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50+ SHADES OF GOTHIC
THE GOTHIC ACROSS GENRE AND MEDIA

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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.

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GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S POLITICAL FAIRY TALES

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ABSTRACT

While critical attention has largely focused on Del Toro's overt fairy tale *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), Del Toro's Hollywood films similarly incorporate the mythic, moral, and gothic qualities of classic fairy tales. His new fairy tales present vital contemporary lessons embedded in these archetypal journeys—and their audience's memories. His free borrowings from fairy tales and popular culture deliberately connect the familiar to his uncanny worlds. This construction is most evident in his films *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008) and The *Shape of Water* (2017). The contemporary politics of race, sexuality, gender, and environmentalism are embedded within these original Hollywood fairy tales. This essay focuses on the intersecting political messages woven into *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* and *The Shape of Water*, messages amplified not obscured by their fairy tale delivery. Through rich textual references, intersections, and hidden subtexts, Del Toro creates new gothic fairy tales, with original protagonists, emerging from the margins. By resisting previous patriarchal and racial boundaries, these films challenge their audiences to embrace new paradigms.

Keywords: fairy tale, Gothic, masculinity, race, disability, queerness.

Disney's selection of Guillermo del Toro for a darker, live-action adaptation of *Pinocchio* (2021) confirms an essential element distinctive of his films. As Michael Atkinson notes, all Del Toro's films "are fairy tales, even when they're science fiction, horror, straight fantasy or some coyote admixture therein. His sensibility is Grimmian, born of urban-Mexican culture steeped in native-arts crafts, poverty, simmering civil discontent and American pop" (50). While critical attention has largely focused on Del Toro's overt fairy tale *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), Atkinson is accurate in highlighting that Del Toro's Hollywood films all incorporate the mythic, moral, and gothic qualities found in the Brothers Grimm, as the filmmaker crafts new tales that draw on the ancient. His fantastical tales are not for children yet still present vital lessons embedded in these archetypal journeys—and their audience's memories. His free borrowings from fairy

tales and popular culture deliberately connect the familiar to his uncanny worlds, adding weight to any moral within.

While these folklore tales predate gothic novels, they contain many of the same qualities. Lisa Hopkins notes the Gothic's "aesthetic of violent contrasts" (xii), with the polarities of youth and age, beautiful and ugly, kindness and evil, innocence and knowledge. Also, as it happens in Gothic fiction, the sins of the parents may be visited on their children, with key action taking place in dark, removed spaces: dungeons, attics, towers, forests, huts. While the uncanny and supernatural in the Gothic is often a threatening force, in fairy tales the supernatural has the potential for good or bad—sometimes within the same source. Without the curses in "Beauty and the Beast" or "Sleeping Beauty," there would be no chance for redemption and love.

Del Toro has offered this explanation for the fairy tale elements in his work: "they tell the truth, not organized politics, religion or economics. Those things destroy the soul" (qtd. in Canfield, italics mine). Jennifer Orme notes that some critics were uncomfortable with how Pan's Labyrinth fable was entwined with the politics of the Spanish Civil War, wishing that Del Toro's film had either focused on the War or a fairy tale. However, she argues that this confluence was central to the theme of Pan's Labyrinth, as the "hybrid nature itself constitutes a form of disobedience to audience expectations of each of these genres by combining genres that are normally distinct" (220). Del Toro's Hollywood fairy tales may likewise promote this disobedience through hybridity—yet they are subtler, with political concerns relegated to subtexts that gives weight to his fantastical characters' journeys.

While fairy tales are at least a subtext in his Hollywood films, they are foundational to two of his films: *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). The prologues of both films include a fairy-tale narrative structure/device. Likewise, these films contain allegorical elements that critique social inequities through their fantastical characters. The contemporary politics of race, sexuality, gender, and environmentalism are embedded within these original Hollywood fairy tales. These two films are further linked in complicated ways. Though *Hellboy II* is technically a comic book adaptation and a sequel to his film *Hellboy* (2004), its story was largely original, allowing Del Toro creative latitude. While *The Shape of Water* may appear to be Del Toro's Hollywood film the least constrained by genre, it shares enough similarities with *Hellboy II* that some viewers have asked if The Shape of Water is an unofficial sequel. However, I suggest that *Hellboy II* was more of a rehearsal for Del Toro's the structure of *The Shape of Water*, using hypertextual construction to carry his political objectives.

Guillermo del Toro's films are not only expressions of his gothic sensibility and his immersion in literature and popular culture—he crafts moral tales that challenge as much as they delight his audiences. This essay will focus on the intersecting political messages woven into *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* and *The Shape of Water*, messages amplified not obscured by their fairy tale delivery. Through rich textual references, intersections, and hidden subtexts, Del Toro creates new Gothic fairy tales, with original protagonists emerging from the margins. By

resisting previous patriarchal and racial boundaries, these films challenge their audiences to embrace new paradigms.

I. A Devishly Romantic Superhero

Before discussing *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, it is important to note how Del Toro shaped a superhero protagonist whose gothic and liminal position allowed him to bridge the fantastical and political tensions fully explored in the sequel. Del Toro traces his gothic sensibility to watching *Wuthering Heights* (1939) when he was a child: falling asleep and waking up, the gothic atmosphere seeped into his consciousness more than narrative (Calia). As a drowsy toddler, he absorbed the powerful force of love, without its pathology or tragedy.

Though others may also use the term horror to describe Del Toro's films, it is a label that the director resists—even when his protagonist is the spawn of Satan or an Amazonian creature. In his *Hellboy* films, Del Toro evokes the nightmare of his characters' exclusion as well as the humanity and beauty within his characters, no matter how frightening—exploiting the tension between awful and awesome. Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder describe Del Toro's process of preserving the beauty within horror, strengthening the moral imperative within both: "The strategy of merging fairy tale and horror, and then making them the emotional and thematic partners of historical realism, insists upon the intellectual seriousness of these forms of popular culture that have been trivialized in the past" (35). Del Toro's fairy tales resonate because of their historical grounding and connections to social issues.

In the first film, Del Toro addresses the opening question posed by Hellboy's adoptive father Professor Broom: "What is it that makes a man *a man*? Is it his origins, the way things start? Or is it something else harder to describe?" This question establishes the character of Hellboy at the start as a and not a monster, defined by his choices and not his unfortunate birth or name. Del Toro's Hellboy is more interested in cats, candy bars, and television than the underworld. Though creator Mike Mignola collaborated on both of del Toro's *Hellboy* films, the protagonist of these films differs significantly from his other appearances. For example, in the 2019 *Hellboy* reboot, Hellboy takes great pride in being the "World's Greatest Paranormal Investigator" and operates alone. Del Toro's Red (as his friends call him) only wants love and acceptance, with his service to the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense merely a diversion from his broken heart. Red represented a new screen superhero, predating Tony Stark's wise-cracking persona in *Iron Man* (2008), choosing love over duty long before Captain America gave up his shield.

Even if Red resists being a figure of horror fiction, he remains firmly a gothic character—like Quasimodo or the Phantom, he is hidden from the eyes of the world, relegated to observing. It remains ambiguous whether Red lives in his underground chamber as a son, guest, or prisoner. Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland explain the subtle construction of the Gothic as "with an understanding of fear that is more nuanced than what we see in typical or traditional horror films—those that rely on tropes and stereotypes—leading us beyond cheap

scares and into a more profound feeling of 'insidious unease'" (8). The supporting characters of fire-starter Liz Sherman and the fish-man Abe Sapien contribute to this unease, as their powers express the untapped potential of nature. Despite their good intentions, they are figures of dread for exceeding what can be contained or understood by humans. In addition to being marked physically as otherworldly, they also possess mental powers that add a psychological aspect to the gothic dread they produce.

Having crafted this genre-bending superhero, *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* used the opportunity of the sequel to add both a fairy tale subplot and incorporate sociopolitical themes. The prologue presents Red as a young boy, watching Howdy Doody and awaiting Santa Claus—both of whom Red assumes are real. For his bedtime story, his father Professor Broom reads the tale of the Golden Army, an indestructible force commissioned by the elven King Balor. Though originally, "men, forests and magical beings" dwelled in harmony, the destructive nature of Man led King Balor to allow the goblin-blacksmith to forge the Golden Army. However, King Balor could not stomach bloodshed of this unstoppable force. Ignoring the advice of his son Prince Nuada, he offered Man a truce—de-activating the Army and dividing the Crown that controls them. Prince Nuada exiled himself, pledging to return when his people needed him the most. This fairy-tale prologue establishes the environmental concern of the film—with the forests and magical beings aligned—while echoing the United States' breaking of treaties with indigenous people, who likewise valued the preservation of forests and wildlife.

As an indication of the consequence of this original fairy tale, Del Toro commissioned Neil Gaiman, an acclaimed author known for his rich fantastical worlds, to create it. Father's reading from an old book to Red was then brought to life with puppet animation. Kristine Kotecki notes the authority of "print fairy tales being associated with an idealized and age-old folk knowledge" (238), an authority that this scene claims. This prologue's blend of fairy-tale motifs and popular culture set the style of this film, displaying "a 'hypertextual' aesthetic, engaging the film's audience with a network of links to follow and metatextual commentaries to process" (Kotecki 243). The omnipresent television and popular music are appropriate for Red as his only link to the outside world—which may explain why it may be challenging for Red to know what is real and what is make-believe. As an adult, Red's bunker has a dozen TV screens, all presenting a different mediated image of the outside world. Like other gothic figures, he is doomed to watch the world go by.

In fairy-tale fashion, Prince Nuada reemergence in present-day Manhattan is due to Mankind's breaking of their treaty. Humanity's greed and disrespect has destroyed the ancient forests, relegating magical beings to abandoned railway yards and hidden tunnels. It is not coincidental that the Prince first strikes at an art auction, where ancient relics are being sold to privileged people with no respect for their spiritual value: the first item on the block is an ancient fertility goddess. Prince Nuada enters as the auctioneer places the segment of the Royal Crown of Bethmoora on the block, labelling it part of a "lost culture." If Prince Nuada's

only intention was to retrieve the Crown segment, he could have done so with minimal violence. Instead, as punishment, he slaughters everyone present, proclaiming, "Proud, empty, hollow things: let me remind you why you used to fear the dark." Nuada releases "tooth fairies," winged Black Forest beings who voraciously consume living calcium, leaving nothing of their victims but goo. Through the geographic origin of these tiny yet terrifying fairies, Del Toro deliberately evokes the ambivalent qualities of Grimmian tales, with violence the consequence for the auction's objectifying of ancient cultures.

Complicating the battle at the heart of this film is that Prince Nuada's return—and his goal to awaken the Golden Army—is tied to ecological conservation. Keith McDonald and Roger Clark compare the strong presence of ecological issues in Del Toro's films to the work of his friend director James Cameron (8). Similar to the character of Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity Wars* (2018), Prince Nuada justifies his ambition by citing Mankind's disrespect for planet resources, natural as well as super. As established in the prologue, Mankind pledged the forests to King Balor in exchange for deactivating his indestructible Army. With magical beings exiled from the forests, Prince Nuada's people *do* need him, almost absolving his patricide to seize the throne. Del Toro's fairy tale construction allows sentient magical beings to stand in for forests, rivers, and animals that cannot speak, representing a formidable threat, evoking the ecoGothic. As Addie C. Booth defines, "the ecoGothic indicates a method of inquiry for understanding the darker, more disturbing aspects of human relationships with nonhuman nature," highlighting the fear, anxiety, and dread that defines those interactions (755). Like the tooth fairies, the magical beings in *The Golden Army* are dark, complicated, and beautiful, demonstrating the perils of disrespecting the nonhuman natural world.

Prince Nuada cleverly links his battle against Mankind to Red's own position, as he is likewise marginalized and unappreciated. Red is confined to the subterranean Bureau headquarters, transported to missions in a garbage truck. Instead of recognizing his work, his Bureau handler actively denies his existence, denouncing any sightings as "ridiculous" on television. When Liz's blaze exterminating the tooth fairies expels him to the sidewalk, Red shouts "we are out," reveling in being freed from his closeted existence. Red yearns for a relationship with people beyond the television images in his bunker, yet the public responds by calling him names and pelting him with beer cans.

When his relationship with Liz is also revealed, he is accused of promoting interspecies relationships, challenging traditional marriage. In addition to the film's link to ecological concerns, Red is simultaneously a queer and racialized figure, as he strives to be less threatening and assure people that he just wants to be "normal—like you, you, everyone." Prince Nuada's taunt that humanity hates him, that Red has more in common with Nuada and his magical people, is continually confirmed, both by Red's interactions with people and as reported on his televisions. He does not realize that he and his companions exhibit humanity that exceeds those with only human DNA. These transhuman or posthuman figures present a "rejection

and a reconfiguration of the values of the traditional humanist subject" (Bolter 2), with Mankind as the ultimate villains whose greed is responsible for this conflict and destruction.

The action of *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* places the supernatural agents of the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense at odds with the humanity that they have worked to protect. Like the kingdom of King Balor, Red and his colleagues have been used and unappreciated. The ecoGothic asserts its power throughout this film, moving from "unease" to threat as it fights for its survival.

II. The Princess Breaks the Spell

The Golden Army also introduces a second love plot that connects the fairy-tale narrative to the franchise's main characters, as well as crafting a unique Princess. Complementing the next stage in Red and Liz's relationship, Abe Sapien—discovered beneath a foundling hospital in 1865 and labelled Icthyo Sapien—falls in love with Princess Nuala, Nuada's twin sister. Princess Nuala opposes her brother's ambition to awaken the Golden Army, hiding her piece of the controlling Crown from him. Abe and Nuala share the challenge of being exiled from their natural element (respectively water and the forest), as well as having the ability to probe people's minds with their touch—probes that are not always invited. Though unsettling ecoGothic figures that resist containment or definition, they maintain a benevolent attitude toward humanity—as well as the "human" desire to love and be loved.

Significantly, Abe and Nuala first meet in the Troll Market, surrounded by marginalized yet diverse and awesome figures. This hidden space emerges as a place of acceptance—Red describes it to Liz as a place that he will bring her to, where no one will stare. The bodies in the Market are not idealized figures, representing instead a range of physical configurations, demonstrating a lack of speciesism. Hidden from the eyes above, they can circulate freely. In the Troll Market, "normal" is not limited to human.

With Abe and Nuala's voiceless communication, as well as their non-binary presentation, this couple anticipates David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's reading of *The Shape of Water*, with its "complex crip and queer embodiments over metaphors of voicelessness" (153)—with speech often an inadequate prosthesis for expression. Adding to the queerness of this couple is that it is technically a triangle: the royal twins Nuala and Nuada are psychically linked, to the extent that they experience each other's thoughts and physical sensations. Nuala can only partially cloak her link with her brother—both implicating him in her relationship with Abe, as well as preventing her from shielding Abe from her brother. Nuala and Nuada exist simultaneously as two individuals, and as one person with two genders and natures—further complicating gender in this franchise. McDonald and Clark connect Del Toro to other transnational directors whose work all "provide counter-discourse perspectives to heteronormative, straight narratives" (6), bringing a "queer appeal" to these romances.

Figure 1 Red (lower right corner) strolls unnoticed in the diversity of the Troll Market.

Like Red, Abe must question where his loyalties belong, as he is torn between his love for Prince Nuala and his duty to the Bureau. Yet Abe consistently chooses love, with a woman who is most like him. However, by sheltering Princess Nuala, he puts Red's life in the balance. And when Abe pays Prince Nuada's ransom with the Crown piece, he allows the Golden Army to come to life. Abe declines to consider Mankind (that has never considered him). While Abe has previously played the celibate third wheel, watching Red breaking rules for Liz, he now asserts himself as a romantic (and potentially sexual) being. When Red formally challenges Prince Nuada for the Crown that controls the Golden Army, Abe impedes him: Abe explains that if Red kills Nuada, Nuala will die as well. Red acquiesces, leaving himself and Mankind vulnerable—for the sake of Abe's love for Nuala.

Figure 2 Nuala and Abe share their grief over the death of the awesome Elemental, the last of his kind.

However, Princess Nuala instead asserts her role as the hero, declining to be anyone's hostage or prize. As the Princess, only she can truly challenge her brother's right to the Crown. By

committing suicide, she removes herself from the equation, as well as killing her brother. However, as noble as her action might be, she has left the natural and magical world without a champion—as well as robbing Abe of his chance at love. Princess Nuala chooses her father's pledge to humanity and fratricide, over love with her fish-man. Yet though she died to preserve humanity, the final choices of the supernatural agents of the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense make Mankind's victory more ambivalent: following Prince Nuada's example, Agent Krauss, Abe Sapien, Red and Liz (carrying unborn twins) choose exile together, no longer willing to serve Man from the margins.

In these characters' search for a new home, away from the eyes of Man, they reject social death and fear-based labels—choosing to live the life in the wilderness that Frankenstein's Creature had imagined with his bride. The sacrifice of Princess Nuala made these choices possible, reminding the viewer that loss is often essential for a happy ending, as they build their new community.

III. Del Toro's Savior Princess

When Guillermo del Toro saw *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) as a child, he thought it was a romance, expecting the two would end up together. With *The Shape of Water* (2017), he corrected the ending: "The ideas I wanted to put in the movie, the reversal…to make the image of the creature carrying the girl a beautiful one, as opposed to a horror image" (qtd. in Erbland). Not only does Del Toro's amphibious creature resemble Abe Sapien, both characters are interpreted by actor Doug Jones. *The Shape of Water* is steeped in Del Toro's gothic vision, revealing the marginalized and the past that infect the visible present. With *The Shape of Water*, he presents a fable of crossing racial, national, gender and species boundaries—embracing instead courage, love, and acceptance.

