring each other, but their most profound difference is in their current economic situation and the ability to adapt to market changes. More specifically, the tension between the two cities is largely produced by the fact that they are in “economic antiphase. As the river industry of Beszél had slowed, Ul Qoma’s business picked up” (44), and it is not only a matter of degree, but also of type: while Beszél saw its golden age in industry, Ul Qoma’s income largely comes from finance. So, even if one takes it that these two cities are separate topological urban entities, they seem to represent the historical change from modernity to postmodernity, from industrial to postindustrial economy. In that sense, they are still heavily dependent on one another as the financially well-off make their living by exploiting those who are not and who are dependent on the “help” given in form of loans, exploitative jobs, and so on. According to Lefebvre, this mode of production is highly incoherent as it reproduces itself in the form of distinct parts that still create an ensemble, the existence of a sub-system that makes up a disorganized whole containing levels that are both disjoined and conjoined (The Survival of Capitalism 10). In other words, these two cities (classes, groups) cannot function without one another, even though it seems that they are separate and that one is superior to the other.

**Between East and West: Urban Gothic and Dystopia**

The economic heterogeneity of the urban setting can also be attributed to human migrations that contribute to the globalized and multi-ethnic image of the city. The hybrid existence of migrants who live neither here nor there is highlighted by the invisible boundary between the two cities: one is simultaneously here and there but is only allowed to acknowledge the ontology of the one, while completely ignoring the other. This provides the narrative with the traits of danger, murder, and mystery that are equally shared by detective and Gothic stories; the encounter or any kind of unauthorized interaction with the monstrous Other results in a symbolic death as the transgressor is taken away by Breach, the secret police, never to be seen again. Thus, although the Other is constructed in economic and ethnic terms, rather than in the form of an actual monster (a vampire, a zombie), the dangers of
transgression remain the same as in other Gothic narratives. Conveniently and very significantly, Miéville sets the plot of the novel in a fictional area somewhere on the European Southeast (the Balkans), referencing actual locations, such as Budapest, Varna, and Bucharest. He situates the fictional Besżel and Ul Qoma somewhere on the border between the historical Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, at a geographical locality marked to this day by migrations and transitions, as well as by its perceived identity of a borderline space, an invisible border between the East and West. The nod to Stoker’s Dracula is more than obvious as the cultural, scientific, social, and political tensions between the colonial West and the colonized East represent the very basis of Stoker’s vampire narrative.

The hybrid nature of the region that Miéville represents as a place of both actual and fictional cultural, geopolitical, and economic transition is additionally highlighted by the very distinctive names of the two fictional urban entities that, contrary to the laws of physics, occupy the same geographic space. On the one hand, there is Besżel, a modernist industrial city on the decline whose name could have been derived from the Hungarian verb “to speak” – “beszél,” and which may very well be a metaphor for the old Europe. The Arabic-sounding name of Ul Qoma, on the other hand, suggests its implied connection to the East, which is further emphasized by the fact that its economy is on the rise thanks to its strong finance industry, reminding us of cities such as the present day Dubai, a corporate Mecca and a symbol of globalization. Additionally highlighting the economic underpinnings of the novel is the economic significance of the setting. Namely, Besżel and Ul Qoma are situated in the midst of what the readers recognize as the territory of ex-communist countries, all of which have in the meantime, more or less successfully, transited to a market economy and joined the EU. The process of transition, much like the one implied in the novel, included models of privatization which in turn implied extreme influx of foreign capital and the creation of various areas of influence in education and economy, as was the case in Besżel and Ul Qoma which, although theoretically independent, function as American or Canadian colonies: “Ul Qoma, in its university district, where Prince of Wales and other Canadian institutions gleefully exploited the fact that the US state (for reasons now embarrassing even to most of its rightwingers) boycotted Ul Qoma” (Miéville 91). Ironically, the two cities, so determined to preserve their national identity and distinction from their immediate neighbors, depend in fact on foreign money and political influence, and the resemblance to the real life situation in the countries of the said territory is uncanny.

In addition to noting Miéville’s reference to the totalitarian history of the countries in the region and its nod to Dracula, it is difficult not to notice an additional reference to Anthony Burgess, whose dystopian masterpiece, A Clockwork Orange, features the invented nadsat language similar to Miéville’s Besż and Illitan. A combination of Russian and Cockney English, nadsat alludes to the fact that the fictional Britain of Burgess’s novel is not much different from the then totalitarian Russia. Moreover, nadsat is implemented as a specific literary device intended to provoke the reader’s sense of alienation from the narrative world and the protagonist, due to which the reader does not judge the characters but rather observes and learns from and about them, gradually building a rapport with Alex as one learns his language and becomes immersed in his world. Yet, rather than aiming at identification with his protagonists, Miéville seems to point out that linguistic and cultural differences can be overemphasized and abused for the purpose of manipulation and control by deterring the attention from the issues of power and distribution of wealth to highly flammable issues of national identity.

[In its original or later written form, Illitan bears no resemblance to Besż. Nor does it sound similar. But these distinctions are not as deep as they appear. Despite careful cultural differentiation, in the shape of their grammars and the relations of their phonemes (if not the base sounds themselves), the languages are closely related – they share a common ancestor, after all. (Miéville 4) The characters themselves, at least those who participate in the subversive and forbidden investigation spread across both cities, acknowledge that the distinctions between the two languages are overemphasized: “I started the last sentence in Illitan, the language of Ul Qoma. ‘This is fine.’ He interrupted in his old-fashioned Illitan-inflected Besż. ‘It’s the same damn-faced language anyway’” (34). Moreover, Besż uses a script that resembles Cyrillic, whereas Illitan uses the Roman script (41).]

The implied reference to ex-Yugoslavian languages that are different but similar, and definitely mutually intelligible, is hard to miss, as is the described mutual history of the two fictional cities, which seems to echo the complex history of Yugoslavia prior to its end in the early 1990s: “It may or may not have been Besżel, that we built, back then, while others may have been building Ul Qoma on the same bones. Perhaps there was one thing back then that later schismed on the ruins, or perhaps our ancestral Besżel had not yet met and standoffishly entwined with its neighbor” (51). In addition, one of the key consequences of Yugoslavia’s disintegration was unlawful mass-scale privatization of the country’s assets, which resulted in the majority of the country being impoverished, and a small percentage of the “chosen” ones (in each of the emerging independent countries) getting massively
rich. The novel does not shy away from using actual historical references that situate the fictional cities into the world of countries such as Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, and China, all marked by distinct totalitarian regimes, and most of them also by the transition to some form of market economy and capitalism: “Many older establishments and offices still displayed portraits of Ya Ilsa, often above ‘Ilsa’s Brothers’ Atatürk and Tito. The cliché was that in older offices there was always a faded patch between those two, where erstwhile brother Mao had once beamed” (161). The total influence of capital is further underlined with the use of the Ul Qoman neologism glasnostroika, which designates “an end to restrictive thinking” (161), and represents a reference to the famous Soviet perestroika, which entailed the reform of the economic system in line with the (world’s) markets as opposed to the government’s central planning.

Thus, two such heterogeneous and yet similar cities, or the double identity of what in reality is one urban entity, reflect the nature of capital, the city’s underlying schizophrenic current, which is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, a “motley painting of everything that ever was believed” and “a strange hybrid of the ultra-modern and the archaic” (Deleuze and Guattari 34, Fisher 6). In fact, the (idea of the) monstrous Other is created by the capital in order to more easily exploit the resources of both cities for their own benefit. The irony lies in the fact that the monstrous entity seems to be capital itself, which (literally – through wars and other violent conflicts) murders and consumes people to ensure its survival.

Consequently, the blend of the hallucinatory, the noir, the strange, invented language, and the references to the ex-communist areas of Central and Eastern Europe results in a disturbing dystopia that takes place in a totalitarian-like society overseen constantly by Breach, a mysterious authority with limitless power. The name alludes to the worst possible offence: namely, the breaching of the invisible barrier between the two cities, which can include a mere conscious glance at a person, building, or vehicle in the opposite city and their purposefully highlighted differences. Breach creates and fosters the epistemological and ontological uncertainty about the nature of the two cities that could easily be resolved by means of critical thinking, but which would then compromise the economic exploitation that is at hand. Because of that, their numerous similarities are constructed into a taboo: breach, the mistake of seeing the other or confusing it with the self, as it is of crucial importance to divide the citizens of the two cities and keep them focused on their cultural differences and staged tensions. Thus, by highlighting the difference of the Other, the novel actually reiterates the fact that “the absolutely other is inextricably within” and that breach “was statement of both crime and identity” (Dollimore 182, Miéville 237).

**Docile Bodies and the Capitalist Society**

To ensure that the carefully crafted distinction and separation between the two cities is upheld, the system resorts to a highly ideological education, or rather indoctrination, which disciplines people into perpetuating the state of affairs and, in Foucauldian terms, turns them into docile bodies (135-141). According to Foucault, to discipline a body in order to subject it to one’s will (ideology, purpose) and use, transform, or improve it accordingly, the body must undergo “uninterrupted, constant coercion” to follow the required protocols or otherwise suffer the consequences of disobedience (137). This is exactly the case with the citizens of the two cities: “The early years of a Besţ (and presumably an Ul Qoman) child are intense learnings of cues. We pick up styles of clothing, permissible colors, ways of walking and holding oneself, very fast” (Miéville 65). Because of their docility, they are complicit in the construction of national identity, and they perpetuate both the system of total control and the myth of the radical “Otherness” of the other city. Ironically, the differences in architecture, vehicles, and clothing are so subtle that at one point during his investigation Borlú himself “realised he [I] did not know what city we were in” (Miéville 250). Deconstructing thus the idea of natural or naturally perceivable cultural or national borders, it becomes clear that territoriality is an arbitrary socio-political construct and that borders are perceived and accepted only thanks to meticulous indoctrination.

The extent of the regime’s control is further highlighted by the fact that, apart from the citizens of Besţel and Ul Qoma who are taught from early on how to view the world and what to see as their own, the incoming tourists must also pass an intense crash course in learning how to distinguish between the two cities. Without such precaution, tourists would naturally perceive the two cities as one, which would subsequently erode the myth of distinction. To that end, they cannot obtain a visa for either Besţel or Ul Qoma without passing the course. The boundaries and rules are learned, and strictly observed so that a person may only see what he or she is allowed to see, and, shockingly, both the tourists and the locals accept the imposed mode of behavior and thinking. In this way, Miéville constructs a dystopian setting in which a person literally decides not to trust one’s own senses but accepts to perceive reality as it is represented by the ruling authorities of both cities. Their shocking docility reveals the absurdity behind the constructs, such as borders, nations, and taboos that are meant to be broken (Schmeink 29). For example, the representation of a double-café, which foils the nature of the two cities’ division, reveals that the distinction is purely imaginary.
and ideological:

[T]he DöplirCaffé, one Muslim and one Jewish coffeehouse, rented side by side, each with its own counter and kitchen, halal and kosher, sharing a single name, sign, and sprawl of tables, the dividing wall removed. Mixed groups would come, greet the two proprietors, sit together, separating on communitarian lines only long enough to order their permitted food from the relevant side, or ostentatiously from either and both in the case of freethinkers. (Miéville 22)

The training of citizens to un-see and not to believe their own cognitive faculties, but rather to become uncritical in their compliance to the authority is crucial in order to manipulate them easily. Consequently, the ultimate crime is to “breach,” that is, to acknowledge the actual unity of the two cities and thus expose the controlling nature of the regime.

Nevertheless, the nature of the two regimes and, quite possibly, the reason behind the schism within the single geographical locality divided into two political units, is slowly revealed through subtle clues, all of which relate to the economic status and standard of the two cities and their citizens, and their mutual dependence on foreign capital and investments. Interestingly, both regimes use nationalist rhetoric to hide the truth about the actual state of affairs. The constant references to political extremists, nationalists and unificationists in particular, whose activities are consistently used as a diversion by multinational corporations so as to keep everyone’s focus on the flammable issues of nationalism and cultural identity, have people disregard the issues related to the cities’ economic success and the questions of the distribution of the surplus value. In short, “[unificationists] had, mostly cack-handedly, targeted nationalist intellectuals – bricks through windows and shit through doors. They had been accused of furtively propagandising among refugees and new immigrants with limited expertise at seeing and unseeing” and used their agendas to try to “weaponise such urban uncertainty” in which there are “different visions of what the united city would be like, what would be its language, what would be its name” (Miéville 43). Such diversions clearly represent an instance of Marxian false consciousness about the mechanisms of capitalist oppression and exploitation of the masses, of the desiring machines that submit themselves voluntarily to repression, as well as human inability to see how circumstances shape them (Deleuze and Guattari 3).

