50+ Shades of Gothic:

The Gothic Across genre and Media

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The Gothic tradition has occupied a central position in our cultural milieu ever since the eighteenth-century century, owing to its mutable ability to tackle the profound anxieties of every period (Sottilotta 4). Hence, the Gothic has considerably evolved since its origins; from deep-set plots and archetypal characters to an ample range of shades of grey, American culture can be seen as particularly prolific in its reinvention and subversion of the traditional Gothic tropes. Indeed, recognizably Gothic elements, archetypes, and images can be detected even in traditions that appear to differ very markedly from it, such as popular culture.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) has long been considered as the novel that inaugurated the Gothic tradition, and that influenced nineteenth-century Gothic narratives, which focused on the socio-economic and political concerns of the Victorian period, such as technological advances, psychoanalytical theories, or occultism (Sottilotta 4). Nonetheless, present Gothic greatly differs from previous forms of Gothicism, given that it is concerned with our "obsessive postmodern anxiety about all manners of excess and hybridity (capitalist, technological, sexual, multicultural) or as a sign of a general instability, degeneration or decline of distinct 'Culture(s)'" (Kohlke and Gutleben 1). Gothic fiction is currently a pervasive phenomenon in popular culture, as it holds a prominent influence in all sorts of cultural and artistic productions in the US, from literature, the movie industry, Television series, music, (video) games, to fashion and subcultures.

Thus was this dossier born, in an attempt to trace the consistent evolution and presence of the Gothic and its staples in contemporary US popular culture. With this aim in mind, the present volume compiles articles resulting from the 2020 conference series 50+ Shades of Gothic: The Gothic Across Genre and Media in US Popular Culture, organized by the PopMeC Association for US Popular Culture Studies.

First, in the article "Guillermo del Toro's Political Fairy Tales", Elizabeth Abele examines Guillermo del Toro's films *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008) and *The Shape of Water* (2017) as Gothic fairy tales charged with messages about contemporary politics of race, sexuality, gender, and environmentalism. In these films, marginal characters challenge established patriarchal and racial boundaries, encouraging the audience to embrace new and groundbreaking paradigms.

"The Story of Coraline(s): A Gothic Coming of Age", by Javier Torres Fernández carries out a comparison between the journeys followed by Coraline both in Neil Gaiman's eponymous novel and its film adaptation, directed by Henry Selick. As the title implies, Coraline's adventure is read as a coming of age narrative that uses Gothic tropes and elements to give shape to Coraline's anxieties, as well as convey her struggles with growing up. Therefore, the Gothic is shown to be intimately tied to the child's personal development, and indeed to be an essential part of it.

Igor Juricevic's "The Close-Up Eye Asymmetry Visual Metaphor Communicates the Abject: Evidence from Batman and Superman Comics" analyzes the presence of this phenomenon, involving the depiction of characters' faces with asymmetry in or around the eye area, in American comics. The author demonstrates how this is more frequent in comics where the hero presents Gothic or Gothic-like traits, and how such a phenomenon is used to communicate the abject, itself a key feature of Gothic narratives.

In "Writing the Grotesque in Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones", Katerina Psilopoulou examines the depiction of Black bodies in Ward's novel as related to the Gothic trope of the grotesque. The article traces Ward's subversive use of grotesque elements against the hegemonic Gothic tradition, examining how this author gives Black characters agency and voice while resignifying and reclaiming the labels of grotesque and savage, that were so often used to stigmatize and discriminate against Black Southern communities.

In his article, "Ghosts of Britain: A Hauntological Approach to the 21st-Century Folk Horror Survival," Alberto Andrés examines the American folk horror revival of the 2010s, focusing on screen texts such as Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) or Robert Eggers's *The VVitch* (2015), and the influence that 1960s and 1970s British cinema has had on them, particularly the so-called Unholy Trinity. These contemporary productions are set against the current debate on nostalgia and pastiche as the predominant cultural modes of production of late capitalism. The concept of hauntology, as defined and explored by Jacques Derrida, Mark Fisher, or Katy Shaw, provides the theoretical background of the article and guides the analysis of the abovementioned films.

Finally, Kerry Gorrill's "Schizoid Masculinity and Monstrous Interiors in American Haunted House Narratives" explores how post-millennial productions of the American haunted house profoundly challenge traditional notions of masculine subjectivity. Gorrill argues that American Gothic has evolved to portray the current post-millennial social, political and financial collapse as a response against neo-liberalism and toxic masculinity. Narratives

such as Steve Rasnic Tem's *Deadfall Hotel* (2012), Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Thomas Ligotti's *The Town Manager* (2008), Jac Jemc's *The Grip of It* (2017), and Shaun Hamilll's *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020) portray a "schizoid" male subject (Laing 17) that has to confront his existential crisis in the space of a monstrous and labyrinthine haunted house.

WORKS CITED

Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben. "The (Mis)Shapes of Neo-Victorian Gothic: Continuations, Adaptations, Transformations". *Neo-Victorian Gothic. Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, Rodopi/Brill, 2012, pp. 1-48.

Sottilotta, Elena Emma. "Re-imagining the Gothic in Contemporary Serialised Media: An Intertextual and Intermedial Study of Neo-Victorian Monstrous Afterlives". *Crossways Journal*, vol. 1, 2017, pp. 1-31.