Reviewing the timeline of 1960s Baltimore, it is clear that Del Toro strategically placed his fairy-tale romance at the intersection of the Civil Rights Movement, an emerging gay-lesbian community, the Space Race (Russia is ahead) and the Cold War, in a city adjacent to the Pentagon. In 1962, Baltimore's Civic Interest Group was actively organizing protests on Maryland's Eastern Shore (*Baltimore*), which was still largely segregated. Concurrently, though the city had several established gay bars, they were subject to raids and the aftershocks of Joe McCarthy's Lavender Scare ("LGBT"). Del Toro deliberately evokes these various tensions. Yet like much of 1960s culture, the characters prefer the distractions of an optimistic popular culture. This historical context of civil rights protests and the Cold War, deliberately repressed by the film's main action, adds Gothic undertones to the forbidden love story at the center.

Like his hero, Del Toro's "princess" defies expectations: Elisa is a foundling and mute, bearing the scars of her early abuse. Yet she finds joy in her life -- with her two friends, her shoes, and her daily orgasm. Being abandoned has taught her to be self-sufficient for her joy. Her friendships cross 1960s boundaries: Zelda is Black and Giles is gay, yet both accept her, ably reading her sign language. Working as a night cleaner in a government lab, Eliza is the

first to recognize the man within the Amphibian, that government workers call the Asset. She actively courts the Amphibian—before organizing his escape to her apartment, with the help of her friends and the Soviet agent. Del Toro's construction falls within Stephen Shapiro's definition of speculative nostalgia, which "mixes the past with an idea about an alternative lifeworld…to build a new social formation" (121). Drawing on gothic tropes, with much of the action in hidden spaces, Del Toro presents invisible figures that defy restrictions of Maryland 1960s to celebrate an unimaginable love. 1950s monster movies such as *The Creature of the Black Lagoon*, drew their horror from the repressed fears of the Cold War, sexuality, and race. In his reversal from a horror film to a romance, del Toro deliberately chose to set his film at the intersections of these fears, making both the subtext and the repressions more visible.

The Shape of Water opens with a lush dream sequence of Eliza's flooded apartment and this voiceover (by Giles) that sets up both its fairy tale and historical context:

> If I spoke about it - if I did - what would I tell you? I wonder. Would I tell you about the time? It happened a long time ago, it seems. In the last days of a fair prince's reign. Or would I tell you about the place? A small city near the coast, but far from everything else. Or, I don't know... Would I tell you about her? The princess without voice. Or perhaps I would just warn you, about the truth of these facts. And the tale of love and loss. And the monster, who tried to destroy it all.

Del Toro says he chose to set the film in the year 1962 to show the hidden horrors of the period he sees referenced with "Make America Great Again": "Everything was super-great if you were white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant, but if you were anything else, you were fucked" (qtd. in Erbland). In line with Del Toro's explanation, the "monster" Strickland is a White suburban father and husband. And despite the "reign of the fair prince" Kennedy, racial protests in Baltimore and elsewhere were more likely to be met with violence than with progress. Though Baltimore is described as "small city near the coast, but far from everything else," it is not far from the Pentagon and the industrial military complex. The action of the film begins September 17, 1962, ending October 10, 1962—days before the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This social and political context is part of the fabric of this fairy tale, as actively represented by the supporting characters. Eliza's neighbor Giles is an isolated, gay man in his 60s, whose alcoholism made him lose his advertising job. Her best friend and co-worker Zelda is a married Black woman, who works with Eliza in the underground government laboratory. The lead scientist Dr. Robert Hoffstettler, dedicated to the care and understanding of the Amphibian, is actually the Soviet double agent Dmitri. Their nemesis Stickland is the government agent who brought the Amphibian from the Amazon, yet he is also an over-compensating family man. This Baltimore laboratory presents the intersection of the Soviet and U.S. military-industrial complex—who believe their captive Asset may provide an advantage in the Space Race—with harassment of gay men, Blacks, and women an accepted part of the workplace. However, the characters of this film live in active denial of their political reality.

Del Toro often balances his borrowing from classic fairy tales with popular culture references, but none so much as *The Shape of Water*. Kotecki explains that "hypertextuality creates resistance to the constructs assumed of 'canonical' literary fairy tales" (236). Eliza and Giles share the upstairs space of a failing, third-run movie theatre. Giles exclusively watches 1930s-40s musicals, escaping the social tensions that could be found in 1950s horror, spy, or social problem films—while Red watches television as a window to the "real" world, Giles uses TV to escape what is outside his apartment.

The first clip viewed is from *The Little Colonel* (1935), featuring Bill Robinson's stair dance with Shirley Temple. Though Giles notes how hard that was to dance, he glides over how Robinson's innovations were stolen by James Cagney and Hollywood. Like Red, Giles finds it challenging to be accepted by real people, as he also finds comfort in television and cats. These escapist texts that Del Toro places on television or the movie theatre below contain images of resistance and integration—even while Giles ignores those messages, preferring the comforting narratives.

Figure 3 Giles takes refuge in televised musicals and Eliza's friendship.

An example of how Del Toro weaves these elements together is evident in a scene that follows Eliza's first meeting the Amphibian. She and her neighbor Giles are sharing a "sordid" pie from a new franchise ("the latest thing!"). As he clears the plates, Eliza turns the TV to the news, reporting police violently breaking up a civil rights protest; from the next room, Giles shouts: "Oh, God, change that awfulness. I don't want to see that; I don't want to see it." Instead, she switches to Betty Grable dancing with a costumed horse to "Pretty Baby of Mine." Though as a closeted gay man, Giles might be expected to have sympathy for others' rights, he prefers to escape to 1940s musicals, oblivious to the coded miscegenation that dances across his living room. On the other hand, Eliza embraces the joy within these musical interludes,

tap dancing on her way to work. It is this joy and curiosity that has prepared Eliza to meet her prince, while her awareness of the darker side of life allows her to disregard others' judgments.

Significantly as the narrator of the story, Giles is the figure most trapped in his self-loathing and denial of the tensions around him. Unemployed, Giles is carrying on a desperate flirtation with a younger counterman (despite how unappetizing the pie he serves is). On a later visit to the counter, his crush harshly turns away a Black couple from sitting at the empty counter, followed by Giles meek, "You didn't have to be so mean." But just, a few minutes later, Giles is likewise banned from the restaurant when the Pie Guy realizes Giles' intentions: "This is a family restaurant." Giles may quietly applaud resistant figures like Alice Faye—but he still supports the status quo, as he draws advertisements of happy families, despite his marginalized and quietly desperate life.

Yet while Giles may be in denial of his social marginalization, Eliza denies society's ability to limit or define her—instead she finds freedom in the margins. Del Toro strategically places his lovers at a point in U.S. history that was socially and politically volatile—while many others were actively in denial of lives who existed outside of television's America.

IV. The Love That Cannot Speak

Though his couple may have come from a monster image, Del Toro's love story draws on classic fairy tale figures, most strikingly the Little Mermaid and the Frog Prince. In her discussion of *Pan's Labyrinth*, Kotecki notes how "an older form approximating a newer one can produce an innovative effect" (236). While Del Toro's canonical models were about hybrid beings striving to become human, this tale celebrates their differences and the sea.

Eliza subverts her fairy tale roots by actively resisting social expectations and constraints. Rather than being a sweet and innocent girl, she is a complicated woman. After the opening sequence, Eliza begins the ritual for her "day" (waking at 9:00pm), boiling eggs for her lunch and then using the egg-timer to masturbate in her bath. She also has an appetite for nice footwear and prefers to wear jewel tones over pastels. While the Mermaid traded her voice to the Sea Witch for legs, Eliza's voice was stolen by her unknown abusers. Like the Mermaid, she was found by the river yet raised in a Catholic orphanage (her origins echo Abe Sapien's). But again, Eliza does not fit the mold of the sweet orphan—she has no qualms about being late to work and breaking in line to clock in. Despite his swagger, she is not intimidated by Strickland. Eliza most subverts expectations, canonical and sociopolitical, in her recognition and pursuit of her Prince.

Instead of being the object of her Prince's gaze, Eliza is immediately curious about the Amphibian. Despite the dangerous potential of the Amphibian (she and Zelda are called in after his attack on Strickland), she is not deterred. As they mop the blood-smeared lab, Eliza retrieves Strickland's fingers, calmly putting them in her lunch bag. While Zelda is rattled by the blood, Eliza approaches the Amphibian's tank, placing her hand against the glass—he is

the one who retreats. Throughout the film, Eliza pursues the Amphibian. She first seduces him with hard-boiled eggs, showing little fear when he rises fully from his pool and shrieks. On her next visit, she adds music to her pursuit. Rather than the beast reassuring the beauty or carrying her off, Eliza is the one who proves herself to the Amphibian, readying herself to rescue him.

Figure 4 Eliza gazes at the Amphibian, beginning her courtship of him.

One quality that united Eliza and the Amphibian across species is their apparent voicelessness. But their lack of traditional speech is ironic—as they may be the most comfortable in expressing their needs and who they are. Mitchell and Snyder describe the film's integration of voicelessness with political and queer coding: "Elisa's surgical neck stars, the Amphibian figure's gills, and their parallel communication disabilities connect them as objects of fascination for an intrusive normative medico-militarized gaze" (153). On the other hand, Eliza teaches the Amphibian to "speak" through sign language. Her signing in several instances gives her "a voice" not available to others. And unlike Abe and Nuala, their love is consummated, with the film acknowledging their desire and sexuality.

Notably, voicelessness is not unique to Eliza and the Amphibian. As Mitchell and Snyder note, "voicelessness is often regarded as a metaphor for political powerlessness" (151). This powerlessness obviously silences Zelda and Giles, but White men Strickland and Hoffstetler are likewise silenced by their precarious position within patriarchal order. Not only do Strickland and the General ignore Dr. Hostetler's pleas on behalf of the scientific and individual value of the Asset, but Dmitri's Soviet handlers also ignore him.

Most ironic is the ultimate voicelessness of Strickland—despite being someone who uses speech to intimidate others. He makes frequent comments against the humanity of non-Whites and non-Americans (comments strangely echoed by Giles early in the film). Yet the Amphibian and his loss reveal Strickland's tenuous position. Despite his brutal nature, Strickland takes pride in his service to society and his family, humbly asking General Hoyt: "When is a man done proving himself, a good man, a decent man?" Hoyt makes it clear that one failure is enough to exile Strickland to an "alternate universe of shit." Strickland experiences metaphoric castration throughout the film (losing his fingers first to the Amphibian then to rot, Giles' side-swiping his new Cadillac). Finally, the Amphibian takes Strickland's voice and his life, after his gunshot proves impotent. Evangelina Kindinger notes del Toro's evoking patriarchy's menace in *Crimson Peak* (2015): "The real horror, del Toro suggests, are not the

ghost but patriarchy, because it traumatizes women and turns them into ghosts and monsters" (63). If *Crimson Peak* is about how patriarchy traumatizes women, Del Toro's *Hellboy* films and *The Shape of Water* ask how a man can survive patriarchy. While the male characters in *The Golden Army* turn their backs on patriarchal service, Strickland does not survive his blind loyalty.

As in *The Golden Army*, the Amphibian embodies the ecoGothic, with abilities and origins that create unease—an alternate masculinity with no connection to patriarchy, that evokes more questions than answers. In the Amazon, he protected natives who were resisting oil drilling. While Giles and Zelda see the Amphibian as Other, Eliza sees her union with the Amphibian fated by their shared difference (as with Abe and Nuala, or Liz and Red). When Giles calls the Amphibian "a thing" and therefore not worthy of rescue, Eliza challenges Giles' definition of human:

> What am I? I move my mouth, like him, I make no sound, like him. What does that make me? All that I am... all that I've ever been... brought me here, to him. When he looks at me, the way he looks at me, he does not see what I lack or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am as I am. …I can either save him or let him die.

Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Shape of Water* is a love story that serves to transform the community left behind by the persecuted lovers. Through Eliza and the Amphibian, Giles, Zelda, and Dmitri/ Hoffstetler found their voices—before Eliza's heroic example, it would not have occurred to any of them to "break the law," despite how poorly the law has treated them. Dmitri gave his life for his chance to speak, brutalized by agents of both the Soviet and U.S. governments. However, Giles and Zelda survive within their marginalized communities but now with a voice to speak against their oppression as well as the oppression of others. In Shapiro's terms, Eliza demonstrates how "an individual's suffering can function as more than merely an object of empathy, but can also stand as a scaffold for mutually enabling development through coalitional alliances" (132). Eliza has revealed herself to be their Princess; instead of the Authority, Strickland is the vanquished Monster.

In Del Toro's version, the landlocked Mermaid does not die and the Frog Prince does not become human—her love and sacrifice restore his strength, which he uses to save her life and make her amphibious. To get to the canal, Giles and Eliza must half-carry the Amphibian—where they are overtaken by Strickland, who shoots both the Amphibian and Eliza. However, the Amphibian heals himself, confronting Strickland and slashing him across the throat (mirroring Eliza's scars). It is at this point that he picks Eliza up in his arms—in the *Black Lagoon* pose—jumping into the canal. As he kisses her holding her neck, she revives and breathes through her new gills.

Some critics and viewers have noted this transformation as proof that Eliza was always more than human, making her even more the Mermaid, with the Amphibian the only one to recognize her true nature. In Donna Haraway's terms, *The Shape of Water* is an "argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (7). The

Amphibian is the Prince who awakens Beauty—affirming her potential to be extrahuman. Neither the Frog Prince or the Little Mermaid in Del Toro's version aspire to be human—they embrace their differences and each other, finding a better place to live.

Figure 5 The Amphibian's kiss revives and transforms Eliza.

As a child, Del Toro instinctively saw the political power in the image of the hybrid man carrying the distressed woman. By choosing 1962, Del Toro not only places this final image as an argument for mixed marriages (Maryland only repealed its miscegenation law in 1967), but it argues for recognizing the humanity in all marginalized people, as well as the dangers of unchecked patriarchy. Eliza refuses to be marginalized by her past trauma or by men like Strickland, empowering everyone to resist "the monster, who tried to destroy it all."

V. Conclusions

Del Toro's has explained the message behind *The Shape of Water* 's happy ending:

> I think when we wake up in the morning, we can choose between fear and love. Every morning …The way you end your story is important. It's important that we choose love over fear, because love is the answer. Silly as it may sound, it is the fucking answer to everything" (qtd. in Erbland).

As simplistic as this may sound, Bacchilega and Rieder see this as the strength that Del Toro draws from fairy tales, separating "the fairy tale's moral imperative from the condescension that so often attends the encryption of adult rules in fairy tale situations" (34). This kind of fairy-tale love is a political act at it defeats fear, scaling walls and ignoring difference.

Returning to Orme, Del Toro's hybridity is central to the defiance within his narratives, as he both engages and challenges his audience through his dizzying hypertextual combinations—mirroring the mosaic of the characters at the center of his films, who refuse "to submit to the narrative desires of others at their own expense" (219). His fairy tale structures pull his

audience to root for endings that are not superficial—their love has been proven through their arduous journeys to lift the curse. As importantly, they are not stock princes/princesses, but characters that cross "natural" boundaries, finding the greatest humanity in the trans- or extrahuman. Del Toro's fairy tales are politically effective because their quests for true love are tied to being our best selves in a moral world—respective of definitions or boundaries.

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THE STORY OF CORALINE(S): A GOTHIC COMING OF AGE

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with *Coraline* (2002), the novel by Neil Gaiman, and *Coraline* (2009), the animated adaptation directed by Henry Selick based on Gaiman's book. While Gothic stories often emphasize and question human morality, children's literature usually holds a moralizing value. Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* presents a story within the genre of children's literature that seems to be deeply rooted in the Gothic tradition. Some of the fundamental gothic elements in Coraline's story are the presence of ghosts, grotesque beings, and the existence of a parallel and dark universe that serves as the setting for the story. Coraline deals with anxieties related with personal development, growing up, and the environments that surround her. Gothic content within both the book and the film contribute to the undermining of the idealization of Coraline's family, her own process of growing up, and her coping with moving to a completely different place. The creation of the gothic world is exploited in both works to represent Coraline's coming-of-age experience and her conflict with her family. However, despite Selick's film being a faithful and well-delivered adaptation of Gaiman's novel, there are considerable differences that affect how the audience interprets Coraline as a character and her story, which this analysis will highlight.