Although the plight of the individual is not the novel’s central focus, the images of next-door neighbors unseeing each other remind the reader of the isolation of the contemporary individual who is no longer dependent on other people for help or entertainment, but rather seeks to satisfy their needs by consuming goods and services catered to them, reinforcing the capitalist reality of lack of belief that results in people becoming consumer-spectators (Fisher 4). In Beszel and Ul Qoma, the alienation is additionally exacerbated by the awareness that the neighbor might be living in the other city and even a glance at them causes the risk of being accused of breach:

It was, not surprisingly that day perhaps, hard to observe borders, to see and unsee only what I should, on my way home. I was hemmed in by people not in my city, walking slowly through areas crowded but not crowded in Beszel. I focused on the stones really around me – cathedrals, bars, the brick flourishes of what had been a school – that I had grown up with. I ignored the rest or tried. (Miéville 36)

To highlight the connection between the urban setting and the political economy on a larger scale, Miéville asserts in an interview that “surroundings intrude on our lives,” and for most people in the West that means urban environment, that is the city with its “official” and the hidden “unofficial” side (Schmeink 26). For Miéville, the unofficial side is closely connected with the issues of current political economy reflected in the fact that increasingly larger portions of cities are being owned by private companies who are surreptitiously transforming public into private spaces:

This is obviously associated with the near liberalization of the city. These zones are privatized space, but they are privatized space that pretends to be public space. Many of these zones are owned by companies. They look like streets, well they look like fucking ugly streets, but they pretend to be streets. But actually, they are private thoroughfares. And that is when we had the Occupy London situation and so on. The notion of what it is to be a citizen in a city is changing because these privatized spaces are not merely very ugly; they are not merely an attempt to bureaucratize that which cannot and should not be bureaucratized; they are also privatized, they are commodities. (Schmeink 27-28)

The ownership of public space turns out to be crucial for the resolution of the murder mystery, as from the very onset Inspector Borlú understands that the murder of the twenty-four year old American student Mahalia Geary, which takes place before the novel begins and which instigates the story, is somehow connected with the nature of the two cities and the possibility that the invisible boundaries between the two have somehow been crossed.
Studies in Gothic Fiction · Volume 6 · Issue 2 · 2020 ©

Articles

illegally: “You know that area: is there any chance we’re looking at breach? There were seconds of silence” (Miéville 14). The mention of breach makes everyone uncomfortable and it soon becomes clear that it is a crime far worse than murder. To breach was to cross the boundary between what was available to the public, what they were allowed to see and to perform, and what was forbidden, what they have been “relentlessly trained” to “unsee” (70).

The efforts the people of Besźel and Ul Qoma put into conscious “unseeing” of the other, that is their immediate neighbors, turns them into beings who no longer trust their senses (or their common sense), making them unsee how the corporations control their lives and participate in the sellout of their national treasures (symbolized by the corporate smuggling of precious archaeological artefacts) and the corruption in politics and academia. Moreover, the staged unificationist rebellion, “a decoy” did not move people to action, but rather only reaffirmed their readiness to be deceived, their complicity in conscious unseeing: “a little revolution that had died before it was born, and had not known it” (277, 278). In fact, Borlú defines the surreal moment as “outright foregone conclusion” (280), as the citizens of both city-states refuse to acknowledge the fact that they, in actuality, live in a single city, and choose to cling to their respective constructed national identities – a comforting lie, and a pacifying idea of home. This is a manifestation of what Deleuze and Guattari would see as “herd instinct…the desire to be led, the desire to have someone else legislate life” (Seem xvi). The ideology thus promoted reveals itself as highly effective since it becomes indistinguishable from practice. As such, it is not expressed at an ideological level and does not appear as ideology, although ideology it is, the ideology of capitalism that makes us want to “unsee” the social interactions of power (Lefebvre, The Survival of Capitalism 12). According to Fisher, “[t]he attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism. Lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism” (5). In turn, by believing that they are protected from political totalitarianism, the people of Besźel and Ul Qoma accept economic totalitarianism of the corporation. Borlú, having realized the mechanisms behind the ideology, can no longer return to his usual life in Besźel and is forced to literally and symbolically leave his life and home behind by becoming a part of Breach, the secret group who inhabit Besźel and Ul Qoma as a single city and who, rather than being seen by all, are seen by none, reinforcing the idea that people – as a mass – cannot escape the Marxian false consciousness. Knowledge is reserved for the chosen – exiled – few. The Breach, and Borlú with them, live in the interstices of ideology, not belonging to either nationalism or capitalism that renders them literally and symbolically invisible, just like the knowledge they possess.

Such lack of epistemological certainty opens up the space for various conspiracy theories, which have one purpose only: to deter from the actual truth, the truth being the path of the money. In Miéville’s novel, the conspiracy is twofold: first, that Besźel and Ul Qoma are two cities, and second that there is a third city called Orciny, situated between the two cities and functioning as the true authority governing the existence of both Besźel and Ul Qoma. Although the theory of Orciny is preposterous, it serves the purpose of a corrupted politician, Mikhel Buric, a Social Democrat working in the Chamber of Commerce. Buric abuses his knowledge of the theory as well as his awareness of Mahalia Geary’s interests and the general predilection for paranoia, and persuades her to figure as a mule in the process of smuggling valuable archaeological artefacts from Ul Qoma into Besźel for the benefit of a foreign corporation, as well as Buric’s own financial profit: “It was all geared stuff that got stolen,” I said. ‘Sear and Core are investigating the artefacts. This is a science experiment’” (Miéville 283). Buric, as the corporate pawn, dies in the final showdown, whereas the regional head of CorIntech leaves Besźel unscathed, making it clear that the destiny of two “odd little cities” (286) dependent on foreign money does not concern anyone, or rather that one of the central issues of contemporary urban Gothic must be the political-economic struggle, which to a large extent is still taboo. The capital and the issue of money and class is a repressed force that governs our lives just like sexuality and race, or even more so.

To illustrate this, in his interview with Schmeink, Miéville is explicit about the fact that “you can’t talk about the future of the city without talking about the future of the political economy of the city and the future of the political system” (31), which for now implies that life in the city is modified according to individual or corporate desires for profit, and that such individual desires (or desires of the chosen few) will produce decisions that will ultimately affect everyone’s lives, as they did in Besźel and Ul Qoma. In Miéville’s fictional city/cities, movement and thought are strictly controlled by Breach limiting the personal freedoms of its citizens. If the “future of the city” as envisaged in this urban Gothic dystopia is extrapolated in the real world, we will start seeing more “privatized zones” where “ordinary citizens [of London] might not be allowed in it, unless they show their ID. Or unless they can prove they have a certain amount of money or something like that. [...] The future [of London as an example] is being dictated by an ongoing battle between grassroots localization and corporate gigantism” (Schmeink 31). Clearly, as David Harvey (1978) and later Edward Soja (1990) have contended, the urban environment of the city is rooted in the ever-changing landscape of capital that continuously builds a particular landscape suited to it.
at a particular historical point and subsequently destroys it in moments of crises. Capital is thus figured as the force that shapes the urban space which contemporary Gothic must take into account. The treatment of urban space in The City and the City – as simultaneously physical and metaphysical – makes it clear that “space can be made to hide consequences from us” (Soja 6), which makes it an instrument of political economy.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Miéville’s urban Gothic dystopia continues the tradition of both Victorian Gothic and detective story in that it is very much concerned with the complexities and mysteries of urban life. In The City and the City, Miéville’s concerns lie specifically in political economy and the ways in which the urban Gothic imagines the future of the city within current modes of production. From the point of view of human geography and its interest in how the interaction between the space and human activity shapes the urban environment, the novel shows that urban Gothic is a very political genre, which is additionally made clear by its dystopian view of human existence as totally controlled by the invisible power of capital. The city space is a social space and as such it can be used “as a tool for the analysis of society” (Lefebvre, The Production of Space 34). The uncanny phenomenon of doubling or dual existence is connected both to the urban life and to the schizophrenia of capitalist reality that implies the accumulation of energy and its unlimited possibilities on the one hand and the power of repression that produces docile bodies on the other. In addition, it implies that the city has an underground, repressed, and unconscious life resulting from fake consciousness and the acceptance of repression (Lefebvre, The Production of Space 36).

The urban space is here represented as being both a means of production and a means of control since it is steeped in capital and its circulation because of which it can hardly be fully controlled either by the well-known authority of Breach or by those who inhabit the two cities. Rather, it seems that urban life is controlled by the ideology of the corporation, as the owner of capital, which surreptitiously and invisibly shapes the urban space and the lives of people inhabiting it.

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The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls: Reconfiguring Personhood through Object Vivification in Gothic Film

by Joana Rita Ramalho

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.33
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ABSTRACT
This article proposes an investigation of the ways in which the figure of the non-person in/animate body operates in Gothic cinema. It will focus on human-like objects, specifically dolls, in order to investigate the key narrative and aesthetic discourses they facilitate regarding hollowness and life. These entities establish a frightening dynamic between stasis and real or imagined (yet always unwanted) movement. In the process, they become haunting symbols of liminality that articulate particular ideas about identity and personhood, while also stressing the permeable boundaries between self and other. Gothic things undermine the normal subject-object relation and thus continually destabilize the demarcations between life and death or sanity and insanity. In so doing, they furthermore expose an irrational attitude towards existence and consciousness. Using an object-oriented approach that draws on Elaine Freedgood’s and Bill Brown’s thing theory, I explore the disruptive tendencies that in/animate agents foster in such films as Maria Lease’s Dolly Dearest (1991), Otto Preminger’s Bunny Lake is Missing (1965), and Robert Aldrich’s What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962). I will focus on these case studies to examine the manner in which Gothic dolls activate uncanniness to represent subjectivity in crisis. In analyzing the figure of the doll to investigate the uneasy relationship between human beings and human-like things, this paper contributes to the growing interest surrounding the role of objects in Gothic cinema.

KEYWORDS:
Dolls; Gothic film; vivification; objects and things; personhood; human likeness

From its inception as a fiction mode, the Gothic has played on our greatest fears but also on our greatest hopes and fantasies. One such fear – and one such hope – relates to our eagerness to invest dead things with life. Over the years, many film narratives have explored this fearful desire and melded magic and murder, the marvelous and the melodramatic, conventionality and preternatural subversion. The artificially or supernaturally animated quickly became a recognizable trope in the Gothic and horror imagination, where inert things are often literally – or seemingly – vivified by being ascribed properties of the human. Each of the films I will be analyzing more closely represents a different approach to the image of the doll. The object’s haunting stillness in Bunny Lake, for instance, contrasts with its unexpected and diabolical movement in the low-budget horror flick, Dolly Dearest. In turn, the anonymous face of the doll in these two productions is opposed to the unbearable likeness of the Baby Jane doll and the protagonist of Aldrich’s film.

Gothic literary and visual (including cinematic) culture has relied on the vivification of still objects as a means to expose and explore the powerful excesses that lie beneath the surface of the apparently organized, constant, controlled, and controlling socio-political parameters that rule everyday life. Literary works are outside the scope of this article, but it is pertinent to emphasize the pervasiveness of the doll motif in a plethora of Gothic texts, such as E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” (1816), Fitz-James O’Brien’s “The Wondersmith” (1859), Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Frau Blaha’s Maid” (1899), M. R. James’s “The Haunted Dolls’ House” (1923), and Daphne du Maurier’s “The Doll” (1937). Several essays and short stories that revolve around dolls are also compiled in Kenneth Gross’s On Dolls (2012) and Ellen Datlow’s anthology, The Doll Collection (2015). These narratives construct the doll as suspicious, yet familiar. Gothic and horror films build on this same understanding of dolls as sublimely odd and oddly appealing, which makes them singularly suited to dramatize deep-seated human fears and anxieties, such as ageing (in Baby Jane), hyper-consumerism and the supernatural (in Dolly Dearest), and mental illness (in Bunny Lake). In this article, I propose an object-oriented approach into the ways in which the non-human in/animate body operates in Gothic cinema. My focus is therefore on objects – particularly the figure of the doll – rather than characters or plot,
and my aim is to analyze the disruptive potential of these life-like tri-dimensional bodies. The shared affinities between human and non-human-but-human-like objects are made more complex when the films engage in processes of dollifying, whereby human beings become increasingly doll-like, as happens in Bunny Lake and Baby Jane, as I will explain further along.

The ideas articulated in this article draw on two interconnected premises. First, that it is possible to read objects as having meaning beyond a given text, so that we can claim with Elaine Freedgood that ideas, namely social relations, lurk or hide in things; and second, that there is a powerful bond between persons and things, which places humans and objects in a state of constant tension (53-54, 56). Many critics have sought to explain the intricate relationship between subject and object during and since Victorian times according to different academic fields, such as commodity culture, cultural history, behavioral history, psychoanalytical theories, and most importantly for this article, thing theory. Freedgood coined the phrase, “Victorian thing culture,” to describe “a more extravagant form of object relations than ours, one in which systems of value were not quarantined from one another” (8). “Thing culture,” she asserts, “survives now in those marginal or debased cultural forms and practices in which apparently mundane or meaningless objects can suddenly take on or be assigned value and meaning . . . [and] be convincingly stripped of randomness” (8). Thing theory, as developed by Freedgood, Bill Brown, and other scholars, is also innovative in that it aims to comprehend the relations between subject and object beyond – or, at least, outside – the capitalist market system.