Keywords: Gothic, children's literature, coming-of-age, Coraline, literature

I. THE GOTHIC AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

This paper deals with *Coraline*'s story, both in the novel by Neil Gaiman, published in 2002, and the stop motion animated film released in 2009, directed and written by Henry Selick. Before delving any further into the paper, it is important to highlight the role of Selick as the screenwriter, for it gives him the capacity to change the story. Now, while Gothic stories often emphasize and question human morality, children's literature usually holds a moralizing value (Saravia and Saravia 77). In other words, when a gothic narrative is shaped and directed within a definite moral purpose, it is aimed at confronting good and evil through different

characters as representatives of such forces in antagonistic positions (Georgieva 39). In fact, "the importance for authors does not reside in an abstract struggle between good and evil but in a concrete moral example involving plausible personae, a model that can be applied to real life" (ibid). Margarita Georgieva, in *The Gothic Child* (2013) further states that "the struggle between good and evil in a child's soul is among the recurrent preoccupations of the [gothic novel]" (Georgieva 40) and Michael Howarth in *Under the Bed, Creeping: Psychoanalyzing the Gothic in Children's Literature* (2014) argues that the presence and the importance of Gothicism in children's literature has a long tradition, "Gothicism has always been an integral part of children's literature" (Howarth 4); indeed, children's literature is expected to play a didactic role in the growth and development of its young readers, which parents often see as subverted by Gothicism (Howarth 6). On the same note, Howarth argues that "one of the strengths of gothic literature is that it teaches us things are not always what they seem" (ibid.), which could reasonably be one of the main didactic messages underlying Coraline's story. Young readers will encounter monsters and ghosts while reading and watching Coraline's adventure in a Gothic world. This becomes essential, as Howarth states, "to our mental and physical growth because as we grow older we discover that these strange shapes and intense situations often embody our individual fears and anxieties" (ibid.). To further support this argument, Howarth explains the following:

> By going on an imaginary journey with these characters, and through witnessing their rewards and mistakes, we learn how to deal with similar conflicts in reality. While a child is certain not to encounter a troll or a werewolf, he or she might feel threatened or oppressed by other people or events in his or her life. In these cases, gothic literature aids the child in abandoning childish impulses so as to engage in mature reflections. (Howarth 6)

Thus, Coraline helps her readers and audience realize that they will not be overcome by their own emotions or problems, but that they will, as she did, survive and prevail. This way, Gothicism can arguably be considered as a teaching tool for children. Gaiman's *Coraline* presents a story that falls into this category of gothic children's literature. Some of the fundamental Gothic tropes are the presence of ghosts, grotesque beings, and the existence of a parallel and dark universe that serves as the setting for the story. Both in the novel and the film, the eponymous character deals with anxieties related to personal growth, development, and the new environment that surrounds her after moving to a completely new town. Many critics have valued *Coraline*, arguing that its narrative articulation can help children grow out from dependence into a healthier acceptance of their desires and give them agency as subjects. Padma Jagannathan classifies *Coraline* as written in the finest tradition of fairy tales and Gothic fiction, not only addressing very specific fears of childhood such as the already mentioned above, but also children's creativity and their freedom to explore (Jagannathan 1). This paper aims at presenting the main narrative and aspects that could be understood as gothic aesthetically in Gaiman's *Coraline* and Selick's *Coraline*, individually analyzing each work and providing a

comparison so as to discern which one delivers a better understanding of Coraline's gothic coming-of-age.

For Chloé Buckley, "the uncanny [is] one of the most useful theoretical tools for understanding children's fiction" (Buckley 58) and, furthermore, some critics have asserted "that childhood itself is uncanny" (Rollin and West in Buckley 58). David Rudd defines *Coraline* as a "rich and powerful work" that participates in a long tradition of "exploring the darker side of life", and which aims at the negotiation of "one's place in the world" (Rudd 159-60). Karen Coats's analysis of *Coraline* argues that Gaiman's work is "well made […] giving concrete expression to abstract psychic processes… mingling the horror with healthy doses of humor and hope" (Coats 91). Now, Buckley further argues that the importance of *Coraline* in the literary canon of children's fiction relies on the underlying psychoanalytic themes and the uncanny, making it a "monumental" work (Buckley 61). When considering morality and children's literature, Henry Hughes states that the evil forces are eventually destroyed through justice, even though the Gothic tends to subvert more conventional aspects of morality (Hughes 83-4), and I agree with Saravia and Saravia when they argue that the Gothic elements in Coraline support the creation of an environment that is needed for the didactic purpose of the narrative to be perceivable in young readers (89). As Buckley puts it, *Coraline* has been valued for its Gothic nature since it helps young readers in their growth towards being more independent and accepting their own desires and emotions (Buckley 60).

Gaiman's book has not only been catalogued as children's literature: it has also been defined as frightening and definitely Gothic in essence, and it "has rapidly achieved canonical status" (ibid.). Selick's film adaptation successfully captures, explores, and projects the book's gothic essence onto the screen. A fair example of this can be the great and astonishing difference in the use of colors between the Real World—understood as the world in which Coraline lives with her family and her new neighbors—and the Other World—understood as the parallel evil universe that Coraline discovers exploring her new home—. In the Other World, Coraline initially seems to find all she could wish for, and everything seems to be extremely alive and colorful. In fact, everyone pays her the attention she seems to lack back in the Real World.

Coraline's negotiation of her place in the world and the exploration of the darker side of growing up is achieved through the use of devices such as spooky settings, the outsider hero, scary villains such as the Beldam, who is also known as the Other Mother, the main antagonist of both works. She is an evil figure that has the ability of shape-shifting in order to lure children into this Other World that mirrors the Real World to take their soul by sewing button eyes in the children she lures successfully. When Coraline first encounters the ghosts of other children, victims of the Beldam, one of them states that "she stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, she took our lives away, and she left us here, and she forgot about us in the dark" (Gaiman 84). Additionally, the Beldam's true and sinister form is revealed later in both works. While in Gaiman's narrative there are numerous references to arachnid beings

throughout the story and the descriptions of the Other Mother's physique, Selick's film delivers a decaying evolution of the Other Mother's physical characterization into that of an arachnid form while also making use of the color scheme, which becomes duller and darker as the story progresses.

Gothic content within both the book and the film contributes to undermining the idealization of Coraline's family, her own process of growing up, and her coping with moving to a completely different place. Therefore, this holds a significant didactic purpose in young readers that might feel connected to some features of Coraline's story. As George Bluestone states, "changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium [and] the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture" (Bluestone 5). On the same note, Linda Hutcheon argues that "the different media and genres that stories are transcoded to and from in the adapting process are not just formal entities […] they also represent various ways of engaging audiences" (Hutcheon xiv). Now, despite Selick's film constituting a reproduction and recreation of Gaiman's narrative, there are considerable differences that affect how the audience might interpret Coraline as a character, her story, and her gothic coming-of-age, which is the aim of the comparative analysis presented in this paper. However, as Hutcheon argues, the double nature of an adaptation does not imply that the proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis (Hutcheon 6). Thus, the focus will be on the characterization of Coraline as the main character and how both authors interpret and introduce the Gothic elements in their work as, for example, what the addition of Wyborn—also known as Wybie, a character added in Selick's film who accompanies Coraline throughout her journey and serves purposes such as saving her from the Beldam and also as confidant, since Coraline eventually finds herself talking to him as a friend—means for how the audience interprets Coraline's development and her gothic coming-of-age.

II. Coraline's Story

The story begins when Coraline and her parents move into a new house; given the stressful situation, and that her parents are always busy with work, Coraline decides to go out exploring around since she feels isolated and ignored. Soon, she meets the neighbors: Miss Mariam Forcible and Miss April Spink, two elderly women retired from the stage who own several Scottie dogs, and Mr. Bobo, an older man who trains mice to play music. In the film, Selick also introduces the character of Wybie, who has just been described above as Coraline's friend. After exploring the surroundings of her new home, she finds a big locked wooden door in the drawing-room, but it is bricked up. In the cinematic adaptation, this door is small and is located in the living room. Behind this door is a parallel, or alternate, world where her Other Mother and her Other Father live, almost exact replicas of her real parents, though they have black buttons instead of eyes. What remains fundamental about not only the Other World but also her Other Parents is that she seems to be more welcomed there than in the Real World.

Everything seems more interesting, fun, and caring at first. At the end of her first visit to the Other World, the Beldam—Coraline's Other Mother—offers Coraline to stay there with them forever, if she lets her sew buttons over Coraline's eyes. After rejecting the Beldam's offer, Coraline goes back home.

When she returns to the Real World, her parents have gone missing, and they do not seem to be returning anytime soon. Coraline soon realizes they have been kidnapped by the Beldam, and decides that she must rescue them. This means that Coraline has to go back to the Other World again, where she will be trapped behind a mirror as punishment for not accepting the Beldam's gifts. Behind the mirror, she meets the ghostly souls of three children from different eras that had been lured and entrapped by the Beldam. In the novel, Coraline is taken out of this mirror prison by her Other Mother, while in the film, it is Other Wybie who saves Coraline from it. In both works, Coraline decides to challenge the Beldam in a game to find the children's souls and her missing parents within the Other World. She does so using her wit and the seeing stone that Miss Forcible and Miss Spink gave her, when they first foretold that Coraline was facing an evil force and a dangerous situation. Eventually, Coraline escapes after she manages to find the souls of the three children and her real parents.

Even though Coraline forced the corridor's door shut, the next day she discovers that the Beldam's severed hand is in the Real World attempting to steal the corridor's key, so that the Other Mother can take revenge on her. In the novel, Coraline lures the hand to a well and tricks it into falling in with the key. In the film, even though Coraline is completely unaware of the presence of the Beldam's hand in the Real World, she decides that she must get rid of the corridor's key by throwing it into the well. When she is attacked by the Beldam's hand, it is Wybie who saves her and helps her in the struggle against it, until they finally get rid of it by smashing it with a rock and throwing it into the well alongside the key.

The creation of the Other World is exploited in both works to present Coraline's coming-of-age experience and her conflict with her family. This gothic world is seen as an alternative reality, since there is nothing that hints at this parallel dimension being created through Coraline's imagination. As Jagannathan states, "the darkness is an essential ingredient even though it leads to traumatic confrontations for the protagonists because, in that catharsis, both the reader and the protagonist expand their imagination and creativity" (Jagannathan 2). In fact, Nick Midgely's analysis of *Coraline* supports this claim when he states that "Freud's work makes clear the way in which confronting the terrifying and the horrific is an important aspect of emotional development" (Midgely 131). Besides, "*Coraline* is here proposed as a gothic text of surfaces, upon which discourses of the child, the uncanny, and psychoanalysis intersect, converge, and come into conflict" (Buckley 62). It will be through Coraline's experience within this gothic world that readers and audiences will be introduced to her fears of loneliness and inability to fit in, and also to the way she will eventually overcome such fears.

Some viewers might consider *Coraline* inappropriate for children precisely for these Gothic images and content. Nevertheless, Saravia and Saravia argue that Coraline becomes a

more "mature girl who is able to empathize with imperfect adults and appreciate them without having to like or understand everything about them" (Saravia and Saravia 92). By instrumentally contributing to the awakening of young readers (for example, undermining the idealization of family love), the gothic elements in the story serve a significant didactic purpose.

2.1. GAIMAN'S CORALINE: THE NOVEL

This section is centered on several aspects that will be analyzed in the novel, such as, for instance, descriptions, dialogues, characterization, and specific roles and symbolism within the story. Coraline is introduced as a naturally curious explorer in a new environment that both frightens her and attracts her attention, so that Coraline's narrative is that of an adventure story and, first and foremost, a gothic narrative, once the action begins with Coraline's first contact with the Other World. The story begins with "Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house" (Gaiman 1), followed by the description of the surrounding area and her neighbors and, then, she goes exploring. However, when it rains, she is not allowed to go out; thus, out of pure boredom and her parents' indifference, she started wondering about "the old door that opened onto the brick wall" (Gaiman 11) that she and her mother had opened and closed before. That night, Coraline dreamed "of black shapes that slid from place to place […] little black shapes with little red eyes and sharp yellow teeth [that] started to sing" (Gaiman 11-12). This uncomfortable dream sets the eerie atmosphere for the beginning of Coraline's gothic adventure. Even though dreams tend to reveal to the reader something that the character is usually afraid to recognize about her/himself, this dream functions as a foretelling element that presents the uncanny nature of the Other World she has awakened when opening the old door, which later reveals a corridor behind it.

To begin with the characterization of Coraline, Gaiman demonstrates Coraline's adventurous nature when, after crossing the mysterious corridor behind the old door, she steps into what she at first thought of as an empty flat, but she is hit with an overwhelming feeling of uncanniness. "There's something very familiar about this. It's the same carpet that we have in our flat" (Gaiman 30), Coraline states as she explores the Other World, realizing that everything seems to look "exactly the same from the outside, or almost exactly the same" (Gaiman 39). Her first visit to the Other World is received with a wonderful, tasty, and homemade meal cooked by the Beldam—her Other Mother—, which constitutes an evident contrast with the food she is used to eating back in the Real World. In Gaiman's book, we can read the following: "it was the best chicken that Coraline had ever eaten. Her mother sometimes made chicken, but it was always out of packets or frozen, and was very dry, and it never tasted of anything" (Gaiman 29). One of the most relevant differences between novel and film for the purpose of this analysis is Coraline's attitude towards the Other World and the Beldam. While Coraline in the film seems to be completely happy to be in this alternate world, the Coraline from the book grows suspicious from the very beginning:

> It sounded like her mother. Coraline went into the kitchen, where the voice had come from. A woman stood in the kitchen with her back to Coraline. She looked a little like Coraline's mother. Only… Only her skin was white as paper. Only she was taller and thinner. Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp (Gaiman 27-28).

This not only supports the claim of Coraline's wariness towards the Other World and her Other Mother, but also describes the Other Mother and its physical appearance with details that betray an unsettling nature. Literary Coraline is almost convinced, from the very beginning, that the Other World is not a place she feels comfortable spending a lot of time in. However, she decides to go exploring this new mysterious world in which she seems to be able to do whatever she desires, and the adults around her are fine with it.

The presence of adult figures is another issue that has to be dealt with when considering the character of Coraline and her gothic coming-of-age. Eventually, for Coraline, the familiar becomes dangerous in the Other World. That is, although everything in the Other World may seem familiar, since the Beldam has created it as a replica of Coraline's Real World, it will evolve into a dangerous world where Coraline will have to face and overcome her fears regarding isolation and losing her parents to the Beldam's monstrous plans. Karen Coats in *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders* (2008) delves into Coraline's boredom as a transitional point that marks that she is developing her capacity of being alone in the process of identifying her own desires as separate from her parents' (Coats 84). It seems like Coraline's real parents are disengaged and unimaginative, they do not consider bothering to explore their new home nor the neighborhood and, therefore, Coraline has to navigate her adventure alone. It is also true that the rest of the adults that surround Coraline are eccentric people, such as the old actresses who read tea leaves, and the old man who trains mice. As an example of the disconnection between the desires of Coraline's parents and her own, Coats refers to when Coraline goes shopping with her mom: while her mother is "aligned with the shop assistant and the school's dress code", Coraline "wants to assert an individual sense of style by buying some Dayglo green gloves" (Coats 84). The importance of this event in the narrative is translated and adapted into Selick's film, for it shows Coraline's separation from her mother. Coats also quotes Coraline's mother when she asks Coraline where she has been, to which she replies, "I was kidnapped by aliens […] They came down from outer space with ray guns, but I fooled them by wearing a wig and laughing in a foreign accent, and I escaped", to which her mother plainly replies, "Yes, dear. Now I think you could do with some more hair clips, don't you?" (Gaiman 24). I agree with Coats when she argues that these small interactions clearly represent Coraline's searching for her own desires while feeling alone in the presence of her mother. Significantly, it is after this disconnection is presented in the novel that Coraline embarks on her first visit to the Other World.

Drawing back to the significance of the adult figures in the story, analyzing their characterization is key since the apparent absence of competent, caring adult figures is what drives

Coraline to fend for herself when her parents have gone missing and, ultimately, leads to her adventure. One of her first reactions when she realizes that her parents have been kidnapped is to call the police. However, the officer replies the following:

> You ask your mother to make you a big old mug of hot chocolate, and then give you a great big old hug. There's nothing like hot chocolate and a hug for making the nightmares go away. And if she starts to tell you off for waking her up at this time of night, why you tell her that that's what the policeman said. (Gaiman 55)

In the novel, Coraline's reality is that she is truly alone in this tangible nightmare. Other adult figures, such as Miss Forcible and Miss Spink, are significant not only as characters that warn Coraline about evil things lurking in the darkness, but also as one of the main elements of gothic literature, foretelling the future to the reader through visions and dreams. It has been already mentioned how Coraline dreamed about the rats and their song, however, it is because of Miss Forcible and Miss Spink that Coraline's future is foreshadowed as one with an evil presence that Coraline will have to face when they read her fortune in the tea leaves:

> "You know, Caroline," she said, after a while, "you are in terrible danger."
> Miss Forcible snorted, and put down her knitting. "Don't be silly, April. Stop scaring the girl. Your eyes are going. Pass me that up, child." […]
> "Oh dear," she said. "You were right, April. She *is* in danger." (Gaiman 20)

The use of italics in the novel emphasizes that the danger is already upon Coraline. Miss Forcible and Miss Spink are two adult figures that, despite their eccentric characterization, help Coraline through their warning and the seeing stone. This is also significant when considering other characters such as the black cat, which holds a greater purpose in the novel than in the film, as will be argued later. Unlike cinematic Coraline, who navigates the Other World with the Other Wybie, literary Coraline can only really express her honest fears and feelings to the black cat. In other words, in the novel, Coraline interacts and dialogues with the cat, while in the film these kinds of interactions are reconstructed through Wybie; these interactions with the cat are added to Coraline's inner monologue, fundamental in the narrative.