Bill Brown distinguishes between objects and things and claims that things assert their presence suddenly, like when a car stalls or we trip over a toy. This means that we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us, that is, when they disturb the usual subject-object relation (3-4). This moment of interruption (of a dramatic change in our relationship to a given object) alters the normalized person-thing balance, in the sense that it forces us to experience the physical world in a different manner (Brown 3-4). Accordingly, the immediate ambivalence of seemingly animated objects poses fundamental questions about the relationship of subject to object and reality to unreality (or mimesis to imagination), challenging the stability of our habitual relationship with the inanimate world: amusement and admiration, on the one hand; repugnance, fear, and revolt on the other. Gothic films present to us a world of things – a world dominated by things, their strangeness and their uncanny power to entice us. But the relations between humans and things are neither comfortable nor sociable in the Gothic. Indeed, when confronted with actual or imaginary vivification (or with the possibility of future animation), we realize that qualities we once thought exclusive to human beings, such as agency and likeness, no longer serve or suffice to describe us accurately. The general implication here is that objects that present characteristics of living creatures allow us to ponder the possibilities, the limits, and the very nucleus of what it means to be human. This is a question to which Gaby Wood, Victoria Nelson, and Barbara Johnson keep returning in their studies of the figure of the doll and the automaton (Wood, Living Dolls; Nelson, The Secret Life of Puppets; Johnson, Persons and Things). Agency in Gothic fiction, and fantastic stories more generally, is widely distributed between human and non-human entities, and with agency comes the question of intelligence (rational thinking). One of the reasons these objects appear so frightening in the Gothic is because we (and the characters) assume they have a will of their own and that their actions have a purpose.

As for likeness, the Gothic and horror imagination is populated by myriad monsters that are human-like but devoid of proper humanness, such as zombies, mummies, and Frankenstein’s creature. In turn, the production of human-like robots that mimic the appearance of humans and the development of artificial intelligence have decidedly complicated matters further, making it all the more difficult to define clearly and unambiguously what it is that makes us human. The dehumanization of the human in favor of object (or non-human) vivification gained substantial prominence in eighteenth-century “it-narratives,” also known as “object tales” or “novels of circulation,” such as Chrysal; or Adventures of a Guinea (1760) and Adventures of a Hackney Coach (1781). Jonathan Lamb explains that these are “surprisingly unkind” autobiographies of things and creatures where there is no benevolent intention towards human behavior. As Lamb observes, “In these stories, metamorphosis reveals one mode of being at odds with another; and sometimes when they find their voices, things and creatures use them not to admire and claim association with human beings but to report matters that humiliate and disgrace them, such as their avarice, delusion, cruelty, ugliness, and mortality” (Lamb 193). These fictions show, usually in the first person singular, how metamorphoses between the human and nonhuman destabilize personal identity. In fact, the tales not only depersonalize the human self, but moreover present non-humans as the voices of reason and the guardians of moral decency. Humans are exposed for their neglect and hypocrisy, their subjecedhood unceremoniously usurped by things in search of revenge. Ultimately, the propensity of humans to ascribe human-like qualities to things is problematic because, as Kathleen Richardson notes, “it locates humans as the main agent in relations with materialities and non-humans” (121-22). In line with eighteenth-century “it-narratives,” it is precisely this idea of human superiority that
Gothic and horror toy with and deconstruct.

Johnson elaborates on the specificities of the human and comments on the importance of exploring the category of “non-person” separately from that of “thing.” She asks, “Are human-like objects (statues, for example) altogether like computers in their inanimateness? Are dead bodies inanimate in the same way that something that was never animate is?” (2). These are pertinent questions that point to the need for distinguishing between different categories of objects and analyze more thoroughly the intricacies pertaining to each type. Following on from Johnson's observation, we can subdivide animate and inanimate bodies into two large groups: “non-person” and “thing.” Each of these can be subsequently divided into two subcategories. “Non-person animate bodies” concern, on the one hand, the human-likeness of the non-human – a subcategory comprised of human-like objects (such as androids and mechanical dolls) – and, on the other, the human-likeness of the no-longer-human; in other words, dead bodies (such as resurrected mummies, zombies, and ghosts), or what Richardson calls “models of non-human personhood” (110). Animate things, in turn, encompass non-human-like automata and haunted objects, such as the aurally alive mirror that speaks in Jean Cocteau’s hauntingly eerie Beauty and the Beast (1946) or the “Fat Lady” portrait in the Gothically-inclined Harry Potter films (Figure 1).

When we move to an analysis of “non-person inanimate bodies,” which are the focus of my investigation, we have the same two subgroups as with animate bodies – human-like objects (puppets, dolls, dummies, marionettes, simulacra, waxworks, statues, effigies, death masks, and mannequins) and dead bodies (preserved corpses, pickled punks, skeletons, morgue bodies, and other post-mortem body imagery). Inanimate things are also organized into two subgroups: objects/curiosities (ancient swords, portraits, Ouija boards, antique jewelry) and dead animals, which become things through taxidermy (Figure 2).

The taxonomy of animate and inanimate bodies I propose here retains Johnson's idea that we should differentiate between non-persons and things but, importantly, it does not establish an unbridgeable gap between the two categories and their respective ramifications. In accordance with Brown, it concedes that the status of objects can evolve and that human-like objects can become things when they have been damaged or destroyed and we can no longer immediately (or unproblematically) perceive our likeness in them. This categorization also allows for mobility between animate and inanimate conditions, as in the case of puppets, marionettes, and dummies, whose animation in the Gothic is, contrary to the horror genre, usually wholly dependent on human action. In what follows, I concentrate on non-person inanimate bodies that have become part of our cultural heritage, specifically the figure of the doll – an object that has long captivated filmmakers working with Gothic and horror tropes who have capitalized on the idea that human-like objects do a highly idiosyncratic job of rendering the human world.

**A Brief History of Dolls**

Historically, dolls and other playthings have been in existence for thousands of years, although social and cultural attitudes towards their function have changed considerably. In museums all over the world, we find Egyptian paddle dolls made from wood or clay, terracotta dolls from Greece, rag dolls from Roman times, and depictions of dolls in Renaissance paintings. Over the 1800s, propelled by the Industrial Revolution, doll-making became an important industry in England, France, and Germany. After the end of World War I, the United States became leaders in doll production by crafting more durable dolls made from leather, celluloid, and rubber that did not require the importation of porcelain. The most significant changes in doll production, however, took
place during the Victorian era, a time when the wellbeing and legal rights of children started to attract public attention, and childhood, as Ginger S. Frost observes, became the subject of much political debate (4-10). With the recognition of children as part of the consumer public, Victorian England saw the emergence of a new cultural space allotted to playthings and the development of a mass market for toys. Dolls of this period had realistic features and were made from a variety of materials such as cloth, wood, papier-mâché, wax, and porcelain. The latter were particularly popular in wealthy households and were generally not intended for playing with but rather to be looked at. These delicate porcelain dolls would become the archetypal dolls of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Gothic fiction, as featured in Bunny Lake, Baby Jane, and John R. Leonetti’s Annabelle (2014). Victorian-era dolls, as Gary Cross notes, “possessed adult bodies and faces,” and the traditional function of doll play was the implicit preparation for adulthood and its socially-mandated gender roles (28). As the toy industry developed, so did the features of the doll which grew more and more realistic and childlike (Stover 27). The culmination of this process was Benjamin F. Lee’s manufacture of rubber dolls from 1837.

When we turn to cinema, we notice that Gothic and horror dolls are, in general, physically homogenous and so the films, with few exceptions, do not reflect the actual changes playthings have gone through over the centuries in terms of production materials or facial features. Some horror films do use plastic dolls (the Child’s Play franchise, for instance), but for the most part Gothic and horror productions adhere to the standard figure of the old porcelain doll. This preference evidences a close proximity to Gothic literature and Victorian society by establishing a direct link with the plaything of choice of many well-off Victorian families. The dainty faces of these dolls and their frail bodies are imprinted with the idea of childhood innocence, which Gothic and horror are quick to taint, subvert, and destroy. Delicateness metamorphoses into subtle evilness, and the doll becomes too life-like, too realistic. A relevant detail to understand the significance of the object’s cultural history to Gothic film, namely the choice to privilege certain doll-making materials, is the fact that Gothic dolls rarely appear fully undamaged, their physiognomy vividly displaying the corruption caused by human manipulation and the passage of time. In this way, they act as constant reminders of the fragility, forlornness, and ephemerality of life. The presence of the antique doll in modern Gothic works also emphasizes an inescapable Gothic theme: the overwhelming pervasiveness of the past within the present; more specifically, the unfailing ability of the past to deeply affect narrative reality. Because of its production history, the vintage doll mediates pastness and willful anachronism, whereas its recurring presence in Gothic narratives materializes the idea of the ever-returning past. The fact that the films have continually used dolls of the old-fashioned kind to haunt their viewers may appear paradoxical, in that Gothic and horror are widely analyzed as commenting on the times that produce them. In this sense, at the same time as the use of and focus on these objects points to their history, Gothic and horror also dehistoricize them. By playing with anachronism, they sever, to a certain extent, the relations of the thing to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century societies that they are deemed to mirror. Looked at in this way, an object stuck in time might not provide such an obvious or fruitful avenue for thing theorists or commodity culture specialists, but it does not necessarily limit the meanings or legibility of the object. It calls, in fact, attention to the power of specific things (of specific commodities) to affect contemporary subjects in a way that might otherwise go unnoticed.

**Uncanniness and the Gothic Doll**

Let’s face it: some dolls are creepy. I am not referring to the Barbie type of doll, although these, too, have had their fair share of disturbing features. In 1975, for instance, Mattel released a Skipper doll that could grow her breasts when you rotated her arm. But this is not the kind of disturbing I am interested in here. What concerns me is the type of creepiness Susan Yi Sencindiver addresses when she writes, “Whether of porcelain, vinyl, or cloth, a sexual surrogate or an object of a child’s caress, divine icon, fetish, or voodoo curse, or assuming its notorious revengeful appearance in horror fiction and film, the doll in its various permutations is endowed with a unique auratic presence susceptible of acquiring an uncanny hue” (103). I have hinted at this earlier, but how exactly does it happen? When does a doll, an object, become uncanny?

Jentsch claims that things that are ambivalently animate and inanimate trigger the uncanny – a state of unease and fear – when they go against our intellectual expectations and desires, breaching the boundaries between human and machine, life and death, mobility and stillness (11-14). Freud, in turn, focuses on the self’s psychic past, arguing that the uncanny arises due to the return of childhood memories that have been repressed, but also due to the return of primitive human beliefs, such as animism. In the fictional world, Freud notes, the ambivalence as to whether narrative events are real or imaginary constitutes a source of uncanny feelings (219-252). Johnson, in her enquiry into humankind’s relationship with simulacra, writes that a “remainder of the uncanniness of unwanted life . . . occurs when one wishes a being dead and it exhibits life; the unsettling persistence of the doll Chucky in the Child’s Play movies, for example” (164). What is uncanny, then, is what goes against one’s waking wishes or beliefs. As Johnson re-
marks, “it is not uncertainty over something’s aliveness that Freud says is uncanny, it is its contradiction of our wishes” (164).

Object-related uncanniness in horror films originates from actually witnessing unwanted animation, as when Dolly Dearest’s Marilyn confronts the evil doll whose hellish spirit is controlling her daughter, Jessica, and it speaks back. In the Gothic horror film, The Boy (William Brent Bell, 2016), the uncanny manifests differently. Greta is hired by an elderly couple to look after their son, Brahms, who turns out to be a porcelain doll. Greta, whose initial reaction at the sight of her charge was laughing in utter disbelief, slowly changes her demeanor and gives in to the possibility that the doll may be capable of agency. Brahms repeatedly turns up in unexpected places, for instance, and some of Greta’s belongings mysteriously vanish. Importantly, Greta’s acquired fear is the result of unwatched (and, therefore, only suspected) animation. Uncanniness, in this case, appears when the audience and the characters believe an object has (or might have) agency and its supposedly imminent animation is not desired. In short, the Gothic uncanny is not dependent on vivification, but on its possibility. In addition, and going back to Brown’s thing theory, the uncanny seems to settle only when the objects stop working and/or call attention to themselves, thus becoming things for the audience and the characters. Specifically, the borderline agency of liminal and/or contradictory entities that are both living and dead – like a human being fall into what Mori calls the “uncanny valley,” that frightening and mysterious realm of the eerie – gives rise to a sense of uncanniness. Mori’s theory calls attention to the quest for wholeness, that is, for a perfect balance between appearance and behavior that would transfer the properties of the human to the simulacra. This would create a potentially dangerous symbiosis between the two, ultimately leading us to redefine our perception and our notion of what “human” means.

Creepiness and scariness are built into the doll, and these feelings guide the interactions of the characters with the physical world. Human-like avatars of the odd and the weird, these paradoxically unresponsive, yet undead, entities that foreclose the possibility of impending re/animation, become haunting symbols of liminality. Their “categorical interstitiality,” to use Noel Carroll’s expression, adds to both the unease with which they are perceived in film and the particular uncanny experience they produce (55). Carroll associates this idea of “impurity” with interstitial and/or contradictory entities that are both living and dead or that conflate the animate and the inanimate (55). In this regard, the fear of Gothic dolls relates directly to their liminal half-existence, specifically the idea that they always seem to be on the verge of moving and revealing agency. Sencindiver remarks upon the doll’s peculiar hold over the characters and writes that the strangeness it excites pertains to “the suspicion of a doll’s furtive inner life” (103). Brahms’s supposed “inner life” in The Boy, for example, constitutes a powerful threat that destabilizes Greta’s daily routine and eventually leads her to question her own sanity. In the Gothic game of people versus objects, the latter often stand victorious. Ultimately, the uncanny almost-aliveness of anthropomorphic things is terrifying in the Gothic because accepting that the motionless can become mobile means accepting the existence of a residual degree of inexplicable agency in lifeless matter; in other words, it means accepting the existence of a residual degree of inexplicable autonomy in evil.

Gothic Stillness and Horrifying Vivification

Just as the contours of uncanniness, in terms of attributing senso-

ry functions of living organisms to non-person bodies, vary from the Gothic mode to the horror genre, so does the extent to which things impact the characters and the viewers. The Gothic and horror cinematic traditions rely on the power of objects to provoke an affective reaction in the viewers, to incite them and draw them in. They produce narratives that deconstruct the ordinariness of everyday things by making them disturbing and foreign to both the audience and the characters. Specifically, the borderline agency of certain objects constitutes a powerful device for defamiliariz-
ing normality, in that it invites human beings to ponder the possibility of humanized non-humans. In a way, creepy doll narratives seem to answer humankind's age-old desire to create artificial life. That desire's inescapable corollary, however, is the fear that things might momentarily break away from their entrancing entropy and actually cross the threshold between the living and the lifeless.

In horror films, as we have seen, that fear becomes a fact, and the norm is to have objects supernaturally endowed with life. These living constructs take over the narrative, and their sole purpose is to haunt (and harm) their human counterparts with remorseless cruelty, like Chucky from the Child's Play franchise or the haunted doll collection from Stuart Gordon's Dolls (1987). An earlier example of horrifying animation is Lewin Fitzhamon's now lost trick film The Doll's Revenge (1907). The British Film Catalogue's plot summary for the film reads, "Boy breaks sister's doll and it mends, grows, tears him up, and eats him" (Gifford 55). When objects come to life in horror films such as these, they invariably become malevolent agents working against the characters. In Dolly Dearest, an American family acquires a Mexican doll factory, located next to a dig site. When an archaeologist breaks into an ancient tomb, he inadvertently releases a satanic spirit, which finds refuge inside some of the dolls in the factory, including the one young Jessica inadvertently releases a satanic spirit, which finds refuge inside some of the dolls in the factory, including the one young Jessica chooses to take home. The sequence where Camilla, the unsuspecting housekeeper, walks through a dark basement crammed with shelves of fake eyeballs and other doll parts encapsulates the violence perpetrated by vivified objects in horror films. Shortly after she turns on the light and inspects her surroundings, the camera cuts to a close-up shot of child-like hands slowly locking the basement door and then to Dolly's tiny feet menacingly approaching. At the sight of the devilish creature, the housekeeper screams and falls backwards down the stairs. In the moments that follow, there is more chaos and screaming. Generalized panic is the prototypical reaction of horror characters to unwanted animation.

Preminger's Gothic noir-ish thriller, Bunny Lake Is Missing, presents a rather different approach to objects. Halfway through the film, in a sequence structured somewhat similarly to the one in Dolly Dearest, Ann, the tormented Gothic heroine, goes down a flight of stairs into the "recovery ward" of a cluttered doll hospital. She is looking for a doll belonging to her daughter Bunny, who has mysteriously vanished and whose very existence is being questioned. The dramatic lighting, with Ann carefully shining a kerosene lamp across shelf after shelf, anxiously perusing each doll, adds a distinctively suspenseful "haunted house" feel to the mise-en-scène. Preminger's hand-held camera and tracking shots in the shop's basement frame Ann alongside the eerie dolls, positioning the character as one of those broken glassy-eyed objects. This foreshadows Ann's forced admittance into St. Charles Hospital – like Bunny's doll, she is broken and needs to be fixed. The use of the word “hospital” in relation to both animate and inanimate characters points to another connection between lifelike playthings and human beings. Ann's psychological games toward the end of the film (slipping into the role of a little girl in an attempt to appease her deranged brother and save her daughter's life), illustrate the importance of the doll also as a symbol of childhood and trauma. In a narrative where up until the end it is hard to tell whether Bunny is real or not, the music-box type of tune that plays while Ann wanders the darkened, nightmarish basement suffuses the sequence with a dream-like quality that serves as counterpoint to the terrifying idea that those inanimate bodies are staring back at her. The possibility of uncanny animation culminates in Bunny's doll uttering the word, "mommy," when Ann finally finds it and picks it up. In the Gothic mode, then, the vivification of objects takes on strikingly different contours: as a rule, objects are only seemingly – which is to say, psychologically – endowed with agency, revealing the instability of personal identity (in this case, Ann's and her brother's). Horror, therefore, deals with non-person animate bodies, whereas the Gothic usually explores human-like inanimate objects. This means that, where dolls are concerned, the physical threats to the self are real in the horror film and imagined in the Gothic.

From these two sequences, we also realize that another aspect that separates Gothic from horror is the reaction of the characters towards these objects. Both films confront the viewer with varying levels of discomfort, associated, in the first one, with scattered human-like body parts and, in the second, with an overwhelmingly homogeneity. Repetition and sameness are the building blocks of uncanniness in the Bunny Lake sequence. In order for Ann to leave the doll hospital, she has to discern the individual qualities of a specific doll – she must search beyond the frightening clone-like homogeneity. There is no physical contact with the objects until she sees and reaches for Bunny's doll. Contrariwise, in Dolly Dearest, there are several moments of undesired and involuntary contact with things, namely when a shelf of doll heads collapses on the housekeeper, whom Dolly later stabs and electrocutes. The specificity that underlies the use of objects in Gothic cinema is related to an almost reverent concern for the world of things, so that the act of perceiving objects tends more towards a sort of sinister curiosity than visceral horror. The actual (visible) animation of the inanimate in horror films produces a type of reaction that is qualitatively different to the act of observing endless stacks of immobile dolls. The Gothic is therefore related to the perception of fear and its experience in the mind rather than to vicious and visual attacks to bodily integrity. In the Gothic imagination, dolls are scary simply because they are dolls;
their presence is enough to instill fear. Moreover, it is the camera itself that creates Gothicity by privileging the object and making it the focus of the action. Stanley Cavell remarks that, in a film, “a trivial thing easily becomes a mythical object, probing its own significance,” in the sense that objects might acquire a particular aura and a chief narrative and scenic role (208). The Gothic, more so than horror, invites viewers to become entralled by “trivial” objects that rapidly take on aesthetically and thematically central roles in the narrative, as evidenced through a series of specific cinematic techniques. In Bunny Lake, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds work in conjunction with camera movements and angles to create a pervasive feeling of suspense, strangeness, and displacement: there is hardly any room for the self amid the violent fixity of those cracked faces, dismembered bodies, and lifeless stares. The Gothic, then, relies more heavily on cinematic rather than narrative devices to generate fear and portray dolls as key emblems of corruption and the uncanny.

What we also understand from these examples is that Cavell’s “mythical objects” quickly revert to the state of “things,” in that they deeply affect the usually stable subject-object relationship by calling attention to themselves. In line with Brown’s thing theory, we can argue that these dolls have become things because they have stopped working and need to be fixed (in Preminger’s film, they are, tellingly, in a doll “hospital”). We look at damaged dolls differently, which alters our normal relationship with them. These “objects-becoming-things,” to use Lesley Stern’s expression, reveal a process during which subjects are de-animatized and with whom they are forced to cohabitate. About six years earlier, Roman Polanski had used similar devices in his short film The Lamp (1959). From the outset, the title highlights the significance of objects to the plot and immediately allocates them a crucial role in the negotiation of narrative space. The contrast lighting, paired with the recurring close-ups of broken dolls and an unusual use of sound, create a grim atmosphere of suspense and fear. Inside the doll shop where the action takes place, the camera privileges the objects and makes them the sole focus of the action, paying very little attention to the human character, an old doll maker. There is no dialogue, only non-diegetic music and ambient, onscreen sounds – a cuckoo clock striking the hour, the steady ticking of the clock, the noise of a door closing. The upbeat harpsichord melody gives way to a soft and disconcerting whispering about two-thirds into the film, after the doll maker closes the shop for the day. The way the camera moves from doll to doll seems to position these uncanny voices as coming directly from the human-shaped objects, disturbing the borders between visualized, acousmatic, and non-diegetic sound (Chion 71-74). The wafting light coming from the electric meter is projected onto the dolls, creating an illusion of movement, of animation. Moments later, a lamp suddenly bursts into flames and burns down the shop. The non-diegetic harpsichord music returns, and the crackling of the fire melds with the gentle whispers, which become progressively overlapping, as though all of the dolls were speaking at the same time. The whispering, it is worth noticing, comes about only after the doll maker upgrades from gas lighting to electricity, which establishes an interesting connection between the animation of Frankenstein’s creature in Mary Shelley’s novel and the aural liveliness of the dolls and doll parts. The image of the flames mercilessly consuming those helpless lifelike objects is, in turn, noticeably reminiscent of the fire that disfigured Prof. Jarrod and destroyed his beloved wax figures in André de Toth’s House of Wax (1953). This film, in which a severely injured wax figure sculptor murders people and then uses their wax-coated corpses as museum displays, offers perhaps the most extreme example of how human and doll can become one, not only transgressing but effectively erasing the boundaries between self and object-other. In this case, the human body goes through a gradual process of dehumanization, whereby it becomes a non-person inanimate object; first, in its post-mortem condition (a corpse) and, then, in its transformation into a human-like object (a waxwork). More recently, cinematic techniques, such as the point-of-view shots of the possessed doll in Dolly Dearest and the long contemplative takes and close-ups that frame scary doll Annabelle in Leonetti’s eponymous film, contribute to heighten the idea that inanimate things may be breathed to life. Dolly is even endowed with the ability to speak, which affords the object the inherently human capacity for articulate speech.

Each in their own way, the films I have analyzed so far affect the transformation of everyday household objects into “myth-
ical things,” to play with Cavell’s expression. Human-like objects in Gothic films are, therefore, manifestly yet subtly peculiar, and the camera stresses their singularity by ensuring that they are given an unusual narrative and aesthetic value within the storyline. In the end, one thing is certain – whether in Gothic or horror films, the supposed innocence of toys is challenged and ultimately destroyed. What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?, as I will argue in the section that follows, plays with this idea – the destruction of innocence – and turns child play into distressful abjection.

**Transpersonal Identity and the Dangers of Dollifying**

Over the centuries, dolls have been used as instruments of socialization, but also to identify and cope with suffering and mental disorders, as in the modern-day use of therapy dolls. Gothic film narratives, such as *Bunny Lake*, have repeatedly focused on this use of the doll to articulate trauma and psychological problems, along with the idea that objects can shadow normative ideals of self and society. The complex innocence of the doll along with the subjective sense of its impending vivification interweave in a way that blurs the distinctions between psychological fear and metaphysical evil and, in that respect, between reason, imagination, and pathology. Indeed, as we have seen, the threat of thingly animation often lies within the self’s own psyche, so much so that, in the Gothic imagination, dolls stand first and foremost as terrifying indicators of personal identity in crisis. Without wanting to fall into the scholarly trap of oversimplification by hastily reading the object as a visual metaphor for socio-cultural anxieties about the relations between people, that is, between the self and the other (in its many shapes), the doll discourse in the Gothic provides us with the tools to dissect a wide range of interrelated themes and tropes. The threats to personhood from within and without expose issues of self-identification and social dysfunction, while offering insights into the construction of agency and our collective imagination. More than a “weak metonym” for personal and social issues, the doll figures “first of all, itself” (Freedgood 3). It tells a story of human relations and of our interaction with our things; it tells a story of industrial production, where objects are put together by a series of anonymous hands. Gothic and horror films recurrently expose this transience and anonymity by presenting dolls that often have an unknown origin. This raises questions of ownership, namely regarding who the legitimate owner of the doll is. In this way, surrounding the object and its history is a feeling of uncertainty about origin, which, according to Jentsch, is one of the sources of the uncanny (10).

The concept of “dollifying” is helpful in understanding the nefarious implications that the confrontation of person and thing may entail in the Gothic. G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis observe that “animistic fancy” and the process of “dollifying” involve “ascribing more or less psychic qualities to the object, and treating it as if it were an animate and sentient thing” (132). In Gothic films, which share a vivid interest in issues pertaining to the frontiers between sanity and insanity, the process of dollifying does not happen as a result of child play. It generally has deeper implications and is used to reveal underlying psychological issues that affect adult characters. While dollifying is widely accepted as part of a child’s normal development, it becomes worrisome when it carries on into adulthood. “To you, they are wax; but to me, their creator, they live and breathe,” says the Professor in *House of Wax*. “Do you really hear what they say, Jarrod?”, his associate asks him. “Of course!” he replies, reasserting the aliveness of his wax figures. From this exchange, we realize that Prof. Jarrod is engaging in a dangerous game of dollifying and is apparently unable to discern between what is real and what is not.