Following Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and his narrative pattern of the monomyth, or hero's journey, Coraline—the hero—is helped by a mentor-ally figure—that could arguably be represented by the cat in the novel—who ventures into the unknown facing conflict but, ultimately, overcoming these difficulties and returning home, transformed. To support this argument of the cat as a mentor-ally figure, observing the dialogues between them is necessary:

> "Small world," said Coraline.
> "It's big enough for her", said the cat. "Spider's webs only have to be large enough to catch flies."
> Coraline shivered. (Gaiman 75)

Here, Coraline has discovered that the Other World only goes as far as her house and the surrounding area; once she tries to go further, she is brought back to where she started exploring. Even though at first she might think she was free to do as she pleased without getting bored, she has noticed she is trapped in the Beldam's world. A world that, as the cat points out to Coraline, is in fact a spider's web in which Coraline has fallen into. This quote, and the following one, hold great philosophical and metaphorical significance for Coraline's adventure. The cat's dialogues are full of philosophical undertones and even, as hinted by scholars quoted at the beginning of the paper, psychoanalytic:

> "Stop it!" said Coraline.
> The cat dropped the rat between its two front paws. "There are those," it said with a sigh, in tones as smooth as oiled silk, "who have suggested that the tendency of a cat to play with its prey is a merciful one—after all, it permits the occasional funny little running snack to escape, from time to time. How often does your dinner get to escape?" (Gaiman 76)

In this conversation, the cat is presenting a moral dilemma about food, preys, life and death, so it actually poses a question to the reader and to Coraline herself: who is the prey? In the context of the spider's web metaphor, if Coraline is the fly that the spider is catching and, therefore, the prey, is the Beldam playing with her and giving her the chance to escape? This quote also goes hand in hand with the foreshadowing trope that has been mentioned before and supports the idea of the cat playing the role of mentor-ally.

In fact, when Coraline is trying to find out what the Other Mother truly desires, the cat replies, "'She wants something to love, I think,' said the cat. 'Something that isn't her. She might want something to eat as well. It's hard to tell with creatures like that'" (Gaiman 65). This dialogue on the nature of the Other Mother reinforces how Coraline is at first intrigued by the Other World as a place where all of her desires would be met without any problem or argument, but soon she realizes that she will, in fact, not be allowed to desire anything that the Other Mother would not want her to. Coraline would never be able to go beyond her Other Mother's desire: she would be confined to her, which is the horrific nature lying beneath the Beldam, her love being an insatiable desire to consume Coraline. Following the analysis offered by Coats, the ghost children that Coraline meets when imprisoned behind the mirror were unable to learn the "paradoxical lesson that Coraline does, that desire doesn't work by getting everything you want" (Coats 84). Coraline is able to grow not only as a child but also as a character: "'You really don't understand, do you?' [Coraline] said. 'I don't *want* whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn't mean anything. What then?'" (Gaiman 120). While the Other Mother does not understand Coraline, Coraline is "unlike other children, discriminating enough to know what she likes, and she also knows, somehow, that being bored is a necessary move in the game" (Coats 85). This is part of the lesson that readers will receive when accompanying Coraline in her adventure. Besides, the fact that this is a gothic narrative brings

a nasty villain that must be defeated, while also functioning as context and escape through which fears, anxieties, and inner dramas are not abstract but represented in a dark and haunting way so that children can actually see them and face them.

2.1. Selick's Coraline: The Film

This section will replicate the previous one, but referencing Selick's film adaptation instead. Given that it is an audiovisual medium, light, color, and dialogue will be more significant in the analysis. In the novel, the point of view is that of the protagonist, so that the readers share Coraline's point of view. In the film, the point of view shifts necessarily as it is not made in the first-person point of view, thus placing the audience as spectators watching Coraline. Descriptive passages in Gaiman's novel are adapted to long shots and close-ups that show the extreme detail put into the animation design and development, giving birth to Coraline's adventure from our imagination onto the screen.

The first significant change that Selick introduces in the film adaptation is the addition of an opening sequence, set in what seems to be the Beldam's workshop. This sequence, as the beginning of the story, introduces the audience to a pair of metallic hands made of needles, making a stuffed doll with black button eyes that bears an incredible and uncanny resemblance to the hero of the story, Coraline. Just as with the analysis of the first sentence of a novel, this credit scene, without any dialogue but with eerie background chanting, sets the mood for the film.

Figure 1 Credit scene, the making of doll Coraline (Selick).

The detailed close-ups and the color scheme used during this credit scene create an eerie atmosphere that sets the gothic tone for the Other World's nature and the dangers that Coraline will have to face. As mentioned above, there are no dialogues during this scene, but we can hear children chanting in the background and, just before the doll is finished, the Beldam itself joins the chanting for a few seconds. Another important detail to consider is that we are able to see the Beldam's hands in its true form, rather than a couple of human hands, which would lessen the feeling of uncanniness that this scene builds up in the spectators from the very beginning of the film.

Now, the characterization of the hero of the story is also significant: cinematic Coraline is presented as more naïve, which makes her character development more noticeable in the end. Her growth and her coming-of-age story as she becomes the hero of her own story make the ending more rewarding, since her increased maturity is observed. As mentioned before, while literary Coraline does not feel comfortable in the Other World from the very first visit, the characterization of Coraline as unsuspecting is peculiar to the film, in which she perceives the Other World as a paradise compared to her own reality.

However, this is not the only element that changes how the character of Coraline is adapted and, thus, perceived by the spectators; the role of adult figures is also significant. While, in the film, Coraline's parents are also disengaged and unimaginative, Coraline is constantly trying to catch her parents' attention. Besides, they do not go missing until after a few days of Coraline's first visit to the Other World, and still, there are neighbors around offering their help and aid to her, contrary to the literary version. In the film adaptation, Coraline is constructed and perceived as more sociable, aiming at winning her workaholic parents' attention.

Films have music, sound effects, tones of voices, even breathing and gasps, which are all elements used to play with empathy and affect, to signal hidden emotions that cannot, in film, be communicated through an interior monologue without a voiceover. Thus, another significant addition that has a great impact on how we perceive Coraline and her coming-of-age is the fact that Selick introduces Wybie to the story. What he brings into the picture is a mixture of comic scenes and dialogues that water down and ease the tension of the gothic atmosphere. Furthermore, through Coraline's interactions with Wybie, we are able to find the traces of her inner monologue—very much present throughout the entire novel—. It could be argued that in the novel, Coraline interacts with the black cat, while in the film this kind of interaction is reconstructed through Wybie. Drawing back to Campbell's hero's journey, Wybie can be analyzed as the mentor-ally of the film. This decision to have a certain character be split or combined brings narrative consistency to the film. The purpose of adding Wybie as the only other child who shares, to some extent, Coraline's adventure is to provide Coraline with an external interlocutor to share her thoughts; even though the film could have employed a first-person point of view, Selick chose to insert an actual character instead. In fact, when

considering that Other Wybie is mute, it might be even argued that it takes on a bit of an imaginary friend role.

While Other Wybie is necessary to show what a sweet and idealized world the Other Mother has created for Coraline, the novel remains much creepier in essence, since Coraline has to navigate it all by herself. Additionally, even though at first Other Wybie is used by the Other Mother as a way of providing Coraline with a friend, since sharing all those new experiences is fun and appealing when she has someone with her, he tries to snap Coraline out of that fantasy when the Other Mother is not around. Wybie remains absolutely necessary in the movie and to cinematic Coraline to show her that not all is as it seems, as well as to save her from the prison behind the mirror and also help her escape through the corridor. He remains an active force on her side while in the Other World, so that Coraline has someone to rely on. However, when the Other Mother realizes that Other Wybie has become a problem in her schemes, Coraline will find Other Wybie's clothes hanging empty from Other Mr. Bobinski's—Mr. Bobo from the books—flagpole.

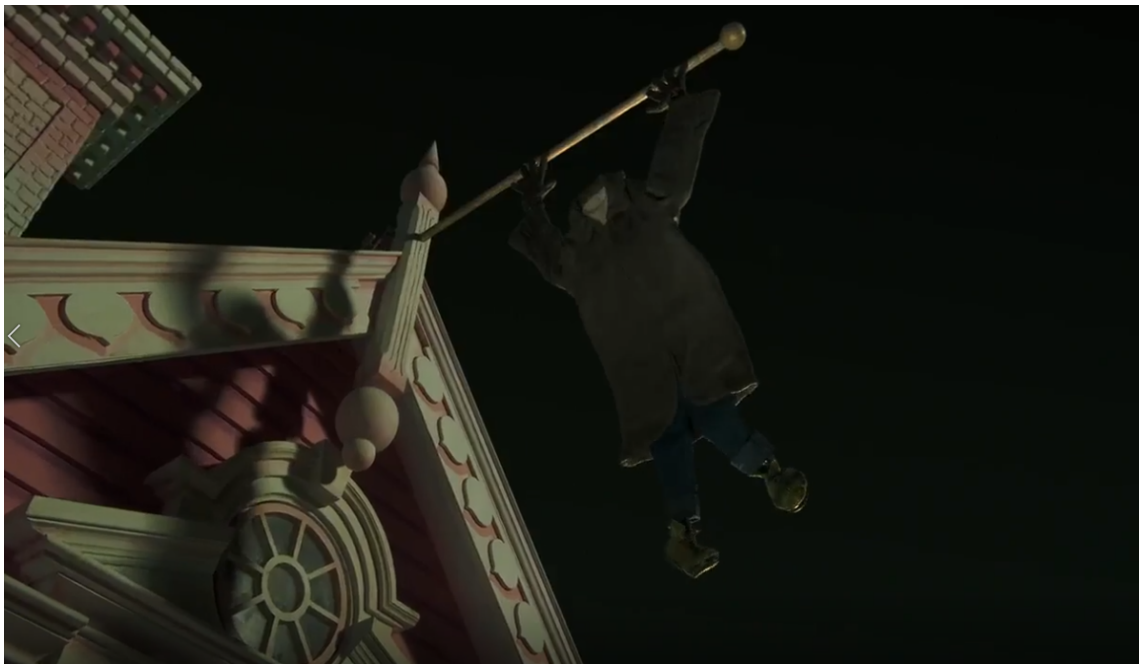

Figure 2 Other Wybie's clothes hanging (Selick).

Wybie shows Coraline and the spectators how terrible the Other World is, as this scene depicts the terrifying fate that Other Wybie has met for not abiding by the Other Mother's commands. Coraline is shocked when she sees her friend's clothes like this, which further delivers the serious and dangerous nature of the Other World to the spectators, viscerally and emotionally.

Additionally, Wybie as a character is also important in the Real World because he helps movie Coraline getting rid of the Beldam's hand that escaped from the Other World in search of the corridor's key and Coraline herself, to drag her down to the Other Mother. This becomes

essential when tackling Coraline's gothic coming-of-age and comparing the two works: inevitably, the film, by bringing Wybie into the story, eases the struggle that literary Coraline has to go through in her journey. The fact that literary Coraline is isolated and alone makes her gothic experience more frightening, whereas she has Wybie in the film to help counter the horrific elements that are at the core of the Other World. Therefore, Wybie can be defined as an ally archetype following Joseph Campbell's monomyth. Selick presents a more friendly environment by adding allies into the mix while maintaining the mentoring role of Miss Forcible and Miss Spink, who also guide Coraline providing her with the valuable and useful tool—the seeing stone—that she will need to escape the Other World just as it happens in the novel.

Paying attention to color and scenery in Selick's film, it seems as if the Real World is more gothic in terms of the frightening atmosphere and the apparent lack of life and color, as we can see in the following comparison between figure 3 and 4 of the same event happening in the two worlds at different times. As it can be observed in figure 3, Coraline's home in the Real World is dull, boring, with a color palette of cold tones that conveys an unwelcoming feeling.

Figure 3 Coraline having dinner in the Real World (Selick).

Contrary to this, figure 4 presents Coraline's home in the Other World with warm color tones, which presents a more welcoming and familiar atmosphere. The reason for this is because the Beldam feeds on Coraline's fears, anxieties, and unhappiness; besides, as has already been mentioned, this world is in fact a trap that has been designed specifically for Coraline. Here, the film adaptation pays special attention to every single detail, creating different feelings in the spectators through the choice of color tones, type of shot, and even the characterization of the different people involved in the scene, such as Coraline's Other Father wearing a red

robe—arguably a sign of his non-workaholic nature to completely contrast with Coraline's Real Father.

Figure 4 Coraline having dinner in the Other World (Selick).

The attention and care to detail in the film adaptation are such that even what, at first, might seem insignificant, can carry a strong meaning. An example of this can be found in the "Welcome home!" cake that Coraline's Other Mother has prepared for her.

Figure 5 "Welcome home!" cake in the Other World (Selick).

Again, with warm tones and a detailed shot, Selick presents a cake that superficially represents a gift for Coraline. The Beldam wants to take care of her and provide her with things she wished she had in the Real World. However, nothing is random: this cake features a double loop on the lower-case O in the term 'home'. Considering the popular graphology's interpretation of this, a double loop on a lower-case O means that the person who wrote it is actually lying (Raghavendra 103). However, there is no double loop on the lower-case O in the term 'Welcome'. Thus, the cake means that Coraline is truly welcomed in the Other World, but she is not home. This element can arguably be interpreted as a feature foreshadowing the dangers that Coraline will be facing along her adventure in the Other World.

One last significant element to be considered in this analysis is the door and the corridor through which Coraline has access to the Other World. While literary Coraline finds her way through a "big, carved, brown, wooden door at the far corner of the drawing room" (Gaiman 8), cinematic Coraline finds a tiny door in one of the walls of the living room, after the little stuffed doll that we saw in the credit scene mysteriously disappears from the table where Coraline left her and reappears exactly in front of the small door next to the chimney, as we can observe in figure 6.

Figure 6 Coraline follows a mouse that gets into the small door at night discovering the corridor (Selick).

Even though when Coraline's mother opened the door for her—as a deal for Coraline to "zip it" and leave her alone to her work—it revealed a wall of bricks, at night a little mouse guides Coraline again to the door, just as the stuffed doll previously did, only to actually find the corridor behind. The symbolism that the corridor holds in both works is incredibly significant as one of the essential gothic elements that differ from one work to the other.

In the novel, the corridor is first described attending to its smell, "a cold, musty smell […] like something very old and very slow" (Gaiman 26), with red carpet beneath her feet, just the same carpet she had at her new home. It seems like a pretty small corridor. However, later in the narrative, Coraline describes a dark hallway behind the old wooden door as

> an uphill run [that] went on for a longer distance than anything could possibly go. The wall she was touching felt warm and yielding now, and, she realized, it felt as it were covered in a fine downy fur. It moved, as if it were taking a breath. She snatched her hand away from it. (Gaiman 135)

Thus, this element seems to be alive or, at least, to change as the story develops. The fact that Coraline's fear is derived from the corridor being warm is interesting, as one would expect a dark corridor to be cold, just as it was described the first time. This warmth makes it quite uncanny by virtue of being an unexpected trait. Furthermore, combined with the "fur", and the movement that the narrative compares to "taking a breath" the corridor is portrayed as being alive. These details provided by Gaiman in the novel can be used to argue that the corridor emulates having Coraline eaten, maybe walking down the corridor's 'throat'. Additionally, following the novel, Coraline "knew that if she fell in that corridor she might never get up again. Whatever that corridor was was older by far than the other mother. It was deep, and slow, and it knew that she was there" (Gaiman 136). These passages present another level of horror, where the corridor is defined as another grotesque, evil being that makes Coraline struggle on her way out and seems to grow creepier the more scared Coraline gets. In fact, there are two possible readings of these passages: either the corridor is used as a literary device to let the readers know how scared Coraline is on her journeys, or the corridor is actually evil and alive just like the Beldam. In other words, the second quote, through Coraline's eyes, provides the corridor with a conscience. It is particularly significant and interesting that Coraline believes that the corridor is older than the Beldam, because it makes the readers question whether the Beldam is really that powerful or if this monstrous corridor was in control all along. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, the symbolism that the corridor holds is analyzed as a metaphor for how scary growing up is. Coraline's fears and anxieties have grown throughout the story, since she has had to take responsibility and be brave enough to save her parents from the Beldam. Inevitably, though expressed through a gothic narrative, she is growing up. The more she steps into the unknown, the feeling of fear and uncanny are intensified, so the corridor might just be reproducing Coraline's subconscious.

To finish with this section, the passageway to the Other World is adapted in the cinematic version as a corridor through which Coraline has to crawl every time. However, it also changes along with the story. The corridor during the first part of the movie is presented as pretty and appealing, but slowly fades into a cluttered crawl space as the story progresses and Coraline travels back and forth. Figures 7 and 8 show the corridor at two different points in the film.

Figure 7 Coraline crawling through the corridor for the first time (Selick).

Figure 8 Coraline running back home after escaping the Beldam (Selick).

Here, it is also significant to remark how the moods of the two different scenes are changed, not only due to the appearance of the corridor itself but also because of elements inherent to the audiovisual medium. In figure 7, Coraline has just discovered the corridor, and the color palette is combined with sound effects similar to fairies flying around. In figure 8, the corridor has completely lost its life and color, it is full of messy stuff around it and covered in spider webs. Moreover, this scene in particular holds greater horrific elements such as the Beldam repeatedly shouting "Don't leave me!" while not only pounding the door but also reducing

the corridor's length as if it were to eat Coraline, just like the feeling readers get in Gaiman's novel, but adapted to the screen. To conclude, a small door can very well provide the spectators with a sense of uncanny and dread, for it is not something common, it actually stands out as something suspicious and out of place. It could also be argued, relating it to children's literature and the lack of adults, that it is an element necessarily aimed at children. In other words, it is possible to argue that the film focuses more on the child as the target of the gothic.