Throughout What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?, the fluidity of the borders of the self grows increasingly visible. The film is about two rival sisters, one of which, Jane, lives in the past, longing for the fame and youth that will never be hers again – not unlike Sunset Boulevard’s Norma Desmond. In a pivotal sequence, Jane, alone in her living room, re-enacts one of her childhood successes, the signature song, “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy.” As she plays a few notes on the piano, a familiar a capella voice interrupts her and fills the sound track. It is her old childhood rendition of the maudlin song. The camera cuts to Jane’s point of view, and, sitting in an armchair next to the piano, we perceive a life-size porcelain doll to which Jane begins to sing, resuming where the ghostly voice had left off. Much like in Polanski’s short film, an acousmatic aural presence is paired with the image of the doll, so that the child’s voice seems to emanate directly from it. In other words, Jane dollifies the object to such an extent that the ghostly song gains diegetic relevance and appears to transition from acousmatic to visualized sound. The charming voice and the doll’s beautiful face make the object seem more alive – more animate even – than sad, grotesque Jane. The object in question was made to her image as a young child star and now stands as the other, as the self-become-other – the self-become-thing. Jane has grown up and gotten old. Time has changed and corrupted her body while the doll has remained in pristine condition.

The fateful likeness of the Baby Jane doll, advertised as an exact replica of Baby Jane Hudson, mitigates that feeling of uncertainty about origin that often surrounds Gothic objects but also complicates its strenuous relation to its owner. The serialized production of Baby Jane dolls, along with their subsequent distribution and consumption, anticipate the split identity of the pro-
The Everlasting Appeal of Vivifying Human-like Objects

The history of the Gothic cannot be told without reference to its objects and, more pertinently, to their afterlives, that is, the story of the objects after they exit the commercial circuit and enter the private sphere of the characters’ lives. Signaling a key encounter between the strange and the familiar, Gothic objects are disturbingly conspicuous and their mere presence affects the characters. Furthermore, they often become ideological tools in dissecting the socio-cultural and psychological issues that govern the lives of their owners. Through the image of the doll, Gothic narratives are able to exteriorize the inner conflicts between the real and the magical or the imaginary, diagnosing a recurring tendency towards abjection, self-hate, and self-destruction. Simply put, vivified things in the Gothic often express cultural anxieties about the human body and the human mind, their limits, and their vulnerability to outside influences.

Over the centuries, our frightening fascination with animism and anthropomorphism has originated terrifying narratives of transgression, depravity, doubling, madness, and monstrosity. One of Gothic film’s most familiar narrative devices since Georges Méliès’s experiments with trick photography, the animation of inanimate objects retains a perennial appeal. Film offers the possibility to bring to life popular tropes which have been around since, at least, the publication of Pygmalion’s myth in Ovid’s Metamorphoses circa 8 AD (Naso). From Méliès’s animation of a statue in Pygmalion and Galatea (1898) to The Golem (1915; 1920) or Homunculus (1916), and from Toy Story (1995) to Corpse Bride (2005), Gothic and horror have vehemently rejected Cartesian dualism and privileged an animistic worldview where humanoid toys come to life, innocent-looking dolls suddenly spark with malice, dummies speak of their own accord, and automatae rebel against their creators. In this way, seemingly vivified human-like objects have shaped the moral and aesthetic economy of Gothic narratives by articulating the trope of a threat to personhood and self-identity from a remodeled human form. Television shows, such as Penny Dreadful (2014-2016) and Pretty Little Liars (2010-2017), have carried on the Gothic tradition of depicting frightening inanimate dolls and dollifying women.

Gothic film feeds on humanity’s preoccupation with unwanted, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable animation. The strange, archaic worlds of puppets, dolls, dummies, and other playthings collide with our own and rearrange our place in the inanimate object world. The digital era, with gaming and virtual reality, where anthropomorphic objects might not be physical things at all, provides yet another commentary on humanity and our endless capacity (and desire) to re/animate it. The development of increasingly mediated online identities via social media, like Snapchat and Instagram, has enabled us to make dolls and puppets out of our selves, exposing our ever-present obsession with doppelgängers and fragmented or displaced identities. The result is a continual redrawing of the boundary between human, non-human, object, and thing, and our redefinition of the nature of life.
and agency, good and evil. For all their motionless yet ubiquitous presence, animate/inanimate things ultimately present postmodernity as haunted, personhood as a volatile concept, and reality as a work always under construction.

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Injustice in the Ruins and a Disordered Post-Apocalypse: Gothic Ideology in the Digital Game World of *Fallout 3*

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.34
Injustice in the Ruins and a Disordered Post-Apocalypse: Gothic Ideology in the Digital Game World of Fallout 3

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Abstract
The Gothic is an influential source for storytelling in a wide range of digital games. Thus far, interpreting it in games and how they are informed by Gothic ideology has been little studied. This study seeks to address this gap in research by investigating these issues in the narrative of the action role-playing game, Fallout 3. More specifically, through a close reading of the game narrative and by drawing on theories of the Gothic, ideological aspects of the Gothic are analyzed in detail with specific reference to non-player characters and their actions and dialogue along with elements of the mise-en-scène, style, and simulation. Results show how classic Gothic ideology is reproduced in games by multimodal means and how, as in Gothic novels, their production and interpretation is linked to real-life contexts. The involvement of the player in these games means that a Gothic hero is not of necessity helpless, but instead bears a responsibility to make decisions in ideologically complex and ambivalent situations.

Keywords:
Gothic; digital games; ideology; role-playing games; close reading; Fallout 3

It is arguable that, since their inception, Gothic narratives of darkness, with images of disorder, alienation, and monstrosity, have been employed “for the purposes of both entertainment and ideological reflection” (Cavallaro 8). In digital games that have been influenced by the Gothic, players are typically invited to explore, challenge, or otherwise participate in mysterious, eerie spaces and experience stories of madness, monsters, injustice, and continuous violence. Despite the pervasiveness of these influences, the Gothic aspects of the game world and its narratives are not often recognized as drawing on the Gothic tradition (Teofilo 46–47). The capacity to construct ideologies in games has also gone unrecognized, although specific types of behavior may be demonized in contexts that we associate with real life events, thereby rendering visible “the covert political views of a text” (Smith 3). As the popularity of games and gaming as a hobby or a profession increases, so, too, does the importance of studying digital game storytelling and the construction of meaningful stories by taking advantage of the means afforded by digital game design. Studying the Gothic furthers understanding of digital games that aim to simultaneously entertain and disturb or horrify players. To contribute to remedying the lack of previous research interest in the functions and meanings of the Gothic in games, this study investigates the ideological aspects of the Gothic in the game discourse and how such meanings are constructed in multimodal ways in games.

This study is an interpretative analysis of the action role-playing game Fallout 3 (Bethesda Game Studios). This is implemented by drawing on the method of close reading digital games and combining it with Gothic theory by drawing on the work of other authors (for example, Cavallaro; Crow; Punter; Smith; Spooner) and on conceptualizations of ideology (Blommaert; Freeden; van Dijk) to provide a framework for analyzing Gothic ideology. The development of tools for the critical, textual analysis of games has been an important undertaking (see e.g. Consalvo and Dutton), and close reading as one such tool is a useful method of game analysis for focusing the reading and interpretation of the game discourse in a rigorous, systematic way (e.g. Fernández-Vara; Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, “Well Read”). Close reading in this context involves oscillation between immersion in and objectification of the experience of the game to “see more clearly the design decisions that support the experience” (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, “Mass Effect” 396). In this study, this means that the analysis of the game begins with two immersive plays of the game that are then followed by a detailed coding of the data – screenshots and notes – based on theorizations of the Gothic. The coding aims at identifying and categorizing the various representational Gothic features of the game, whether to do with spatial design or narration by characters.

Thanks to its complex handling of the Gothic in its representational elements, the game in focus in this investigation,
Fallout 3, is fertile ground for studying the ideological aspects of Gothic horror. It is a game that allows the player the freedom to set the player character’s (PC hereafter) gender as male or female, to customize his/her appearance, and to select skills and attributes that influence the play experience. It is the first game in the Fallout game series played from a first-person perspective, allowing seeing the world through the character’s eyes and free movement across an open world map. It is set in a post-apocalyptic United States of an alternative timeline in which nuclear bombing has destroyed the surface of the earth two-hundred years before the game’s events begin. Ideologically, because of this destruction, a distinction can be made between the time prior to the nuclear destruction – to be learned about in the ruins of the game world – and the post-apocalyptic, largely anarchist world that replaced it.

Gothic influences are abundant in the Fallout games’ world, which is filled with violence, injustice, unethical science, and animals, insects, and people horribly mutated by radiation. However, although the Fallout universe has some unique features, similar game design decisions can also be found in other games. For instance, while these games feature new character types that are treated as “other” – Ghouls and Super Mutants – in several role-playing games, character races function in a similar way. For example, this is the case of the Elves in the Dragon Age series (BioWare) and the cat-like Khajiit in The Elder Scrolls series (Bethesda Game Studios). Similarly, post-apocalyptic, dystopian settings can also be found in action-heavy survival horror games, such as the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. series (GSC Game World), the Metro series (4A Games), and in The Last of Us (Naughty Dog).

This paper begins with a discussion of ideology as a concept and how it is used here as a conceptual frame to discuss the Gothic features of the game. This is followed by a brief discussion of previous studies on the Gothic in games, and finally the analysis of the Gothic ideological aspects in Fallout 3.

**Ideology and Gothic ideology**

In this paper, ideology refers to forms of thought and behavior that are inherent in our political and social worlds and offer means for making sense of the worlds that we inhabit (Freeden 2). As such, they also guide our interpretations of what is Gothic, i.e., what arouses terror, horror, discomfort. As Jan Blommaert suggests, ideology has a dual nature (“State Ideology” 18). On the one hand, ideology can refer to partisan views and opinions that represent bias and characterize specific social formations with their specific interests. This aspect of the concept includes the political “-isms” by which specific groups and their ideologies, via a specific set of symbolic representations that serve a specific purpose, become recognizable (Blommaert, “Discourse” 158). On the other hand, ideology can be defined as a general phenomenon: something that is present in every member of a social or political system. On this view, ideology “penetrates the whole fabric of societies or communities and results in normalised, naturalised patterns of thought and behaviour” (Blommaert, “Discourse” 159). For example, Barthes suggests that ideology as naturalized forms of thought and behavior can become dangerous when it is taken so much for granted that it becomes invisible and unrecognizable as an ideology (Blommaert, “Discourse” 160). Ideology can, thus, function as a Gothic, invisible “trap.” Often, a negative meaning is also attributed to ideology, such as when it is perceived as something wrong, false or misguided, or as something that belongs to someone who is an opponent or “other” (van Dijk 2).

In line with Blommaert’s suggestion, ideologies are understood here as materially mediated ideational phenomena (“Discourse” 164). For the Gothic, this view of ideology means that a range of ideas, features, and connotations that are traditionally associated with the Gothic as a mode of creating cultural phenomena are mediated in a range of practices, such as fiction, art, fan cultures, and, as discussed in this paper, digital games.

Gothic ideology has been investigated in various contexts. For instance, Dani Cavallaro has focused on the British/European Gothic in her discussion of its “ideological connotations” (8-9). According to her, Gothic connotations include archaic disorder versus modern discipline; medieval darkness versus enlightenment; anti-classical leanings versus (neo)classical ethos; crudeness versus elegance; savage paganism versus refined morality; aristocracy/feudalism versus bourgeoisie/capitalism; and landed classes versus cosmopolitan gentry. Interestingly, for Cavallaro, the ideology of the Gothic manifests as binary conflicts, implying a constant ideological rivalry in Gothic works. This view of the Gothic as a set of competing or contradictory ideologies at work in a cultural product is also a key aspect focused on here. Although Cavallaro focuses on the era in which the Gothic mode emerged, it has also managed to remain culturally relevant by adapting to different cultural and temporal contexts. This is exemplified by Justin D. Edwards’s study on racial ambiguity in nineteenth-century American Gothic, which was influenced by “scientific” attempts to prove that African Americans are an inferior race, aiming to dehumanize them and discourage racial mixture (112–113). On the topic of gender ideology, Kim Ian Michasiw argues that the late 1980s and early-to-mid-1990s antifeminist Hollywood films like Fatal Attraction (Lyne) represent the “fau oppositionality” of the Gothic, as some of its viewership believes that the film reveals women’s weaponized use of sex as evidence of the non-credibility of feminist issues like sexual harassment (240–241). Ideologies are thus shaped and reflected through time in complex ways in Gothic
storytelling.

The present study discusses modern digital games, while it also indicates how “later use of Gothicism will necessarily bear a significant relationship to the original generic ideology” of the historical period from 1764 to 1820, “whether through duplication or inversion” (Bernstein 5). An example of this is the dominant ideological positioning of the Catholic as “other” during the Enlightenment period, which is echoed in Gothic games in how they depict specific groups or belief-systems as “other” by representing them as somehow negative (Hoeveler 13). Diane Long Hoeveler has also argued that Gothicism takes “ideologically contradictory positions ... on all issues, sometimes appearing conservative and sometimes liberal” (10). This suggests that, ideologically speaking, Gothicism can reproduce and support currently dominant beliefs, values, and systems of power, as well as challenge them. Such a view is also supported by Kate Ferguson Ellis: in her feminist analysis of Gothic novels, she demonstrates how “popular literature can be a site of resistance to ideological positions as well as means of propagating them” (xii). It has been argued that the Gothic is “deeply skeptical that either individuals or societies can be perfected”; this explains why cultural criticism is typical of Gothic fiction (Crow 2). These views are also in line with theorizations of Gothic fiction as a genre that thrives on the transgression of boundaries, specifically the crossing of socially acceptable limits (Smith 3; Taylor).

As ideology is a complex concept, it also constitutes an analytical challenge. In line with critical approaches to investigating ideologies as materially mediated ideational phenomena, and within the framework provided by a characterization of typical ideological aspects of the Gothic, the purpose of this study is to conduct a detailed analysis – a close reading – of the game discourse and the game world, for identifying and evaluating ways in which the ideology of the Gothic is taken up and used in a game like Fallout 3.

**The Gothic Ideology and Games**

It is only recently that the Gothic in games has become a research topic, although horror, a key aspect of the Gothic, has received a great deal of prior attention (Habel and Kooyman; Krzywinska; Perron). Nevertheless, the Gothic has been an explicit focus in a few studies. From the perspective of ideology as a materially mediated ideational phenomenon, these studies also show how Gothic ideologies are mediated in games. One such study is T. S. Teofilo’s textual analysis of Super Paper Mario, which investigates how the modalities of the female Gothic function in the game, showing, for instance, that the Gothic heroine is eventually rewarded for making a virtuous choice that puts her in danger. Another study is Tanya Krzywinska’s investigation of the grammar of the Gothic game, in which she identifies the game mechanics, i.e., concrete means of interacting with the game, and rules that are well-suited to the adaptation of the American Gothic to game form. For instance, in her view, a conspiracy-style approach to reading a game that focuses on the close reading and decoding of signs in the game space to make progress or to discover the back stories of a specific game world functions effectively in American Gothic games (Krzywinska, “Digital Games” 305). I would add that if players must question the truthfulness of the information that they discover, this kind of approach produces an especially Gothic, unnerving play experience.

In another study, Krzywinska further develops the theorization of the Gothic in games (“The Gamification”). According to her, Gothic games are characterized by five coordinates that can be used as a framework for an evaluation of the uses of the Gothic in games: these are the false hero, mise-en-scène, affect, style, and function. Of these, perhaps the most central is function, as it concerns the reasons why the Gothic is used in games: Krzywinska is interested in it as central to the overall concept of the game in question – the story, game mechanics, and representational style – rather than merely drawing on Gothic elements in a game’s representation and iconography. Krzywinska’s study is an important contribution to the field, although as a general mapping of the Gothic in games, it excludes discussion of specific key concepts such as monsters, the uncanny, tyranny, and othering. Those aiming to study this phenomenon thus cannot merely rely on these coordinates to contribute to a deeper understanding of Gothic games.

The analysis of the Gothic ideology in Fallout 3 comprised two phases. The first phase was an immersive observation of the game and the gaming experience, during which I made systematic notes on my gaming experience and collected screenshots of key episodes in the game. I then proceeded, in phase two, to identify recurrent ways in which the game discourse mobilizes ideological resources of the Gothic and to discuss the effects and meanings that are created with the help of these resources.

**The Past and the Present**

The temporal setting of Fallout 3 is important in constructing its world and ideology. The game’s world geographically and culturally resembles that of a Western society, specifically the Washington DC area of the United States. It features real locations such as the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, which appear uncanny, simultaneously strange and familiar, in their partially crumbled form in the game. However, with its alternative timeline, it is, like many Gothic novels, temporally situated at
a distance that makes the horrors of the game comfortable for a contemporary player to witness. Gothic tales have often been set in the past so that we can “indulge our passion for pleasurable tyrannies while safe in the knowledge of our present enlightenment” (Punter, Vol. 1 7, Spooner 19). Instead of the past, *Fallout 3* is temporally set in the future, the year 2277, yet the ruins left behind by nuclear destruction two hundred years earlier reveal an aesthetic and ideology similar to those of United States in the 1940s, suggesting that – aside from some technological innovations, such as robots and laser weapons – society had in some ways stagnated in comparison to our present timeline. This means that, to a present-day player, the game world can appear to be simultaneously set in the past and in the future. Therefore, it is also temporally uncanny via its retro-futuristic design and appears impossible because of this ambiguousness. Dystopian alternate futures must typically retain some level of plausibility to convey a cautionary message; instead, the game’s timeline appears distancing in the way described by Spooner above, since players are aware that the pre-apocalyptic society described in the game does not match contemporary America.

Examples of “stagnation” are to be found in the *mise-en-scène*: advertisement posters among the ruins that appear to feature only Caucasian Americans, nuclear families, and representations of stereotypical gender roles. One such advertisement for underground security bunkers, branded Vaults, designed to provide shelter during the already expected nuclear war, is shown in Figure 1. The billboard poster depicts a long line of people, primarily white-skinned, heading to a Vault. On the left, a family comprising a happily smiling father, mother, and son are placed in the front, suggesting that they constitute the main target audience for the advertisement. Their clothing and the style of the poster mimic the painted advertisements of the 1940s United States and is a style used in posters throughout the game world. These advertisements can be perceived doubly as relics of the past, as they are stylistically old-fashioned and represent the bygone, pre-apocalyptic game world.

It has also been argued that in Gothic texts, the past “chokes the present, prevents progress and the march towards personal or social enlightenment” (Spoonier 18–19). In *Fallout 3*, this is very concretely the case, since the nuclear destruction has resulted in the dissolution of governments and societies and has made it impossible to return to the way things were. Nevertheless, in contrast to the pre-apocalyptic white, patriarchal ideals, the post-apocalyptic world affords an equality and freedom that did not previously exist. Anyone with luck, skill, and perseverance can survive and gain personal momentum. This becomes apparent when the player meets non-player characters (NPCs hereafter) in the game world who have become store owners, radio disc jockeys, commanding officers, and leading scientists regardless of race or gender. Since the world is dangerous and unstoppably violent, this freedom comes at a high price, but it produces a tension between the past and the present in which the game world’s present is, in some ways, arguably more progressive than its past. Any progress, however, exists only on an individual level – for every successful NPC encountered, the player also encounters NPCs struggling to survive and vulnerable communities. In a wider societal sense, the past has truly choked the present by destroying social structures and thus preventing the unification of the survivors.

**Disorder and Discipline**

In *Fallout 3*, disorder and discipline emerge as binary Gothic ideological contrasts, both of which are portrayed as horrific from the perspective of the game world’s inhabitants. For instance, the Raiders, the game world’s version of bandits, represent disorder, crudeness, and immorality, which shows in their simulated actions, the stylistic design of their bases, and stories told about them by other NPCs. More specifically, Raiders attack anyone on sight and cannot be reasoned with. In addition to threats yelled out during combat and simulated acts of violence, the Raider ideology is produced nonverbally in the *mise-en-scène* of their bases, which are decorated with graffiti, mutilated corpses, drugs, and discarded alcohol bottles. Figure 2 features a dimly lit room in Raider territory that showcases their exaggeratedly grotesque aesthetic typical of the Gothic. The depicted gore, bloodstains, and hanging corpses are disturbing, yet their placement and posing also seem creative, since the bodies have been deliberately hung with hooks and chains in certain positions and have not simply been abandoned in a pile in a corner. This aspect of crude creativity is also visible in the messy graffiti painted on the walls. Arguably, the Raiders are re-producing an ideology of terrorism with their grotesquely ornamented territory and acts of violence that are intended to horrify others. For the Raiders, the disordered, post-apocalyptic world filled with violence represents their ideal
and their reputation as merciless increases their power over ordinary Wastelanders, since few will have the courage or means to challenge them. Thus, their ideology being oppositional to others is beneficial to them. The disordered Raider ideology is a Gothic one, since it is founded on terror and tyranny and positions the Raiders as a dangerous “other” in the Wasteland.

In contrast, the Enclave is a disciplined, tyrannical military force with advanced technology, but is, in its desire for control, as ruthless and merciless as the Raiders. The Enclave claims to represent the government of the United States and broadcasts propaganda messages on the radio from their leader, President Eden. The player may also listen to these lengthy messages that verbally reproduce the Enclave’s ideology; one such message is shown in Figure 3. In it, President Eden addresses those who might question his presidency without providing real answers to who has elected him. For example, he says he is the President because “the appropriate people of this great nation” decided so. In a contradictory manner, he reveals he was chosen by non-democratic means, since it was the decision of a few selected, “appropriate” people, yet claims this was indeed a democratic election: “Of course I was elected, sweet America! Isn’t the right to vote the very foundation of a democracy?”. By addressing his listeners as “sweet” and “dear” America, he is also arguably attempting to gain favor with them. In the late stages of the game’s main storyline, it is revealed to the player that Eden is an Artificial Intelligence (AI). His personality is a fusion of previous US presidents, explaining the uncanny quality to his speeches. However, he is no puppet of the Enclave: he has elected himself as their leader and betrays them by attempting to recruit the PC on his side. He represents the tradition of Gothic AI in film, such as HAL 9000 in 2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick), and in games, such as GLaDOS in the Portal games (Valve Corporation) and SHODAN in System Shock (Looking Glass Technologies). Like previous Gothic AIs, he has not chosen his existence, but has agency in convincing the Enclave of his leadership.

In the context of the post-apocalyptic world, Eden’s messages seem greatly out of touch, since most NPCs that the player can talk to either do not mention the Enclave at all or ridicule the broadcasts. Only one NPC, an old man called Nathan, has become obsessed with them and believes that the Enclave will bring salvation to the Wasteland and restore order. In Figure 4, a screenshot of part of the conversation with Nathan shows how the game uses dialogue with NPCs to convey narration as well as ideological messages; Nathan believes that “any day now” the Enclave will come and end the “nightmare.” The shack city of Megaton can be seen in the background; the aesthetic details of this backdrop will change depending on where in Megaton and during what time of the day the player initiates conversation with Nathan. Further extracts from Nathan’s speech can be seen in Figure 5. They reproduce a strongly patriotic and nationalist ideology along with the use of specific symbols, such as the repeated naming of the country, the American eagle, and the use of the term “patriot.” As in President Eden’s speech in Figure 3, elections are mentioned in Extract II. However, neither Nathan nor anyone else the player meets in the Wasteland has participated in an election. Extract IV, which concerns the Enclave’s patrolling robots, is perhaps intended as comforting by Nathan, but instead paints them as an Orwellian “Big Brother” keeping a close watch on the Wasteland and possibly planning an invasion.
Nathan’s language, with its references to “America” and the iconic line “We, the people” in Extract V, is exaggeratedly patriotic in comparison to the language used by the other NPCs in the Wasteland. The reason is that no wider sense of a unified country is left among the ruins; other NPCs speak more locally of “Capital Wasteland.” Consequently, Nathan’s language portrays him as naïve for buying into and reproducing the Enclave’s propagandic messages and as comedic for his misplaced, even absurd, optimism. This is particularly the case as, to the people of the Wasteland who are critical and skeptical of the Enclave’s messages, the ideology promoted by the Enclave is outdated. As the game progresses, the Enclave becomes the tyrannical “other” that poses a threat to the Wasteland by attempting to seize control over the sole reliable source of pure water in the game’s world. Thus, the Enclave’s disciplined patriotic and nationalist ideology is rendered Gothic by its untruthfulness: the Enclave is not interested in the good of the Wasteland and its inhabitants as it claims, but rather seeks tyrannical control over those aspects of it that it finds useful and to destroy the rest. The latter objective becomes materially observable in the later stages of the game when Enclave patrols begin to appear in the game world and attack anyone on sight.

Conforming and non-conforming to established ideals also receives a complex treatment in the game. The exclusive nature of different settlements reinforces a strong ideological message of the necessity of conformity in the Wasteland. The case of the Brotherhood Outcasts is rather interesting, since they are non-conforming by conforming. The Brotherhood of Steel branch represented in Fallout 3 departs from the overall goal of this military force to collect and preserve pre-war technology, science, and knowledge to protect humanity’s progress. They do this by also having become the only protective force in the Wasteland. This ideological departure, and hence non-conformity, has resulted in the branch of the Brotherhood in Capital Wasteland becoming cut off from the main faction in the west, despite their heroic actions. Non-conforming and questioning normalized patterns of thought, thus, receive a Gothic flair in the game, since instead of respect, acting selflessly earns this branch punishments in the form of exclusion and the loss of some of its members. The Outcasts mentioned above are ex-members of this branch who disagreed with the decision to protect locals and now independently gather old technology from ruins. In Figure 6, their leader, wearing the signature black and red armor of the Outcasts, is seen describing the locals as “savages,” implying that the Outcasts do not believe the locals to be worthy of protection. Their stance is cruelly elitist, lacking sympathy for those without access to their level of education and technology. Noting their perception of outsiders as almost subhuman, it is questionable whether they would ever share their findings with the rest of society, despite their reasoning that their actions could help everyone. Therefore, while conforming to the original ideals of the Brotherhood of Steel, they take pride in their decision to reject the policy of the local branch, although, conflictingly, their goal to preserve humanity’s progress appears to isolate them from humanity itself and positions them as complex Gothic villains.

**Race, History, Class, Nation, and Gender**

Mutated people, Ghouls, in the game are treated as monsters despite their humanity: in various pieces of dialogue, Ghouls accuse healthy humans of treating them as subhuman and excluding them from society under false reasoning, producing an ideology of “anti-Ghoulism.” Anti-Ghoulism can be interpreted as one of the socio-political ideologies in Fallout 3 that are reproduced in human communities and are relevant to many Gothic texts: race, history, class, nation, and gender. Ghouls are fundamentally victims who are unjustly considered monstrous because of their physical appearance, a manifestation of the Gothic that has been popular since Frankenstein’s creature. They become a sympathetic “other” to the player, who can interact with them in the same manner as with humans, while they are believed to be a dangerous and untrustworthy “other” by the game world’s human NPCs.