III. Comparative Analysis of the Gothic Elements

Having delved into the important elements and differences in each of the texts, this section is devoted to discussing how cinematic Coraline appears as more naïve, how foreshadowing is used differently, and also the impact of Wybie's character in Coraline's coming-of-age and the reception of the gothic elements in the spectators. The lack of adults, or the lack of competent care, is arguably a strong point of comparison between the novel and the film since Campbell's hero's journey monomyth is presented differently in each of the texts. Two characters that maintain their archetype roles are Miss Forcible and Miss Spink as mentors, who aid Coraline indirectly, before she is even aware of the danger she will find herself in, by providing her with an essential tool to escape and see the true nature of the Other World. Despite this, they are not able to take up the role of allies for Coraline when she tries to find them after her parents have been kidnapped. On the one hand, in Gaiman's work, the black cat is both a mentor and an ally of Coraline throughout the story by not only physically helping Coraline struggle with the rats and the Beldam itself, but also psychologically, by making Coraline ask herself questions that will aid her facing and overcoming her fears preparing her for the catharsis of the story. On the other hand, Selick's work constructs a doubling of the black cat by adding Wybie into the film.

A clear example of how the addition of Wybie, with the role of ally for Coraline in both worlds, is significant in the perception of Coraline's gothic narrative can be observed in the ending of the film. This is also central in the comparison, for it is what shows to what extent Coraline has, as a character, developed, matured, or changed after her adventure. While the novel shows Coraline as being brave, resourceful, and wise from the very beginning—she notices that the Beldam's hand has followed her into the Real World and she is able to patiently wait and plan how to trap it on her own—, the movie delivers a rather more improvised situation in which Wybie helps Coraline getting rid of the Beldam's hand, to which Coraline was completely oblivious. This change in the story falls in the 'boy saves girl' narrative paradigm.

In both works, the archetype of the shapeshifter is used in the Other World through the different creations of the Beldam, which represent unstable or shifting characters that mislead Coraline and act as a catalyst of change by bringing in doubt and suspense. As an example of this, we find Coraline's Other Father, Other Miss Forcible, and Other Miss Spink. Gaiman's work pays more attention to detail in description, while Selick's work delivers the same

uncanny feeling by adding sound effects, lighting, and the physical characterization of the decaying nature of the Beldam's creations. Despite these elements, Wybie remains the main difference between the two texts in terms of character roles.

Coraline's gothic coming-of-age in the film adaptation is thus inevitably different from the original. Even if Selick's work delivers a great adaptation of Gaiman's story into the big screen, the book still allows for greater room for gothic elements, or a major influence of the gothic in Coraline's coming of age since the novel leaves more to the imagination eliciting uncanny images in the reader. Arguably, both works make use of the uncanny and the gothic genre as the setting for Coraline's adventure and her development as a child. Furthermore, in both versions of Coraline's story, the notion that children's literature holds a moralizing value can be traced. The decision of making the story a bit more cheerful and have goofy characters, such as Wybie, allows the film to be more appealing to a wider audience. Moreover, the notion that Coraline is constantly navigating and exploring in a subconscious way to escape her boring reality is crucial to both versions of the story. As a premise, she felt like her parents did not pay attention to her and that she can find the exact opposite on the other side of the corridor. In the Other World, her negative feelings and emotions are released when in touch with the gothic, fantastic dimension she deals with, and her intelligence is engaged. Thus, Coraline's adventurous nature is enhanced in her journey back and forth to the Other World and in her quest to save her parents from the Beldam. Her exploration of the Other World is cathartic and, as a result of her contact with this gothic reality, Coraline returns home a more mature child, having understood, for example, the value of her family.

Another significant difference between the two texts is how readers and spectators receive said value of family and love. Arguably, the film makes it more evident that Coraline was not mature enough to understand her parent's needs in terms of, for example, working or what moving houses meant for them concerning stress. Coraline comes back home with a lesson learned, which is that loving parents would not allow her to do whatever she wishes every day at all times, nor pay her full attention constantly. In the novel, while Coraline was at first not comfortable with her neighbors—who were not able to even get her name right, as they repeatedly called her "Caroline"—she comes back to give a tight hug to Miss Spink, who says, "'What an extraordinary child' […] No one had hugged her like that since she had retired from the theater" (Gaiman 161). Coraline's growth in the novel is observed through her subtle gestures with her family and those who surround her, whereas Coraline's growth in the film is more evidently hinted in, for example, her complete change of attitude towards Wybie—who at first she could not even stand.

The devices distinctive of dark fantasy and gothic narratives are fundamental in the construction of such an evolution, allowing the readers to grasp and recognize themselves in Coraline's situation. Eventually, young readers will follow her development as a character and observe the progressive construction of a "new" Coraline that is presented as not only more mature but also more appreciative of the world that surrounds her. Thus, the moral is

that imperfection is inherent in life, and that the idealization of love does not have any good consequences. Additionally, Coraline's perception of her parents' treatment and her overall situation was distorted by the "trauma" of moving to a new house, which might imply a loss of security for children, as they lose sight of the world as they know it—their city, their friends, school, etc.; this is also part of the lesson she learns in the end, how to adapt to a new reality and face uncomfortable changes. In short, while Gaiman's text focuses on Coraline and her growth, Selick's film draws on conventional narrative paradigms such as the already mentioned "boy saves girl," and the family coming back together.

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THE CLOSE-UP EYE ASYMMETRY VISUAL METAPHOR COMMUNICATES THE ABJECT: EVIDENCE FROM BATMAN AND SUPERMAN COMICS

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ABSTRACT

A distinctive theme of Gothic narratives is the abject. A character that is abject threatens to disrupt boundaries, both personal and societal. As such, the abject character must be rejected or destroyed by society. In this study, I propose that the visual metaphor of Close-Up Eye Asymmetry (CUE-A) communicates the concept of the abject in Gothic narratives. I then investigate this proposal by comparing how often CUE-A is used when depicting Batman compared to Superman in comic books. Overall, I provide evidence that: (1) Batman is more Gothic than Superman, (2) Batman is more abject than Superman, and (3) Batman is depicted with CUE-A more often than Superman. Taken together, this shows that CUE-A co-occurs with the concept of the abject in Gothic narratives, supporting the idea that the CUE-A visual metaphor does, in fact, communicate the abject in Gothic narratives.

Keywords: Gothic, visual metaphor, abjection, Batman, Superman

A distinctive theme of Gothic narratives is the idea of the abject character. During the process of socialization, a person is taught what is and what is not socially acceptable. To be accepted into society, a person undergoes a process that casts off what society deems unclean, disorderly, repulsive, or antisocial. "This process is termed abjection, and all the putatively improper stuff which the subject aims at casting off constitutes the abject" (Cavallaro 199).

There are numerous ways to communicate that a character is abject in a Gothic narrative. For instance, a character could be both dead and alive, as many of the classic Gothic monsters are, such as vampires, zombies, and mummies (Caroll 32). In this study, I will propose another way to communicate that a character is abject: the visual metaphor of Close-Up Eye

Asymmetry (CUE-A). CUE-A consists of the combination of depicting a character as close in proximity to the viewer (i.e., "Close-Up") while simultaneously depicting asymmetry focused on or around the character's eyes (i.e., "Eye Asymmetry"). I will provide evidence supporting the idea that CUE-A is used in American comics to communicate the abject by comparing its use in depicting Batman (a Gothic superhero) with Superman (a non-Gothic superhero).

I. The Abject

The abject "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). The behaviors of, and often the mere existence of, the abject character threatens to disrupt boundaries, both personal and societal. Because of this, the abject needs to be removed to preserve those boundaries (Skott 389). There are many features typical to the abject, including: (1) being interstitial or crossing boundaries, (2) its personification as monsters, (3) a lowly nature, (4) being threatening to the self and societal norms, and (5) needing to be rejected or destroyed.

1.1. Being Interstitial or Crossing Boundaries

In Gothic narratives, the abject is often portrayed as having certain characteristics, one of them being that it exists across boundaries. The abject refers to an admixed phenomenon (Hurley 144), that is to say a combination of characteristics that exist across borders from each other or at opposite ends of binarisms. Examples of Gothic characters that admix include the "wild-man" (a human who crosses the boundary of civilized/savage), the "dog-faced boy" (admixing animal/human features), and the "hermaphrodite" (combining opposite ends of the male/female binary) (Hurley 139). It is important to note that the abject does not simply shift between categories or move along a binary, rather the abject exists in both categories simultaneously (Cavallaro 202).

1.2. Personification of the Abject as Monsters

The Gothic monster can be considered a personification of the abject (Skott 390). Many monsters in Gothic horror are interstitial, occupying the spaces between categories, or contradictorily, embodying disparate categories at the same time (Caroll 32). Archetypal Gothic monsters often cross orthodox boundaries. These boundaries can include natural physical boundaries such as dead/alive (e.g., "undead" vampires, zombies) and animal/human (e.g. werewolves), or can also be societal boundaries, such as good/evil (e.g., Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, Frankenstein's monster). Gothic monsters are often both perpetrator and victim: they are dangerous and often violent, but they can also themselves be the victims of natural or social circumstances (Skott 390; Sothcott 443). As such, many Gothic monsters are manifestations of the abject (Cavallaro 202), with their transgressive behavior that rebels against societal norms often emphasized in Gothic narratives (Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 21).

1.3. A Lowly Nature

Somewhat related to the idea of the Gothic monster as a personification of the abject, the nature or content of the abject is always loathsome or grotesque (Hurley 144), thereby giving the abject a lowly and/or miserable existence. The admixing that occurs in the abject often combines social ideals that are considered "high" (e.g., civilized, human, living) with those that are considered "low" (e.g., savage, animal, dead). This degradation of lofty ideals to a lower level is a feature of the grotesque (Hurley 138; Bakhtin 19), and a consequence of the admixing characteristic of the abject.

1.4. Being Threatening to the Self and Societal Norms

By crossing boundaries and admixing binaries, the abject weakens the barriers between categories, threatening to destroy the borders keeping them separate. This weakening of borders, in turn, threatens our shared identity (cultural, national, and societal) as well as our sense of self (Skott 389). Indeed, the origin of the abject, deriving from a failure of abjection, comes directly from "abortive socializing processes" (Cavallaro 199). The failure of being socialized, this inability to be processed and categorized into agreed upon concepts and identities, undermines these crucial binarisms and categorical distinctions of society (Hurley 139).

1.5. Needing to be Rejected or Destroyed

This threat to self and shared identity produces the need to reject or destroy the abject. Disgust for the abject leads to abjection, thereby causing the rejection of these subjects that cross the boundaries between categories (Conroy 106). As mentioned previously, in order to be accepted into society and take part in a shared identity, the individual must discard "everything which culture perceives as unclean, disorderly, asocial or antisocial." (Cavallaro 199). This discarding of the abject serves to protect the culturally shared ideas and concepts, the agreed upon boundaries and binarisms. This abjection even occurs at the level of selfhood, when the self, in an effort to maintain independence, must also be protected from the *other*. This can lead to the abjection of intimate attachments to assure the self-determination (i.e., independence, agency, individuality) of the self (Cavallaro 204).

II. Possible Visual Metaphor for the Abject: Close-Up Eye Asymmetry

2.1. Visual Metaphor

In Gothic narratives, the abject nature of a character can be described using literal and/or metaphorical devices. In Gothic literature, an example of a literal device is a description of the physical body of an interstitial Gothic monster, like the werewolf, that crosses the boundaries of human/animal. An example of a metaphorical device could be having a character live in a dark and foreboding manor on the outskirts of town. While there is no boundary being

crossed here (i.e., living in a manor is accepted by society), the metaphor is that concrete features of the manor, namely being "dark" and located on the "outskirts" of the town, map onto abstract features of the character, indicating that they are somehow also "dark" and "outside" of society.

Traditionally, metaphor was thought to be solely a linguistic or literary device. In contrast, conceptual metaphor theory proposes that this process of mapping similarities among concepts is a function of the human cognitive system (Lakoff and Johnson 159). As a cognitive process, metaphor can also be used in non-linguistic mediums such as pictures, producing visual metaphors, which can be used in Gothic narratives to communicate to an audience that a character is abject. One such possible visual metaphor is Close-Up Eye Asymmetry (CUE-A).

2.2. Close-Up Eye Asymmetry

CUE-A is a visual metaphor that is used extensively in the comic book medium (Juricevic 4). It consists of the combination of depicting a character as being physically close to the viewer (i.e., "Close-Up"), while simultaneously depicting asymmetry focused on or around the character's eyes (i.e., "Eye Asymmetry"). The cover of *Detective Comics* #716 (December 1997) provides an example of CUE-A, with Batman shown as being close to the observer and asymmetry around Batman's eyes being caused by his scowled facial expression and shadows (see fig. 1 left panel). This can be contrasted with the cover of *Action Comics* #676 (April 1992), which does not make use of the CUE-A visual metaphor. Here, while Superman is depicted as being close to the observer (though admittedly not as close as the Batman example), there is little to no asymmetry around Superman's eyes, even though he has a similarly scowled facial expression (see fig. 1 right panel).

Figure 1

On the left, Batman depicted using CUE-A on the cover of *Detective Comics* #716 (December 1997).

On the right, Superman on the cover of *Action Comics* #676 (April 1992) is not depicted with CUE-A.

Further examples of the use of CUE-A can be readily found in Batman's rogues' gallery (see fig. 2). These examples highlight the great variety of ways that CUE-A can be implemented, including by use of objects, facial disfigurement, hair and make-up, lighting, and character collage.

Figure 2 Some examples of how CUE-A can be implemented, including:

- top: the Joker's camera (top left), Bane's torn mask (middle), Two-Face's disfigurement (right)
- center: Harley Quinn's hair and make-up (left), the Scarecrow's missing right pupil and shading (middle), the Penguin's monocle and shading (right)
- bottom: the Riddler's hair and shading (left), Batman partially occluding Mr. Freeze in collage (middle), and the Joker partially occluding Catwoman in collage (right)

If CUE-A can be understood as a visual metaphor, it must communicate different concepts about the depicted character. What are these concepts? An analysis of the structure of CUE-A using conceptual metaphor theory (Forceville 91) and visual design theory (Kress and van Leeuwen 3) reveals the nature of this visual metaphor.

First, let us consider conceptual metaphor theory. According to conceptual metaphor theory, a visual device can be metaphorical if the viewer experiences "one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 5), such as experiencing action lines as path-of-movement indicators (Carello et al. 43). This experience often involves understanding abstract and/or complex phenomena in terms of concrete phenomena (Forceville 92). Applying conceptual metaphor theory to CUE-A suggests that the viewer experiences the concrete phenomenon of *asymmetry* to understand the abstract concept of *other*. Specifically, the literally represented asymmetry of a character's eye (the "Eye Asymmetry" part of CUE-A) is used metaphorically to communicate that the character is *other* (i.e., apart from human society, somehow not like the rest of us). This metaphor is understood by the viewer partly because our embodied minds (Johnson 100) have experienced, while living on Earth, bilateral symmetry in the majority of animals, human beings included (Finnerty 1174).

Additionally, symmetry is especially important in human faces. Neuropsychological research has shown that disfigured faces suppress both empathy and social cognition in the viewer, leading to the dehumanization of the disfigured individual (Hartung et al. 4). In other words, asymmetry in the face (in this research, through disfiguration) causes the disfigured person to be dehumanized (i.e., made *other)* by society. This dehumanization is, in effect, a perceived admixing of human and nonhuman categories, leading to the perception of the disfigured individual as interstitial. The suppressed empathy and social cognition further leads to the disfigured individual being easily judged as possessing an intrinsically evil nature and/or moral failings. As a result of this perceived admixing of high societal values (i.e., human) with low societal values (i.e., nonhuman/animal), the disfigured individual is judged as having degraded lofty ideals to a lower level, thereby becoming loathsome or grotesque (Hurley 144). In summary, according to conceptual metaphor theory, the abstract concept of *other* could be expressed in terms of the concrete concept of *asymmetry*, and this would be especially powerful for facial asymmetry.

An analysis of the visual design used in CUE-A leads to additional metaphorical interpretations. Specifically, the size of the image frame relative to the subject and their depicted physical distance are used to communicate the subject's kinship with the viewer. Analyzing the visual design structure of CUE-A indicates that we experience the concrete phenomenon of *closeness* to understand the abstract concept of *kinship*. Presenting the character at a close physical distance indicates that the character is inviting involvement from the viewer, that they are equal in power to the viewer, and a part of their world (Kress and van Leeuwen 125-126). In other words, the literally represented physical closeness (the "Close-Up" part of CUE-A) is used metaphorically to communicate that the character is akin to us (i.e., part of human

society, somehow like the rest of us). In sum, according to conceptual metaphor theory and visual design theory, depicting a character using CUE-A implies that the character is simultaneously like the viewer (i.e., *kinship*) and also unlike the viewer (i.e., *other*), thus indicating that the character exists in these two categories at the same time.

2.3. CUE-A Could Communicate the Abject

The conceptual metaphor theory and visual design theory analysis of CUE-A suggests that it is strongly positioned to communicate that a character is abject. As previously stated, the abject "does not respect borders, positions, rules" and is "The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 4). Further, the abject threatens the self and must be discarded, that is, made to be *other* (Cavallaro 199). As such, CUE-A could communicate the abject since it crosses the boundary of *kinship*/*other*, admixing these two opposite ends of the binary. Further, by combining these two opposite concepts, CUE-A threatens the integrity of the self, thereby requiring that it be discarded through abjection. In sum, the CUE-A visual metaphor is strongly positioned to communicate to a viewer that a character is abject.

III. Does CUE-A Communicate the Abject?

Even though CUE-A could communicate the abject, is it actually used in this way? And, if so, is it actually used in Gothic narratives? The purpose of this study now turns to determining if CUE-A is used to communicate the abject in Gothic narratives. To test this, I looked at whether the CUE-A visual metaphor is used more extensively in American comics in which Gothic modes are pervasive compared to those which lack Gothic features. Specifically, I analyze the use of CUE-A in comics featuring Batman (which make pervasive use of Gothic modes) versus those featuring Superman (which contain very few, if any, Gothic features). The argument underlying this study is as follows:

> Premise 1: Batman is more Gothic than Superman
>
> Premise 2: Batman is more abject than Superman
>
> Premise 3: Batman is depicted with CUE-A more often than Superman
>
> Conclusion: CUE-A is used to communicate the abject in Gothic narratives.

3.1. Premise 1: Batman is More Gothic than Superman

While it may be difficult to define what is or is not Gothic consistently (Round 11), there are elements that are characteristic of the Gothic theme. Representative Gothic characteristics include, but are not limited to, the pervasive presence of fear, the monstrous, the other, the uncanny, the constant infringement of the past into the present, as well as oppressive architecture (Jensen 92) and the erosion of boundaries (Skott 387). The general consensus is that Batman is a Gothic character. Batman is considered to be "the first major gothic superhero in

comic books" (Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 19), with a definite "Gothic sensibility" (Fitch 208). Batman's mythos is "about the pressing of Gothic Fear into the service of heroic Justice" (Fisher), thus making "Batman's story… truly a *gothic* one" (Jensen 92).

Even though Batman is considered to be a Gothic character, the rational for this study requires that Batman also be "more Gothic" than Superman. In other words, this study requires that the tropes fundamental to the Batman mythos contain more Gothic features than the Superman mythos. To this end, Batman can essentially be viewed as the Gothic double of Superman's straightforward superhero ideal (Monnet 96). In fact, Batman can be thought of as a Gothic reaction to the enlightened ideals that Superman represents (Bukatman 205). That Batman is actually more Gothic than Superman can be further demonstrated by analyzing various aspects of both characters, and highlighting how Batman's character uses more of the commonly recurring Gothic narrative devices and themes than Superman's.

First, Batman's visual appearance is more Gothic than Superman's (see fig. 3). Batman's look was based on a staple character of Gothic narratives, the vampire (Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 23-24). Batman's costume was specifically designed to "strike terror into their [criminals'] hearts" (Finger and Kane). Terror is a basic element of Gothic narratives (Skott 387). This element of terror combined with the similarities to vampires gives Batman's costume "an inherent Gothic sensibility to it" (Fitch 208). On the other hand, Superman's brightly colored costume was inspired by classical heroes and performing strongmen (Andrae "Of Supermen" 14), with the "S" insignia variously standing for "Superman" (Andrae "Of Supermen" 14), "Hope" (Waid), and "Stronger Together" ("Stronger Together").

Figure 3 Batman and Superman depicted together on the covers of *Batman/Superman* #1 and #19.

On both covers, Superman's costume is brightly colored and he is positioned in the light, while Batman's costume is darkly colored and he is positioned in the shadows. The Gothic vampire influences on Batman's costume are especially prominent given the use of dramatic shadows (left) and how Batman is holding his Batarangs to give the appearance of claw-like hands (right).

Second, Batman's origin story is more Gothic than Superman's. Batman's origin story revolves around the murder of his parents when he was a young boy, which is a Gothic theme as "Gothic tales often linger on the characters' memories of a traumatic and shattering encounter" (Bruhm 268). The trauma from the murder of his parents is continually returned to and has become part of the basic psychology of Batman (Sanna 34). Batman's memories often linger on the murder of his parents, revisiting this tragedy in comics, animated cartoons, and movies. In contrast, Superman's memories rarely linger on the death of his Kryptonian birth parents, whom he did not grow up with. Furthermore, while his adoptive father died in *Action Comics* #870 (December 2008), 69 years after Superman's debut, his mother is still very much alive and a guiding influence on him.

Third, the spaces that Batman inhabits are more Gothic than those Superman inhabits, including Gotham City, Wayne Manor, and the Batcave. Batman protects Gotham City, while Superman defends Metropolis. The characterization of Gotham City further links Batman to the Gothic genre (Sanna 35). In fact, Gotham City is a "liminal city" that is "indicative of the urban Gothic" (McCrystal 316, see fig. 4, left panel). Extending its Gothic aesthetic, Gotham City is described as containing "Gargoyles to frighten people onto the path of righteousness, rounded edges to confuse the malevolent beings, thick walls to lock in virtue' (Grant and Breyfogle 20–21). This is in direct opposition to the superior quality and more modern cityscape of Metropolis with its "orientation towards the future not the past" (Cremers 144, see fig. 4, right panel). Indeed, Gotham City is the dark Gothic reflection of the bright and ideal Metropolis (Fitch 214).

Figure 4

On the left, Gotham City's Gothic features include dark shadows, gargoyles, and crumbling edifices.

On the right, Metropolis is depicted as a much more modern city, with a brighter and more vibrant skyline.

Batman's civilian residence is Wayne Manor, an ominous, opulent mansion located on the outskirts of Gotham City (Knox, see fig. 5, top left panel). Wayne Manor is 150 years old, and usually depicted with characteristic Gothic elements such as dark hallways, towering libraries, shadowy recesses, and even a vast array of caverns underneath the mansion (i.e., the Batcave, discussed below, see fig. 5, top right panel). As mentioned previously when discussing metaphors in literature, the concrete features of Wayne Manor, namely being "dark" and located on the "outskirts" of the town, map onto abstract features of Batman, indicating that he is also somehow "dark" and "outside" of society. Once more, this can be contrasted with Superman's non-Gothic civilian residence, an apartment in a high-rise complex located at 344 Clinton Street in the heart of Metropolis ("344 Clinton Street", see fig. 5, bottom left panel). An even greater contrast is found in Superman's more recent apartment that he shares with Lois Lane, with its open concept and abundant natural lighting (see fig. 5, bottom right panel).

Figure 5

. Top: Wayne Manor's exterior (left) and interior room (right).

. Bottom: Superman's original apartment's exterior (left) and a view of his and Lois' new apartment's interior (right).

Batman's superhero headquarters, the Batcave, is "inherently Gothic" (Fitch 207). It is a space that admixes the ancient and the new, combining "rocky walls and a state-of-the-art crime laboratory" (Reinhart 20, see fig. 6, left panel). Even its location incorporates classic Gothic elements, being analogous to a gloomy dungeon located under a Gothic castle (Wayne Manor). This is in direct opposition to Superman's superhero headquarters, the Fortress of Solitude. The Fortress of Solitude is a glittering structure, housing advanced, crystal-based technology from Krypton (see fig. 6, right panel). It is also located somewhere in the lofty summits of the Arctic Mountains, rather than in the depths of an underground cave.

Figure 6

On the left, Batman seated at his computer in the Batcave.

On the right, Superman seated at his Kryptonian computer in the Fortress of Solitude.

Finally, even Batman's rogues' gallery is more Gothic than Superman's (see fig. 7). "The Gothic mode has also been, from Batman's beginning, particularly present in the recurring villains of the series" (Monnet 102). Writers and artists created sympathetic villains for Batman who were themselves also victims (e.g., the Joker, Bane, the Penguin, and Two-Face), a common theme for Gothic villains (Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 29). Given that Batman's crime fighting motivations also stem from past trauma, this further serves to blur the boundaries between good (the hero Batman) and evil (his rogues' gallery). Many of Batman's rogues exemplify the Gothic mode by being physically deformed (e.g., Clayface, Killer Croc), mentally deranged (e.g., the Mad Hatter, the Ventriloquist), or having grotesquely disfigured faces (e.g., the Joker, Two-Face) (Monnet 102). Delving further into Gothic motifs, many of Batman's villains are creatures "utterly different from normal man: a vampire, an atavism, a degenerate, closer to apes and savages and rodents" (Skott 386), such as Killer Croc or one of Batman's earliest foes, the vampire/werewolf Monk (Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 21). These characteristics of Batman's rogues differ greatly from Superman's. Superman's villains tend to be less physically deformed or grotesque (e.g., the entirely human Lex Luthor, or Superman's fellow Kryptonian, General Zod). Even Superman's alien villains that deviate from a human appearance tend to be less composite and more completely alien, not crossing boundaries between human and alien (e.g., Brainiac, Darkseid, Doomsday).

Figure 7

. Batman's villains tend to have grotesquely disfigured faces (Two-Face and the Joker, top left and center) compared to Superman's villains (Lex Luthor, top right).

. Batman's villains tend to be physically deformed (Clayface and Killer Croc, middle left and center) compared to Superman's villains (General Zod, middle right).

. Batman's villains are often themselves also victims (the Penguin and Bane, bottom left and center) compared to Superman's villains (Brainiac, bottom right).

3.2. Premise 2: Batman is more Abject than Superman

After demonstrating that Batman is Gothic and, importantly for our purposes, unquestionably more Gothic than Superman, the next step in the argument is to show that Batman is more

abject than Superman. An abject character is one that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 4). Previously, several characteristics of the abject were enumerated, which are now recalled to show that Batman possesses these characteristics to a greater extent than Superman.

3.2.1. Being Interstitial or Crossing Boundaries

Batman's character is defined by his "tensions and paradoxes" (Monnet 99), crossing boundaries across a variety of dimensions. For example, Batman is a hero but also an outlaw, often accepted as an honorary member of the police force while still engaging in illegal vigilante actions (Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 28). And even though Batman's actions are illegal, they are paradoxically dedicated to the return of law and order to Gotham (Sanna 42). On the other hand, although Superman also engages in vigilante actions, he remains respectful of the law and attempts at all times to comply with authorities (Nicolas 15-16). Superman can be thought of as a part of the American justice system, fighting for "truth, justice, and the American way" (Wandtke 178).

Batman is often suggested to also cross sexual and romantic boundaries. Questions surrounding Batman's sexuality have persisted throughout his publication history. This has often occurred because of Robin (Monnet 100), with questions arising whether the nature of their relationship is sexual/platonic, heterosexual/homosexual, and legal/illegal (Dick Grayson was 10 years old when he became Robin). This similarly occurs in Batman's complex relationship to the Joker, who has at times referred to Batman as "darling" and "my sweet" ("Batman: The Dark Knight Returns", Miller 141, 150), and outright admitted that he loves Batman ("Batman: Death of the Family", Nocenti and Sandoval 92). No such questions arise regarding Superman's sexuality, as his heterosexual relationship with Lois has been a stable part of his publication history.

Batman's appearance also crosses boundaries, "most notably (and alarmingly) breaking down the distinction between human and inhuman, human and animal." (Hurley 137). Even his name, "Batman", suggests the crossing of the animal/human binary (Fisher). Superman's name suggests no such crossing of boundaries, but rather the peak fulfillment of humanities greatest ambitions (Wandtke 56). Further, Batman even crosses his own boundaries, having changed in his presentation over the years "between dark and light versions, intensely alone and sometimes slightly mad (dark version), or playful and energetic as he dance/fights alongside his young sidekick (light version)." (Monnet 101). Superman's appearance, in comparison, has remained relatively stable throughout his publication history, with very brief changes made for specific storytelling purposes (e.g., his Black suit to aid his recovery in the "The Return of Superman" story arc, Stern and Guice 11).

3.2.2. Personification as a Monster

Batman is essentially a Gothic monster. As mentioned previously, the Gothic monster can be seen as a personification of the abject (Skott 390), with many monsters in Gothic horror being admixed (Caroll 32). The admixed nature of Batman (i.e., mixing human/animal) suggests his monstrous character. In fact, in his own mythos, Batman is a self-created Gothic monster (Fisher), assuming the appearance of a hostile, supernatural creature (i.e., the vampire, Sanna 38; Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 23-24). Batman even employs the tactics of a horror monster, attacking at night and from the shadows (Sanna 39). Finally, Sara Skott observed that "The monster, in the Gothic imagination, is representative of social traumas, for which it is also blamed." (389). This is undoubtedly true for Batman, for not only is his origin tied directly to the murder of his parents (i.e., social traumas), but Batman is often blamed for the proliferation of costumed villains in Gotham City. Superman, by contrast, was not based on monsters but rather on epic heroes such as Samson and Hercules (Wandtke 58). He is the complete opposite of a Gothic monster, representing instead the realization of human perfection (Nicolas 122).

3.2.3. A Lowly Nature

Batman has an inherently lowly nature, especially when compared to his fellow superheroes. The nature of the abject is always loathsome or grotesque (Hurley 144), and Batman modeled his appearance on a bat, bringing the high ideal of the costumed superhero low by admixing it with what is typically thought of as a loathsome creature. On the other hand, Superman's appearance was modeled on the American flag, suggesting a merging of Superman's ideals with what is best about America (Gordon 41). "Superman stood for civility, tolerance, and the struggle to extend just who was tolerated." (Gordon 48). Batman himself is often reminded by friends and foes that he is simply a human with no superpowers. His very categorization as a superhero crosses the boundary regularly used to define "superhero". The Oxford Languages dictionary defines "superhero" as "a benevolent fictional character with *superhuman powers, such as Superman*."("Definition of superhero in English"; emphasis added). Batman is merely a man, infusing a lowly nature into the heroic physical ideals of super men and wonder women. Superman, by contrast, is the very personification of those heroic physical ideals (Nicolas 122).

3.2.4. Being Threatening to the Self and Societal Norms

Batman's behavior and mere existence threatens the integrity of the self and societal norms. As mentioned previously, the abject weakens the borders of the self and societal norms. Batman, as the result of "abortive socializing processes", can be regarded as a failure of abjection (Cavallaro 199). Batman's ethics and methods are often described in shades of gray (Cates 834). His vigilante actions are in service to himself, rather than to the law: "For Batman, on the other hand, law enforcement authorities are tools in his war on crime. Like any tool, they are

to be used when needed and laid aside when they aren't." (Nicolas 16). Conversely, Superman, even when engaging in vigilante actions, attempts to comply with authorities whenever possible (Nicolas 15-16). Superman avoids the assumption that might makes right, and strives to be observant of the law whenever possible (Nicolas 48).

Further, "Bruce Wayne's alter ego [Batman] is intentionally constructed as the "Other", whose presence only apparently threatens to disturb the boundaries of civilization and rationality" (Sanna 33). Conversely, Clark Kent's alter ego (Superman) is constructed as representing the best of America (Gordon 41), fully integrating himself into American society and providing that society an inspirational example to strive for. By crossing boundaries and admixing binaries (hero/outlaw, human/animal, self/*other*), Batman's existence and behaviors weaken the walls between categories, threatening our shared identities (cultural, national, and societal) and our sense of self (Hurley 139; Skott 389). Superman's existence helps to shape and articulate our societal categories, especially for "truth, justice, and the American way" (Gordon 48).

3.2.5. Needing to be Rejected or Destroyed

It has already been argued that Batman both appears and behaves as a Gothic monster and, as such, is a threat to self and shared identity. The Gothic monster is unique from other forms of othering in Gothic narratives in that the monster must be destroyed (Skott 390). This feature of the abject, the requirement to be rejected or destroyed, is readily present in Batman. Batman is a vigilante, engaging in illegal activities, and has more than once been pursued by the police (Andrae "The Darkest Knight" 24). He lives in Wayne Manor, on the outskirts of Gotham City, apart from society (Knox). Even further, Batman spends much of his time alone in the Batcave. Batman has even been cast out of the Justice League for his actions (he was voted out of the Justice League following the events of "Tower of Babel", Waid and Hitch 2). Superman, on the other hand, represents "truth, justice, and the American way" (Wandtke 178). He lives in the heart of Metropolis, often cohabiting with Lois Lane. Lastly, Superman has never been voted out of the Justice League, rather he was the deciding vote that cast out Batman (following the events of "Tower of Babel", Waid and Hitch 2).

3.3. Premise 3: Batman is Depicted With CUE-A More Often Than Superman

Now that the Gothic and abject nature of Batman in comparison to Superman has been established, the penultimate step in the argument is to show that the CUE-A visual metaphor is used to depict Batman more often than Superman.

3.3.1. Method

A corpus analysis of comic book covers was completed to determine if CUE-A is used to depict Batman more often than Superman. Specifically, I analyzed the covers of both *Detective Comics* and *Action Comics* and identified instances where Batman or Superman, respectively, were

depicted using CUE-A. The covers selected spanned four decades from January 1960 to December 1999. The issues released during the selected period were *Detective Comics* #275-739 and specially numbered issues #0 and #1000000, and *Action Comics* #260-600 and #643-760. *Action Comics* #601-642 were excluded from the corpus analysis because they were rebranded as *Action Comics Weekly* and featured a variety of characters from the DC universe other than Superman. The selected dates ensured that the covers used in the corpus analysis: (1) spanned multiple American comic book ages (i.e., Silver Age 1956-1970, Bronze Age 1970-1985, and Modern Age 1985-Present), (2) featured a variety of different authors and artists on each book, and (3) included Batman's more Gothic period in the late 1960s and 1970s (Monnet 97).

For the analysis of the covers, "Close-Up" was operationally defined as a depiction of a character at a distance such that their entire body could not be visible in the frame of the image (see fig. 1). Note that this excluded instances when parts of the character's body would have been visible if they were not occluded (e.g., the character is distant but partly hidden behind a building) or were not out of frame. "Eye Asymmetry" was operationally defined to have occurred when both eyes were potentially visible (i.e., side profiles did not count as "Eye Asymmetry"), but one eye was either obscured (e.g., by hair, eye patch, etc.) or clearly depicted differently than the other eye (e.g., heavier shading, black eye, etc.).