While Ghouls are not a race, their treatment resembles racism, including the use of slurs like “zombies” and “shufflers” by humans. For example, in Figure 7, a rich and influential NPC, Allistair Tenpenny, expresses in dialogue his disappointment in discovering that a mercenary Ghoul that he hired years ago is still
alive and refers to Ghouls as zombies. He goes as far as to suggest that, to kill Ghouls successfully, they should be shot in the head. The more privileged NPCs also claim that they have worked hard to earn their place in the world, whereas Ghouls are merely demanding handouts – an argument that typifies racist and classist thinking. This reconstructs the traditional use of the Gothic, especially in the American context, to resist slavery and racism, and on the side of the oppressors, to justify them (Edwards xxii). In the game, racist expressions are used to portray prejudice as condemnable and ignorant, although referring to Ghouls as zombies may also become normalized to players, showing a duality in employing racist ideology in games. However, like the Gothic use of time, games can draw on the Gothic horror of racism in an inoffensive, distanced manner by linking recognizable real-life injustice and prejudice to fictional minority groups like Ghouls who are interpretable by players from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Ghouls seem to have come to replace the anti-Chinese ideology of the Fallout 3 universe prior to nuclear destruction, which was largely caused by the political tensions and war with China. This racist history is materially visible in several details of the game. For instance, some posters, such as the one depicted in Figure 8, feature the Chinese as monstrous enemies. In this poster, a giant Chinese soldier, whose exaggerated features underline the racism of the depiction, picks up white Americans with long, sharp nails. Nevertheless, since information about the war does not seem to be widely known by post-apocalyptic societies, they have largely left anti-Chinese ideologies behind and have established the Ghouls as the new Gothic “other” to be feared and hated. This produces a cyclicality of racism by suggesting that humankind will continue to find opponents in others. It also appears that, while the concept of nation as an aspect of ideology was of the utmost relevance to the pre-apocalyptic world, it has since been largely abandoned, except by the Enclave, as the Wasteland does not have a sense of a unified nation.

The people of Capital Wasteland have been split into several micro-communities, each of which has unique features. Thus, it cannot be said that there is an overarching class ideology in the game world. Still, in addition to Ghouls, the poor are generally excluded from communities, left begging for water outside settlement walls. The transformation of some Ghouls is also linked to class: a Ghoul named Carol says in dialogue that her family was too poor to get into a vault when the nuclear bombing took place, and therefore she was left exposed to radiation that changed her, also giving her an unnaturally long life. Gothic characters such as the vampiric Count Dracula and the damned scholar in Charles Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer also obtain such an expanded lifespan, making this aspect monstrous from a human perspective. In contrast, they originate from a privileged class of people, whereas Carol must have submitted to class restrictions, her transformation, and now the healthy humans. Therefore, her experience is complex, at an intersection of inhabiting a Gothic body and racist and classist oppression.

With respect to classism in specific communities, inside the aircraft carrier that accommodates Rivet City, an NPC called Diego is worried about the tension brewing between the rich inhabitants, who live on the higher levels, and the poor, who live on the lower levels with unclean air. He says: “It’s not too bad now, but if it keeps going this way, in a few years they’ll start fighting in the streets” on the aircraft carrier. This kind of segregation appears to be the norm, however, in the eyes of the better-off NPCs. Figure 9 depicts Harkness, the security chief of Rivet City, belittling the issue as something that happens in “every place.”
This kind of class ideology, in a Gothic sense, is one that countenances injustice by claiming that some people are destined to suffer while others thrive.

Another aspect of ideology that has not yet been discussed is gender. In the post-apocalyptic game world, aside from the number of female sex workers in comparison to male ones – of which there are none – gender roles appear to have been greatly abolished. This naturally implies that gender roles existed prior to the nuclear war and traces of this can be found among the ruins. As discussed above, many of the poster advertisements among the ruins targeted stereotypical nuclear families. In an automated guided tour in the Museum of Technology of Vaults, women are addressed as cleaners and cooks. In war propaganda posters, as with their real-life American counterparts in both World Wars, men are encouraged to join the army and women to help in healthcare. An example of such a poster is shown in Figure 10, in which an attractive woman is holding up a piece of watermelon on a plate in one hand and a crutch in the other. The header says: “You don’t need a Howitzer to be a Hero!”. The poster also lists available jobs that sound absurd: “Candy Striper,” “Puppeteer,” “Interminable Blood Donor,” and “Bedpan Unsullification Technician.” These positions are an example of the game’s dark humor, but also highlight how little was expected of women during wartime in the game world. The posters reproduce the ideology of traditional gender roles which limit people’s opportunities and freedoms based on their gender. Although such portrayals are not invariably Gothic, they can reflect the traditional trapped and powerless heroines of Gothic fiction who must follow societal rules and expectations, as evident in works like Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk: A Romance*. These novels are also critical of gendered separated worlds, representing exiles from both as disempowered (Ellis xv). Interestingly, in *Fallout 3*, female NPCs become empowered after social structures are dismantled by nuclear destruction, making this empowerment Gothic.

**Deception Leading to Moral Dilemmas**

Deceptiveness is present both in the game world’s past and in its current state, with the notable difference that the player cannot change the past but must personally face its existing manifestations. In the pre-apocalyptic world, capitalist ideology is portrayed as horrific, unjust, and deceptive in journal entries and messages preserved in computer terminals that can be found among the ruins of factories, office buildings and other places related to commerce. They reveal the mistreatment of employees, unethical product development and the design of untruthful advertisements, implying that those who owned the largest companies held great power and were not held accountable for their actions. The rise of tyrannical corporations enabled by capitalism is taken to extremes in the game, often humorously, and portrayed as an evil “other.” This commercial deceptiveness is strongly linked to misuses of power which also makes it Gothic.

At times in *Fallout 3*, NPCs take advantage of the player’s good will and manipulate the player to help them by underlining the injustice they are experiencing. Their lack of privileges is very real, but these NPCs use it to convince the player to help them without revealing their personal agenda behind the request or generally without telling the whole story. For example, Figure 11 depicts Mister Crowley, a Ghoul who is angry at their poor treatment. He hires the PC to kill a few specific anti-Ghoul bigots; however, if the player talks to other Ghouls in the area, or to the target NPCs in person, only one of them is shown to be bigoted. When confronted, Mister Crowley says that in all truth, he is after keys in the possession of these NPCs, keys that will grant access to great treasure. Mister Crowley has thus attempted to use anti-Ghoulist feeling to appeal to the PC’s sense of justice while seeking personal material gain. Secretiveness and deception of this kind is particularly Gothic, as it renders the seemingly innocent victims of injustice also capable of horrific acts and produces ambivalence. Hence, the Gothic ideology this reveals is one of uncertainty or even paranoia: the player can never be quite sure which NPCs to trust or which action is morally correct, if even the innocent can be revealed to be treacherous.

![Figure 10: A war propaganda poster calling for women to contribute to healthcare.](image1)

![Figure 11: Mister Crowley accusing human NPCs of bigotry.](image2)
Another example of deception is to be found in the Pitt, an area that is downloadable as additional content to the game. The player can follow a radio message in the game to meet with a representative of the slaves at the Pitt, Wernher: “To anyone who can hear me: my name is Wernher. I come from a settlement to the north. I have information of great value to anyone willing to help me free my people. Please... help us. This message repeats.”

Wernher describes the hopeless situation at the Pitt in Figure 12: the place is plagued by radiation, mutation, and disease. He asks the PC in dialogue to enter the Pitt and steal the cure that the tyrannical leaders are working on against the sickness that run rampant in the area. The slaves believe that this is their only way of gaining leverage before fully succumbing to the slavers who would also hold the power to decide who gets to be cured. Once the player painstakingly gains access to meet with the leader, it is revealed that the source of the potential cure is his baby daughter – a detail that Wernher failed to mention earlier. To help the slaves, the player would have to kidnap the baby for her to become a test subject, simultaneously condemning her parents to become victims of a rebellion. The slaves are clearly victims of cruelty and horrible living conditions; one of the first scenes that the player witnesses at the Pitt is a simulation of three slaves being executed for virtually no reason. Nevertheless, their increased leverage would also come at a high price.

![Figure 12: Wernher, a representative of slaves, describes the Pitt.](image)

The moral dilemma that the player faces is particularly difficult because of the secretiveness of the slaves and their deceptive manipulation. It is further complicated by the fact that in the dialogue with the baby’s mother, who is gently studying the baby to allow the slaves immediate power. In the game, the player can decide to join either side, but either way, the situation is ambivalent: slavery is portrayed as ideologically horrific, but so is the line of thought that experiencing injustice gives one the right to perpetrate unjust actions under a veil of secrecy. In a Gothic sense, the situation at the Pitt blurs and transgresses the boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, and innocence and guilt, with secretiveness as one of the vehicles of transgression. As in the case of the Ghouls, the innocent are also shown to be capable of treachery.

**Gothic Uncertainty and the Weight of Responsibility**

This paper investigated the ideological resources of the Gothic and their (re)construction in game discourse. In *Fallout 3*, ideological aspects of the Gothic are employed to construct meanings that represent both the world prior to destruction and the one after it as dangerous and horrific. These meanings are communicated in a variety of ways: through signs left in the game world for the player to interpret, whether in verbal or visual form, or in written or audio form, through dialogue with NPCs and through simulation, most typically that of violence. *Mise-en-scène*, style, narration, and simulation work together to create ambivalent or horrific situations. This supports previous observations of the Gothic in games, such as Krzywinska’s five Gothic coordinates (the false hero, *mise-en-scène*, affect, style and function), showing that the Gothic in games is produced in multimodal ways (“The Gamification” 59-61). Of Krzywinska’s five Gothic coordinates, the “false hero” is absent in the game in the sense that the player is empowered to influence the game world and defeat those deemed as opponents. However, the player’s freedom to make choices in the game world also entails responsibility. I suggest that it is not only helplessness that contributes to a Gothic experience in a game, but also a responsibility to make decisions in ambivalent, morally complex situations, such as the one encountered in the Pitt in *Fallout 3*. What produces Gothic anxiety in these situations is the player’s uncertainty about what the “right” choice is, and what kinds of horrific consequences these possible choices might have. At times, the consequences are not revealed until the choice has been made, potentially producing emotions of regret, or even disappointment and anger, in addition to those of horror. Notwithstanding, as is typical of the Gothic consumer, the player is also drawn into these situations of play despite the difficulties that they may present.

The Gothic ideologies at play in the game largely duplicate classic Gothic narratives. Significantly, the game world treats certain types of people as “other.” At the same time, the player does not necessarily share the NPCs’ views as to what constitutes a dangerous “other,” as is the case with the Ghouls. This positions the PC as the participant who must remain vigilant and make his/her own interpretations and evaluations instead of taking things at face value. The uncertainty faced by the PC is further compli-
icated in situations where seemingly innocent NPCs manipulate or deceive the player, and thus have a morally disorienting effect. Because of secretiveness and the unjust exclusion of “others” that the player witnesses, he or she may become increasingly distrusting of the NPCs, which further encourages a Gothic interpretation of the game discourse more generally, although the player may not recognize it as such. This invites a paranoid interpretation, with the player coming to expect betrayal, societies to have dark secrets, anything good to be tainted. At worst, players lose hope in the game world’s humanity, rather in the way of the solitary classic Gothic heroes whose morality does not match the world which they inhabit.

In the same way as Gothic texts can be ideologically contradictory, so, too, can the worlds represented in games. Here we have seen, for instance, how both disorder and organized discipline can take extreme, horrific forms and lead to tyranny; it is no less possible in a world lacking order to hold power over others by means of terror. This suggests that all absolutes, such as absolute order or disorder, are harmful to societies — a notion that, owing to the recognizable aspects of the context of the game world, may extend to the world outside the gaming experience. Thus, through the construction of Gothic ideologies, games can provide an implicit socio-political commentary that goes beyond the limits of the game, if the players, despite being at comfortable temporal distance from the game events, also find aspects of the game world familiar and comparable to their experience of the real world. This would also explain why ideologies informed by race, class, nation, or gender can be effective in constructing the Gothic in a game world, and why, in the present instance, the treatment of Ghouls may be perceived as racism, although the game never refers to Ghouls as a race or to bigotry as racism. However, the implicit resistance or support of ideological structures may become complicated in unexpected ways, as is the case when racist expressions are targeted at Ghouls; while the typical player response is to reject bigotry, it also provides them with insults to use if a Ghoul were to anger them during play. This hauntingly reflects how the use of offensive terminology can be harmful in any context for normalizing it.

These findings exemplify the importance of Gothic influences for constructing geographically, temporally, and socially uncanny game worlds that are haunted by their past. These game worlds are simultaneously relatable and impossibly strange, featuring communities whose attempts to gain control or merely survive are also eerily familiar, reflecting and recycling humanity’s errors. Future studies focusing on specific aspects of ideology, like race, gender, class, religion, nation and society, or their intersections, are of interest to produce a deeper understanding of the Gothic and its challenges in games.