Using these operational definitions, I reviewed the 467 *Detective Comics* covers and the 459 *Action Comics* covers for instances where Batman or Superman, respectively, were depicted using the CUE-A visual metaphor. Only depictions of Batman or Superman were used for this corpus analysis, no other characters were included.

3.3.2. Results

Covers of *Detective Comics* were given a score of "1" if they contained Batman and he was depicted using CUE-A. Covers were given a score of "0" if they contained Batman but he was not depicted using CUE-A. Lastly, covers were not included in the statistical analysis if Batman was not depicted on the cover. The analogous scoring system was used for Superman in *Action Comics*.

Of the 467 *Detective Comics* covers analyzed, 441 (94.4%) depicted Batman. Of these 441 covers, 29 (6.6%) depicted Batman using CUE-A (see fig. 8). Of the 459 *Action Comics* covers analyzed, 443 (96.5%) depicted Superman. Of these 443 covers, 17 (3.8%) depicted Superman using CUE-A (see fig. 8).

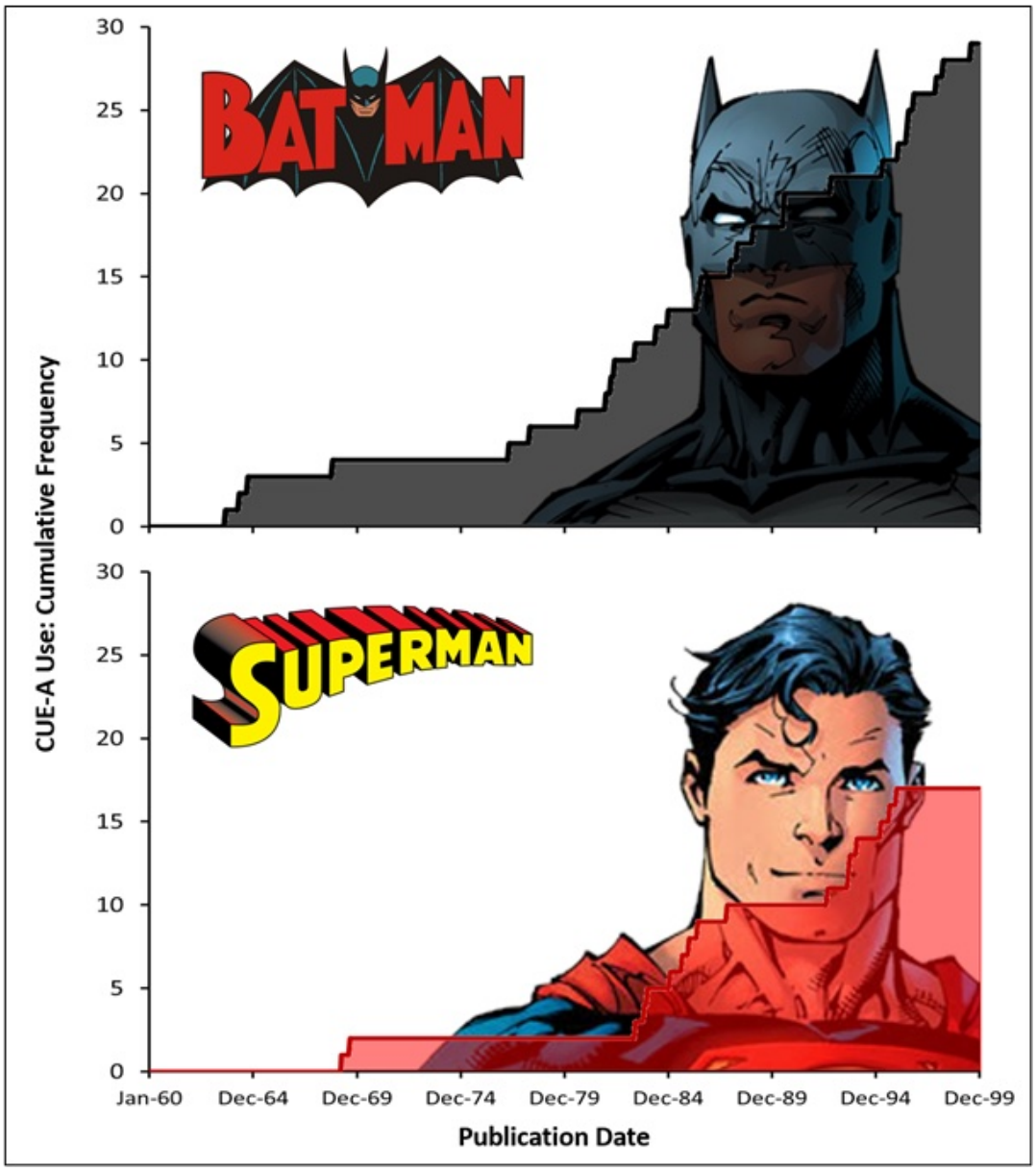

Figure 8

Cumulative frequencies for the use of the CUE-A visual metaphor when depicting Batman in *Detective Comics* and Superman in *Action Comics.*

. Top: Batman image taken from: Snyder, Scott and Tom King, writers, and Jim Lee, cover artist. *Batman: Rebirth.* Vol. 1, no. 1, Convention Exclusive Variant Cover, DC Comics, Aug. 2016. Batman logo from: Babies, Bronze Age. "Which Batman Logo Would You Prefer? Pic.twitter.com/hfjRN76NMf." *Twitter*, Twitter, 12 Dec. 2017, twitter.com/bronzeagebabies/status/940402140555743232.

. Bottom: Superman image taken from: Tomasi, Peter and Patrick Gleason, writers, and Jim Lee, cover artist. *Superman: Rebirth.* Vol. 1, no. 1, Convention Exclusive Variant Cover, DC Comics, Aug. 2016. Superman logo from: "Superman Logo The New 52, the Title Bar Design, Heroes, Text, Trademark Png." *PNGWing*, www.pngwing.com/en/free-png-yxqpr.

These scores were tested using a one-tailed independent means *t*-test. The *t*-test assessed if the difference found in the use of CUE-A is a real and reliable difference. It accomplishes this in a somewhat backwards manner, by actually calculating the probability that random variation caused the predicted higher use of CUE-A for Batman. In other words, it is possible that the difference in CUE-A use found in this study, 29 for Batman vs. 17 for Superman, was simply a lucky outcome and does not reflect how an abject character such as Batman is depicted in Gothic narratives. The *t*-test, however, indicated that there is only a 3.4% chance that these results are due to chance, $t(882) = 1.8$, $p = .034$. In other words, it is highly unlikely that the greater use of CUE-A for Batman compared to Superman is a lucky, random outcome. This, in turn, makes it highly likely that the greater use of CUE-A for Batman compared to Superman is a real and reliable difference.

IV. Conclusion: CUE-A Communicates the Abject in Gothic Narratives

The statistical analysis revealed that Batman is depicted using CUE-A more often than Superman. Given that Batman is portrayed with more Gothic and abject features than Superman, this supports the idea that the CUE-A visual metaphor communicates the concept *abject* in Gothic narratives. In other words, in a Gothic narrative, depicting a character as close to the viewer and with some sort of asymmetry about the eye could inform the viewer that the character is abject.

4.1. CUE-A Use Increases During Gothic Eras

Even though it was not explicitly tested in this study, further evidence that CUE-A communicates the abject can be found in how the use of CUE-A has increased over time. During the years included in the corpus analysis (1960-1999), there was a rapid increase in the use of the CUE-A visual metaphor when depicting Batman in two separate periods. The first occurred in the mid-70s and the second in the mid-90s (see fig. 8). The increase in the mid-70s coincided with "Batman's Gothic turn in the late 1960s and 1970s" (Monnet 97), when writer Dennis O'Neil and artist Neil Adams transitioned Batman away from the lighter, campier attitude that dominated the 50s and early 60s to a darker, more Gothic aesthetic (103). The second increase in CUE-A use, occurring in the mid-90s, coincided with the comic book's adoption of the Gothic aesthetic found in director Tim Burton's and artist Anton Furst's designs for the film *Batman* (1989). Tim Burton brought an extensively Gothic aesthetic to his work, having been heavily influenced by European fairytales and horror films (Fitch 208). Furst further articulated this aesthetic in his set designs for Gotham City. Burton's European fairytale influences helped to produce a more complex and ambivalent Batman (Hart 4), influencing Batman's portrayal in the comics. Furst's set designs for the *Batman* film heavily influenced the appearance of Gotham in the comics between 1992 and 1998 (Fitch 213). The influence of Furst's work was so great that some of his sketches for the *Batman* film were used as the

background art for covers of Batman comic books (Fitch 209). This augmented Gothic aesthetic in the Batman comics also served to produce a more Gothic tone to the stories written at that time (Fitch 213-214).

Surprisingly, there are also two periods where there was a rapid, although smaller, increase in the use of the CUE-A visual metaphor when depicting Superman. The first occurred in the early 80s and the second in the early 90s (see fig. 8). This may have been be due to Gothic influences on Superman's stories as well. Superman went through a reinvention in the early 80s, with the "final story" of the Golden Age Superman taking place in "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" (September 1986) written by Alan Moore, and Superman's reboot by John Byrne in "The Man of Steel" (July-September 1986). This may have shifted Superman's aesthetic to a more Gothic tone, as the character crossed between the boundaries of "death" (i.e., of the Golden Age Superman) and "rebirth" (i.e., into the Modern Age). Likewise, the second increase in CUE-A use, occurring in the early 90s, corresponded to another Superman "death", this time at the hands of Doomsday in the "Death of Superman" storyline (1992-93). Superman then returned once again (i.e., "rebirth") in "The Return!" (1993). Given the Gothic nature of admixing the dead and the living, the increased use of CUE-A to depict Superman during these two periods may have been directly caused by the more Gothic nature of those stories.

4.2. Future Research

This is the first study to provide evidence that CUE-A can be used as a visual metaphor for the abject in Gothic narratives. Further research is needed to determine if this finding generalizes across different Gothic mediums and narratives. Possible avenues for future research include: (1) other Gothic comic book characters in the superhero genre (e.g., DC's Deadman, Marvel's Moon Knight), (2) other Gothic comic book characters in other genres (e.g., DC's Dream from the *Sandman* comic, Roman Dirge's Lenore from *Lenore, the Cute Little Dead Girl*), (3) Gothic film (e.g., *Sleepy Hollow* [1999], *The Witch* [2015]), and (4) Gothic still art (e.g., Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* [1781], C. Allan Gilbert's *All is Vanity* [1892]).

Another question that the current study raises stems from the co-occurrence of CUE-A with Gothic narratives and the abject. This co-occurrence leaves open the possibility that: (1) CUE-A also communicates the abject outside of the Gothic genre, (2) CUE-A communicates other Gothic features in addition to the abject, (3) CUE-A communicates other Gothic features not including the abject, or (4) CUE-A communicates some other, as yet unidentified, concepts. While the evidence provided here strongly supports the idea that CUE-A is used as a visual metaphor for the abject in Gothic narratives, future research is required to converge upon a single conclusion.

4.3. SUMMARY

In summary, CUE-A is a visual metaphor that consists of the combination of depicting a character as being physically close to the viewer (i.e., "Close-Up"), while simultaneously depicting asymmetry focused on or around the character's eyes (i.e., "Eye Asymmetry"). CUE-A implies the character is simultaneously like the viewer (i.e., *kinship*) and also unlike the viewer (i.e., *other*), thus indicating that the character exists in these two categories at the same time. As such, CUE-A can communicate the Gothic concept of the abject. This was tested by seeing if CUE-A is used more extensively when depicting a Gothic abject character (Batman) compared to a non-Gothic, non-abject character (Superman). In this study, I provided evidence for the following premises:

> Premise 1: Batman is more Gothic than Superman
>
> Premise 2: Batman is more abject than Superman
>
> Premise 3: Batman is depicted with CUE-A more often than Superman.

Taken together, this indicates that CUE-A co-occurs with the concept of the abject in Gothic narratives, supporting the idea that the CUE-A visual metaphor does, in fact, communicate the abject in Gothic narratives.

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WRITING THE GROTESQUE BODY IN JESMYN WARD'S *SALVAGE THE BONES*

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ABSTRACT

In her work, Jesmyn Ward has revitalized the Southern Gothic tradition and its tropes to better reflect the realities of Black American life in the 21st century. This essay explores the reconfiguration of the grotesque body in Ward's sophomore novel, Salvage the Bones, which follows an impoverished Black family in Mississippi in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. In contrast to her literary predecessors, Ward defines the grotesque as a state of debility imposed on Black bodies and then deemed uniquely problematic to them as a class and race, rather than the result of centuries of structural oppression. As such, she understands the trope as encompassing far more than bodily or intellectual difference, the way in which it was previously utilized by Southern writers like William Faulkner and Carson McCullers. Instead, Ward theorizes the grotesque as a biopolitical state, in which populations that do not conform to the status quo, and specifically the dominant capitalist mode of production and consumption, are driven to the margins and their lives deemed expendable.

Keywords: African American Gothic, Jesmyn Ward, Southern Gothic, Hurricane Katrina, grotesque

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, amidst the turmoil of the Black Lives Matter protests spurred by the killings of unarmed Black Americans by police, a new literary and cultural phenomenon has been on the rise. The new African American Gothic is a school that engages with the legacy of American slavery and racism, while at the same time linking it to the present and to the precariousness of Black American lives. Jesmyn Ward, twice-winner of the National Book Award, has

been on the frontline of this emerging school of writers and artists.[1] Her work has contributed to the development of the new African American Gothic by reviving the modes of the so-called Southern Gothic, a tradition preoccupied with the "haunted" South and its legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. A native Mississippian, in her oeuvre Ward seeks to historicize the Southern Gothic, revising its tropes to expose the continuing haunting of the present by past racial prejudice, discrimination and violence. Thus, she revitalizes the genre while pioneering a new school of writing that shifts the focus from White subjects to the ongoing Gothicism of Black existence and the precariousness of Black lives in America. This essay explores one aspect of this revisionist project by examining how Ward repurposes the familiar Southern Gothic trope of the grotesque body in her novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011).

In contrast to her literary predecessors, Ward defines the grotesque as a state of debility imposed on Black bodies and deemed uniquely problematic to them as a class and race, rather than the result of centuries of structural oppression. As such, she understands the trope as encompassing far more than bodily or intellectual difference, as it was previously utilized by Southern writers like William Faulkner and Carson McCullers. Instead, Ward theorizes the grotesque as a biopolitical state, in which populations that do not conform to the status quo, and specifically the dominant capitalist mode of production and consumption, are driven to the margins and their lives deemed expendable. In *Salvage the Bones*, the grotesque manifests physically in the changing body of a pregnant teenager, Esch Batiste, and in the animal imagery that is repeatedly used to describe her and her family. The Batistes live on the margins of society, in a dilapidated plot of land nicknamed "the Pit," trapped by poverty and lacking prospects as Hurricane Katrina approaches. Their financial and social status is seen as a grotesque by mainstream society, and Esch's body is initially described as embodying and carrying the effects of this othering. The result of this othering is that people like the Batistes are stripped of their political existence—what in *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben termed *bios*—and are living in a permanent state of *zoē*, or bare life, which is defined as grotesque by mainstream, typically White and able-bodied society (Agamben 10).[2] Agamben's theory expanded on the Greek concept of *zoē*, meaning biological life, and *bios* which encompassed one's political existence as a citizen. In this context, *bare life* implies loss of political subjectivity and the denigration of life to its barest biological components. Ward exemplifies this theory through the Batistes, who live in a state of survival, forgotten by the State. Hurricane Katrina exacerbates the precariousness of their existence and exposes how devalued and grotesque the lives of Black Southerners are to the eyes of the State. By incorporating Agamben's theory alongside

[1] Other contemporary writers who work within the framework of the African American Gothic include Colson Whitehead, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Maurice Carlos Ruffins, and Reginal Bradley, to name a few.

[2] Agamben's concept of *zoē* and *bios* has been previously utilized by Holly Cade Brown in her "Figuring Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker." Brown examines the effects of Hurricane Katrina through Agamben's lens, yet the concept has not been applied in the context of Ward's revisionism of the Southern Gothic.

the language and imagery of the Grotesque, Ward modernizes the trope to better reflect the reality of contemporary Black American life in the South and the ways in which it remains subject to disenfranchisement and othering along both racial and economic lines.

I. The Gothic and the American South

The Gothic, a nebulous term which has greatly evolved since its inception in eighteenth-century British literature, has always had a close relationship with race and class. In the early British tradition, the Gothic focused on "the past, and immoderate, ungovernable passions" and was marked by familiar tropes such as ruined castles, supernatural elements, dark villains and innocent maidens (Weinstock 1). Its early iterations were often allegories for the decline of rigid British class structures and critiques of the aristocracy. However, the genre became particularly problematic when it was exported to America and lost its usual referents: gloomy castles, ghosts and hapless heroines paled beside the wilderness and the natural and human threats the first settlers encountered in the New World. Rejecting the structured class system of Britain, America was seemingly founded on Enlightenment ideals of reason and equality, characteristics antithetical to the traditional Gothic. However, what links the two traditions is the legacy of slavery, as the emergence of the genre coincided with the height of the slave trade. Slavery is widely acknowledged as the "central historical context that produces the Gothic and against which it responds," from the eighteenth century to the present (Goddu 71). In 1960 Leslie Fielder even argued that the American literary tradition "is almost essentially a gothic one," given the nation's two particular sources of culpability: "the slaughter of the Indians and the abominations of the slave trade" (142,144). His interpretation, which introduced the question of race in the discussion of the American Gothic, calls for a sociohistorical reading rather than a psychological one. These two "original sins" in the Edenic garden that was newly-settled America did not correspond with the nation's self-mythologizing of innocence and new beginnings. Thus, instead of being defined in national terms, the American Gothic became most recognizable as a set of regional forms, including the Southern Gothic, which developed following the Civil War. The South's literary and material history, that is, the Gothic's relation to America and the South, is critical in understanding the scope and importance of Ward's new approach to the Southern Gothic tradition.