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.35

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.35
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From her considerable academic output over the last twenty-five years, it is clear that Paulina Palmer's primary research interest is in the queer Gothic, a literary and cinematic subgenre that is having something of "a moment" in academia at the present time. Therefore, the publication of Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative is timely, even if (likely thanks to the glacial speed of academic publishing) it does not take into account some of the most recent developments in the field. Palmer's monograph, part of the Palgrave Gothic series edited by Clive Bloom, explores the ways in which queer themes and Gothic tropes interact in fiction in productive ways, with a particular focus upon developments in the academic study of queer history informing her research.

The work is well-structured, with four main chapters dedicated to the tropes of haunted houses and ghosts, vampires and the uncanny double, monsters (broadly construed), and urban and rural Gothic, respectively. For Palmer, the primary intersections between queerness and the Gothic gene include transgression, ghostliness, secrecy, the monster, death, and excess. She draws upon these concepts in each of the chapters, using some impressively wide-ranging research. However, the monograph's primary weakness is its incorporation of too many different theorists and evaluation of too many different fictional works in too slim a volume, resulting in, at times, cursory analysis and a tendency towards description.

In the first chapter, "Ghosts and Haunted Houses," Palmer analyzes Steve Berman's Vintage: A Ghost Story (2007) and Sarah Waters's Affinity (1999), setting up a pattern of comparisons between lesbian- and gay male-focused/American- and British-authored stories that persists throughout the book, in relation to what she terms "spectrality." She follows this with an exploration of The Water's Edge (Louise Tondeur, 2003) and Winter Birds (Jim Grimsley, 1984) in relation to the concept of the haunted house. Some of Palmer's strongest analysis is contained in the section on Vintage, where she explores the unnamed narrator's sexual relationship with the apparent ghost of Josh, a homosexual man killed in the 1950s. Drawing on the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Palmer raises the idea that this relationship could be imagined: the narrator's means of coping psychologically with his recent eviction from the family home by his parents, due to his sexuality, as well as his experiences of bullying at school. Moreover, she uses Carla Freccero's notion of allowing "ghosts to speak" to explore the importance of connections between the contemporary queer community and our history. However, this section (like all of the sections in the work given its size) is very short – only five and a half pages – and thus lacks the detail necessary to be a truly useful analysis.

Palmer's second chapter, "Uncanny Others: Vampires and Doubles," again explores two pairs of texts in relation to two concepts: vampires in Meg Kingston's Chrystal Heart (2013) and Gary Bowen's Diary of a Vampire (1995), and Gothic doubling in Vincent Brome's Love in the Plague (2001) and Susan Swan's The Wives of Bath (1993). Despite being somewhat descriptive in parts, this chapter contains an interesting analysis of Love in the Plague as AIDS narrative and Chrystal Heart as comment on the popularity of neo-Victorian fiction in recent years. The chapter also provides a useful overview of the history of the development of the vampire, particularly in queer fiction.

The third chapter of the monograph, "Tracking the Monster," is an examination of queer gender – especially intersex and transgender – as monstrosity. Palmer acknowledges the political minefield in which she is working here and makes attempts to reclaim monstrosity through its queer potential, but her continual deadnaming and misgendering of trans and intersex authors and characters alike is somewhat troubling. This is particularly a problem in this chapter and in the last quarter of the...
previous chapter, due to their content, but it persists throughout the book. Political issues aside, this chapter’s use of Frankenstein as Ur-text for the four fictional works Palmer examines here The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein (Peter Ackroyd, 2008), The Daylight Gate (Jeanette Winterson, 2012), Annabel (Kathleen Winter, 2010), and the short story “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” (Randall Kenan, 1992) – is fascinating and a longer analysis would have added much to this volume.

The final chapter of the work, “Regional Gothic: Uncanny Cities and Rural Areas,” which explores rural and urban Gothic primarily in relation to Alan Hollinghurst’s The Folding Star (1998) and Michelle Paver’s Dark Matter (2011), is, however, half as long as the others so does not benefit from its sole focus on two works. The choice to pair these two (as well as the urban and the rural) together seems somewhat odd, but some of the analysis in this final chapter is particularly strong, particularly its focus upon the troubling of the real that the novels produce by their invocation of spectrality and voyeurism, which causes the audience to question whether certain events really happened or are merely the products of the protagonists’ imaginations. “Regional Gothic” also works nicely as a final chapter as it reflects some of the themes analyzed in the previous three chapters, such as doubling and spectrality.

The primary fault in this work is the sheer number of theorists and novels used, resulting in necessarily brief analyses of each one, as may be evident from my descriptions of the central subjects of analysis above. But as though the laundry list of texts above was not enough for one volume of just over two hundred pages, Palmer also conducts several extremely brief analyses of other, often older texts – for example, there is a two-page analysis of both Dracula (Bram Stoker, 1897) and “Carmilla” (Sheridan Le Fanu, 1872) in the second chapter, adding further to an already overcrowded field. One often feels left wanting more of Palmer’s insightful analysis on each text, and, indeed, I am convinced that the whole volume should have been two or three times its size in order to examine all of the texts and theorists relayed here in the necessary detail.

Moreover, there are several stylistic issues that detract from the merits of the work. Palmer has an awkward tendency to frequently rely solely on pronouns when talking about relationships between same-sex pairings, rendering some of her sentences extremely confusing to those who have not read the novel she is discussing at the time. For example, in Chapter Two, Palmer ends a paragraph with “From the research [the unnamed narrator of Vintage] conducts there and the conversations that he holds with Josh, he discovers that, in the year 1957, the latter engaged in an angry altercation with his ex-lover Roddy on Route 47 on account of him having outed him at school in revenge for his sexual infidelities” (31). Very long sentences, running over five, six or even seven lines at times and comprised of a great many clauses, are also not uncommon in this work, making it a difficult read at times. In addition, there are a considerable number of typographic errors throughout the text, especially at the beginning, which become quite irritating over time. However, I am aware that this may well be the fault of the publisher (and this era of change for the publishing industry, including the mass firing of subeditors) rather than Palmer herself. The book’s title is also somewhat confusing as Palmer’s primary focus is on works published between 1984 and 2013.

However, this work does have its merits. Palmer’s research in this monograph, as previously mentioned, is incredibly wide-ranging, and even as a scholar who works in this field, there are a number of useful works cited that I had not yet discovered, as well as several new novels for my leisure reading list. As an academic who has clearly devoted her life’s work to this genre, Palmer gives the impression that perhaps some of the cursoriness of her reference to various theorists is simply the product of her great familiarity with their work; however, for a less experienced reader, this can result in considerable confusion. Although she alludes to it only briefly (though repeatedly throughout the monograph), Palmer clearly has a great deal of lived experience of the early struggles of the queer rights movement in the 1970s and beyond, which I feel would greatly benefit her work if she were to engage with it more overtly in an interdisciplinary manner. Indeed, much of the strongest analysis in this work is also the most interdisciplinary.

Overall, Queering Contemporary Gothic, 1970-2012 will primarily be useful for a more generalist audience or those embarking for the first time on queer Gothic fiction-related projects as a brief overview of the more contemporary work in the field, both in literature and academia. While its faults are frustrating at times, the work is still a valuable contribution to a growing and topical area of literary studies. Perhaps, most importantly, Palmer’s love for and familiarity with this genre shines through the text.

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.36

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Ruth Bienstock Anolik’s Property and Power in English Gothic Literature undertakes a large task when it seeks to unify various characteristics of Gothic fiction under a single concept, but it does so with a good deal of finesse. In four parts and sixteen chapters, the work builds its claim that Gothic novels join together under a common interest in issues of property and possession. Anolik situates this claim in the context of eighteenth-century attitudes toward primogeniture, commodity culture, and ownership, and she skillfully connects these attitudes toward Gothic tropes, such as contested inheritances, fragmented texts, haunted spaces, absent mothers, and demonic husbands. All of this builds off of a strong Foucauldian foundation, which reads eighteenth-century instances of confinement and regulation as means of retaining power. For the sake of her own study, Anolik reframes the idea of “power” into her own terms of commodity and ownership. Then, in the three major parts of her work, she skillfully moves from a discussion of the Gothic’s interest in physical property to an expanded discussion of the abstract concepts of ownership of the self/individual and of the text.

In Part I, “Castle and Moat: Property Possession in the English Gothic,” Anolik ties the Gothic interest in property and possession to the changing landscape of eighteenth-century economics and law. “The advent of mercantilism and commerce,” she says, may have created the need for “laws . . . to define and protect the terms of possession,” yet she demonstrates that it is the role of “the English literary imagination” to “fill the void left by the limits of the legal imagination” (14). Through recurring themes of properties that resist their present owners as well as of properties that resist enclosure altogether, the Gothic novel suggests that the very concept of property is something both slippery and problematic. Anolik manages a careful balance between conservative readings that see the Gothic ending—the restoration of order—as supportive of the established order and those readings that appreciate the disruption of the Gothic novel’s plot. She suggests that Gothic texts maintain their tension between these two extremes by abruptly ending the narrative at the moment of restoration, leaving open the question of how long that order might be maintained. Key texts in this section include The Castle of Otranto, The Old English Baron, and Wuthering Heights.

In Part II, “Ghosts: Possession of Person in the English Gothic,” Anolik turns from possession of physical property to possession of the self. Her interest here lies primarily with the figure of the woman and the racial other. The woman is a dual figure, both the means by which men can, though coverture, attain additional property and the means by which the patriarchal system—by way of childbirth—can be maintained. If the woman traditionally represents a self who is threatened because ownership of her is desirable, the racial other, especially in the figure of the wandering Jew (as developed later in the book) or the revolting slave, represents a threatening self that resists enclosure and ownership. Like the physical building that resists enclosure, unmarried women, wandering Jews, and revolting slaves in Gothic texts give voice to anxieties that the current landowning male order could be overthrown. Also important in this section is a consideration of how various forms of possession reflect social and legal modes of ownership in the eighteenth century. Key texts in this section include A Sicilian Romance, The Monk, Melmoth the Wanderer, and Zofloya; or, the Moor.

In what I consider the book’s final major section, “Fragmented Stories; Appropriated Voices: Possession of the Narrative in the English Gothic,” Anolik turns to the issues of reliable narrators, fragmented texts, and ownership over the written word. She suggests a parallel between the rise of copyright laws and discussions of authorship rights throughout the eighteenth century and the forgeries, stolen diaries, and fragmented narratives in Gothic literature. Overall, what Anolik
suggests is “a recurring tendency to destabilize both the writer’s narrative authority and the reader’s hermeneutic and critical control of the text” (125). Key texts in this section include The Woman in White, Trilby, and other previously mentioned novels.

Though the book has a fourth and concluding section, it is in these first three sections that I find Property and Power’s greatest strengths. Anolik works from a strong methodology that combines Foucauldian, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theory with historical documents and original close readings of Gothic novels. While I appreciate her ability to both rely on and build off of Foucault’s work in Discipline and Punish, I especially appreciate her use of Lacan and Kristeva as she reads the role of motherhood in Gothic novels. Via Alison Milbank, Anolik acknowledges the way that abjection is manifest in the Gothic novel’s frequent requirement that a mother be absent in order for an individual character to develop selfhood. And yet in texts like Radcliffe’s A Sicilian Romance, Anolik sees a disruption of this paradigm. A mother’s care for her child in fact imprisons her within a marriage while enabling her child’s needs to be met. For example, Julia’s reunion with her mother creates a story in which “the mother and daughter are allies . . . against the law of the father” (110). In her reading of the novel, “it is not the story of the daughter fleeing the engulfing mother, but the story of the mother subject to the social confinement of childbearing, dictated by the patriarchy . . . . The mother manages to escape a prison that is a literalization of the confined situation of the mother in the eighteenth century” (110). Similarly, it is through reunion with his mother that Anolik reads Ferdinand’s fulfillment. Through a Lacanian lens, she suggests that Ferdinand’s silence upon meeting his mother signals “his maternal need fulfilled, he is plunged back to the pre-linguistic state that precedes the separation between mother and son that is enforced by the law of the father” (113).

The final section of the book, “Beyond the End: Dispossessing Closure,” has both its strengths and its weaknesses. In the final two chapters, Anolik turns to two departures from the limits of “English Gothic,” considering a modern day neo-Gothic novel in one chapter and the American Gothic in another. The strengths of these chapters are the connections they make. Anolik supports the importance of possession as a unifying Gothic concern when she can trace it through a twentieth century neo-Victorian text (Sarah Water’s Affinity) that includes, in Anolik’s terms, dispossessed property, the dispossessed self, and narrative dispossession. Anolik also insightfully claims that the American Gothic grew immediately out of English Gothic concerns of selfhood and property. The American Gothic responds to the idea of America, itself a newly owned property with newly forming selfhood, yet born out of acts of dispossession. The only weakness in this final section is its brevity. Anolik’s readings of neo-Victorian literature and American literature strengthen her overall claim about property and possession in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literature, and the latter would benefit from the former’s expansion.

Overall, though, Anolik’s Property and Power is an enjoyable text that knits together a wide network of texts and theories under the compelling mantel of property and possession. This book, while a strong contribution to Gothic studies in its own right, may prove especially useful in teaching the Gothic as both a unified genre and as a complex field.
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