The adjective "Southern" gives regional specificity to the Gothic and displaces any unsavoury aspects of American history onto a single part of the nation. Teresa Goddu notes that the South is "identified with gothic doom and gloom…[and] serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself… a benighted landscape, heavy with history and haunted by the ghosts of slavery" (3). Similarly, David Punter and Glennis Byron describe the Southern Gothic as "investigating madness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities" (Punter and Byron 116-7). The South was constructed in opposition to the

North, reaffirming the latter's identity as the progressive, true face of America. Similarly, Blackness was constructed in opposition to Whiteness: the slave master projected his own brutality onto the Black slave body, where he could whip it out of existence (Wester 57). For Black Southern writers, then, a version of Southern Gothic limited to the works of William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor is incomplete, particularly if we consider their portrayal of Black characters. As Ward said of Faulkner, "the failures of some of his Black characters—the lack of imaginative vision regarding them, the way they don't display the full range of human emotion, how they fail to live fully on the page—work against that awe [of him] and goad me to write" (Hoover 2). The legacy of Southern Gothic informs the writing of contemporary Black authors who are keen to explore the history and literature of their nation, whether they are Southerners or not. However, instead of fixating on the South's past sins and glories, many contemporary Black writers refocus those narratives on the lingering effects of slavery and racism in contemporary America.

For Black as well as White writers, "Southern Gothic can be understood as a genre that is aware of the impossibility of escaping racial haunting and the trauma of a culture that is not just informed by racial history, but also haunted and ruptured by it" (Wester 25). This haunting emerges through a fascination with the grotesque, usually manifested in the bodies of marginalized characters as a form of disability or disfigurement, as well as ghost stories and a sense of claustrophobia and impending doom inherent to the Southern landscape. Such elements have long been evident in the works of African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Jean Toomer and Richard Wright. Indeed, Wright famously noted in his introduction to Native Son (1940) that "if Poe were alive [in the poor Black districts of Chicago in the 1930s], he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him" (31); in other words, for Black Americans, life was and is a Gothic tale that needs no imaginary embellishment.

Ward, a native of DeLisle, Mississippi, is unusual amongst contemporary Black Southern authors in that she left the South and, despite her ambivalence about the region, returned to raise a family. Ward acknowledges that she feels at home in Mississippi and that its context has shaped who she is, but at the same time "I dislike the fact that I have to bear up under the weight of the history of this place, of the history of slavery and Jim Crow and sharecropping, the history of this place that made me" (Block). Taking cue from Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Ward situates her three novels—Where the Line Bleeds (2008), Salvage the Bones (2011) and Sing, Unburied, Sing (2017)—in the fictional Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage, inspired by her hometown. All three novels have contemporary settings, detailing the lives and hardships of rural Black families struggling with generational poverty, addiction, systemic racism and an inability to progress while haunted by the region's past.

II. The Grotesque Body

Salvage the Bones follows 15-year-old Esch as she grapples with the implications of her unplanned pregnancy in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. Ward situates the narrative

within the parameters and tropes of the Southern Gothic, including the grotesque, which takes on new meaning through her work. The grotesque is no longer simply the perceived, oftentimes shocking effect of physical difference, as found in the traditional Southern Gothic of O'Connor and Faulkner; instead, Ward's grotesque is the result of interpretation, of how dominant society observes and classifies populations deemed other and expendable, both in terms of race, gender, and political and financial status.

The grotesque has had a peculiar relationship with the Southern Gothic, and is particularly identified with the works of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers. A concise definition of what constitutes the grotesque has been notoriously difficult to pinpoint, leading to Alan Spiegel bemoaning that the term has been "applied so frequently and so recklessly" that it has become "increasingly difficult to use [it] with any degree of clarity or precision" (426). Spiegel was one of the first critics to propose a definition of the grotesque, but one which is rather limiting: he posits that the term does not refer to a mood, style, or situation, but to a character type often found in Southern fiction that is always a "physically or mentally deformed figure" (428). For Spiegel, what makes characters—such as Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*—grotesque, however, is their transcendence of their disability, to the point where readers can evince pity and compassion for them. As such, the grotesque character is:

> …a thorn in the side of the society which produced him. His existence tells the society something about itself whether it wishes to acknowledge his presence or not. He informs society that his deformity is *real,* that it is *there*, and will continue to be there because it is society's deformity [which produced it] as well as his own (Spiegel 431, emphasis in original)

Spiegel's definition uncovers the ableism inherent in the grotesque trope. Characters with mental or physical disabilities are used either for shock value or as objects of pity for the presumably able-bodied reader, or as vehicles for the writer's attempt at social criticism. As such, these characters tend to remain one-dimensional, their function and importance limited to their disability which forms the entirety of their personality.

Other definitions of the grotesque emphasize its radical potential as a disruptive agent operating at the margins of society. Mikhail Bakhtin links the grotesque with a body of "unashamed excess, anathema to authority and pious austerity" (303), a body that interacts intimately with the world and challenges its limits and hierarchies. Bakhtin sees the grotesque body as potentially radical, able to disrupt social homogeneity, yet his definition implies a certain loose morality and inability to control individual urges, stereotypes often levelled at Black Southerners who were typically the objects of grotesque characterization. As such, the grotesque figure is a politically and socially charged symbol. As Patricia Yaeger has argued, grotesque bodies "provide a particularly condensed and useful figure of thought for presenting a set of problems plaguing the South," such as oppressive ideals of womanhood and the pervasive memory of slavery and racial violence (25). For Bakhtin and Yaeger, these bodies also have the potential to disrupt the status quo, disclosing "the potentiality of an entirely

different world, of another order, another way of life" (Bakhtin 48). In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward appears to agree that there is potential for transformation through what others deem grotesque and thus aligns herself with this more radical tradition. However, she remains realistic about the difficulty of overcoming the stigma attached to the notion of the grotesque body, particularly as it is linked with years of intergenerational trauma.

III. Debility and Bare Life as the Modern Grotesque

In her use of the grotesque, Ward challenges its traditional and problematic equation of physical or mental disability with either moral corruption or child-like innocence. Her characters are not in the vein of Faulkner's innocent Benjy or O'Connor's nihilistic Hazel Motes. Instead, Ward works within the framework of what Jasbir Puar has termed "debility": that is, her aim is to capture the felt effects of "biopolitical control of populations that foreground risk, prognosis, life chances… and capitalist exploitation," which is "endemic, perhaps even normative to disenfranchised communities… a banal feature of quotidian existence that is already definitive of the precarity of that existence" (16). Debility implies a larger scheme of structural violence that marginalizes and oppresses certain groups and communities, manifesting tangibly as lower-quality infrastructure and schooling, fewer job opportunities, poverty, drug abuse and even premature death at the individual level. In *Salvage the Bones*, debility partly manifests as lack of healthcare which results in the death of Esch's mother in childbirth, and in Esch's little knowledge about her own pregnancy and options. She cannot access birth control, saying "I've never had a prescription, wouldn't have the money to get them if I did, don't have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department" (139). Her peers seem as uninformed as she is, with Esch recalling snippets of conversations from other girls about how to terminate an unwanted pregnancy:

> If you hit yourself really hard in the stomach, throw yourself on the metal edge of a car and it hits you low enough to call bruises, it could bring a miscarriage…This is what you do when you can't afford an abortion, when you can't have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you. (138)

Esch concludes that "these are my options, and they narrow to none" (139). Thus, debility is figured as a form of intergenerational trauma, carrying over from mother to daughter, whose effects white writers would deem grotesque. Ward, however, sees these characters as victims of a system of debility and structural violence. She does not interpret the seemingly grotesque aspects of their bodies or their situation as indicators of their moral value, but rather the product of an environment of sustained violence.

Puar's concept of debility is closely related to Agamben's theory of *zoe* and *bios*, the two states of human existence. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben elaborates on the concept of the "sacred man," a figure in Roman culture who has lost his rights to citizenship and can thus be killed by anyone with impunity, but cannot be sacrificed for religious purposes. As such, *homo sacer* is someone living outside the law, not afforded its protection, and must thus live outside of

society. Those deprived of a political existence are living in a state of *zoe,* "bare life," while those participating in society are part of *bios*, political life. Esch and her family are living in a state of bare life as illustrated, according to Holly Cade Brown, in the complete disregard the State has for their survival before, during and after Katrina's landfall. Brown argues that "while the state in contemporary democratic societies is often portrayed as a force of protection, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina demonstrates that the power of the modern state rests on a process of exclusion that can leave bodies to be rendered dispensable at any time" (1). When applied to Ward's revisionism of the Southern Gothic grotesque, however, bare life extends to individual autonomy, or lack of thereof, as well as the state's disregard of those bodies. In other words, bare life can be the result of debility, which begins on a structural, state-level, but is ultimately experienced individually in the bodies of those affected and in the lack of choice and autonomy afforded to them. As pregnancy and motherhood are central themes of *Salvage the Bones*, debility and its grotesque effect are most clearly visible on Esch's body. It is clear, however, that this cycle did not begin with her, but that she is part of a chain of intergeneration trauma, passed on from her mother and stretching far to the past.

IV. Grotesque Motherhood in *Salvage the Bones*

The grotesque can be, then, defined as the result of loss of bodily autonomy due to an already precarious existence, an effect of living in a state of *zoe* instead of *bios*. In *Salvage the Bones*, that loss is exemplified through an unplanned pregnancy which literally takes over and transforms Esch's body. In a family dynamic partly inspired by *As I Lay Dying*, young Esch finds herself pregnant, a precarious position made even more so because of her mother's death in childbirth a few years back. Motherhood and pregnancy, typically perceived as joyous life events, are figured as a form of debility and grotesquery for poor, Black Southern women like Esch. Lacking proper healthcare and familial support, and feeling ashamed of her condition, Esch retreats into herself and interprets her pregnancy as grotesque and the child she is carrying as a parasite intent on taking over her body. She sees herself as a confirmation of White society's stereotypes of young Black women, and its "disdain for the ghetto and its outlaw sexualities… premised on an unspoken threat of an association with disability" (Erevelles 72). These "outlaw sexualities," relegated to poor Black communities, echo Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque as a body of unashamed excess, reinforcing the stereotype of Black women as sexually insatiable and reckless. Thus, Esch's pregnancy is seen by White society as the result of her own recklessness and sexual profligacy, a condition only slightly better than an animal.

Ward depicts the bodily processes of pregnancy and birth viscerally and at times even grotesquely, illustrating her understanding of the South as a "place where Black people were bred and understood to be animals" (Ward 5). *Salvage* opens with the family's pit-bull, China, giving birth to a litter of puppies, effectively introducing the theme of motherhood through an animal. The physicality of the birth is rendered in stark realism, with China "turn[ing] on herself," snarling, her sides rippling and then "she seems to be turning herself inside out" and

"splits" as she delivers (Ward 1,4, 9). Watching the birth, Esch thinks "that is what killed Mama" (10), while delivering her last child, Junior. Esch recalls her mother, "chin to chest, straining to push Junior out, and Junior snagging on her insides, grabbing hold of what he caught on to try and stay inside her, but instead he pulled it out with him when he was born" (10). In her final moments, Esch's mother "shook her head…raised her chin to the ceiling like an animal on the slaughter stump" (221). She does not speak to Esch, but looks at her for a last time, and Esch imagines her mother saying to her, "*Don't do it. Don't become the woman in this bed, Esch*" (222, emphasis in original). The grotesque descriptions of bodies in the act of turning in on themselves and transforming signify that motherhood is inscribed in Esch's mind as a life-threatening situation, one to be avoided at all costs, suitable only for animals and those privileged enough to be able to afford a safe pregnancy.

These animalistic, grotesque aspects of Southern Black life—and motherhood, in particular—are punctuated by moments of literal bodily damage, leaving characters maimed and deformed, seemingly conforming with the original definition of the grotesque as a form of physical disfigurement. Christopher Lloyd observes that Ward "is interested in the ways bodies are never quite entire, intact, or solid… Black southerners are complexly presented as precarious, creaturely and throwaway" (255). Ward maintains the parallelisms between humans and animals in a scene of shocking violence where China eats one of her puppies, occuring simultaneously with Esch's father losing a finger in an accident: "The blood on Daddy's shirt is the same color as the pulpy puppy in China's mouth…Daddy's middle, ring, and pinkie finger on his left hand are sheared off clean as fallen tree trunks. The meat of his fingers is red and wet as China's lips" (190). Dogs are figured in the novel as stand-ins for humans, mimicking their behaviour, power dynamics, and social hierarchies. China's attack on the puppy is prefigured by a vicious dog-fight she is forced to participate in against the puppies' father, Kilo. The fighting dogs are all maimed in some form, with "sliced ears," "gashes on [their] shoulders" and multiple cuts on their bodies (242-3). When it is China's turn to fight, one of Esch's brothers objects, saying, "*How you going to fight her?... She's a mother!*" to which Skeetah, the eldest, replies "*And he's a father…and what fucking difference does it make?*" (247). Life has taught Skeetah and Esch that living is a struggle, and that relationships between men and women, mothers and fathers, cannot exist without violence.

Motherhood is denigrated from an almost holy, untouchable state, to simply a biological phenomenon that does not differentiate between humans and animals. The fight between Kilo and China is described in quasi-sexual terms; "they meet. They rise. They embrace. They bite, neck to neck" (255). However, this dance soon devolves into violence of a particularly gendered nature. Kilo notices China's teats, full with milk, and attacks. He "bows his head like a puppy to drink. But he doesn't drink. He bites…Her breast is bloody, torn. The nipple, missing" (253). Esch uses the human "breast" to describe China's teats, thus strengthening what she perceives as a connection between herself and the dog, the only two mothers in the novel. Kilo's attack is pointedly aimed at China's role as a mother and he deforms her by attacking

the symbol of her motherhood. The dogs seem to physically carry the psychic wounds inflicted on their owners by the everyday hardships of life and by each other's cruelties. Their grotesque deformities are inflicted upon them by a system of violence—dog-fighting—which is figured as a microcosm of larger society, with man pitted against man, dog eating dog. Ward takes the analogy a step further by drawing parallels between the dog fights and the antagonistic relationship between the sexes and the precariousness of being a woman and a mother in such an environment. Esch, after witnessing China's attack on her puppy, thinks to herself, "*Is this what motherhood is?"* (191 emphasis in original). She understands womanhood and motherhood as grotesque states, not simply because of the bodily changes they entail, but also because of the violence they seem to generate and attract. In other words, Esch understands how vulnerable she is bio-politically as a Black pregnant girl, living in poverty, branded deviant and grotesque.

However, despite the zoological imagery associated with Esch from the beginning, Ward makes it clear that she possesses a sophisticated inner-world that is deeply inspired by the environment around her and from her readings, which include Faulkner and Greek mythology. Esch recalls reading *As I Lay Dying* in ninth grade and getting an A for answering "the hardest question right: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?*" (16, emphasis in original). Having also lost her mother at a young age, Esch understands Vardaman's need to mythologize his mother as a way of dealing with her death. Esch does not think her mother is a fish, but her ghost lingers in the periphery of the text and in the depictions of violent motherhood that recur in the novel. Esch's literary interests, then, influence the way she thinks about motherhood and her own pregnancy, which is initially described in Gothic terms, in the vein of Faulkner or Toni Morrison. Upon first discovering that she is pregnant, Esch thinks, "the terrible truth of what I am flares like a dry fall fire in my stomach… There is something in there" (36). Later, when she vomits, the child is described as a mysterious thing clinging to her insides: "I cannot stop heaving up air and spit, but still I am not able to throw it all up. Inside, at the bottom, something remains" (48). The foetus is figured as an unknown parasite and Esch's womb almost like a haunted house, terrorized by an unseen ghost. The situation recalls Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), where the ghost of the titular child returns to haunt her mother, Sethe. Like Sethe, Esch struggles to maintain a separate sense of self as the child takes over. The fear of birthing a monster, another common Gothic trope, is present in Esch's feelings about her pregnancy. Monsters often represent unwanted aggressive or sexual thoughts and thus embody what humans fear is evil and destructive in themselves. They are also "like caricatures –larger than life—… By seeing them this way," argues Barbara Almond, "we can deny their connection to our own impulses and feelings" (51). Esch's othering language when referring to her pregnancy and her fear of disclosing it to anyone reinforces this notion of the baby as something alien and hostile to her body, separate from herself.

Lacking any female figures to relate to, apart from China, Esch navigates her new, confusing state, by turning to Greek myth. Like other African American writers — including

Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison —, Ward is drawn to the classics, although she complains that many readers and critics still assume that "the work of white American writers can be universal and lay claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghetto-ized as 'other'" (qtd. in Hoover 3). She therefore "wanted to align Esch with that classic text…to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage" (Hoover 3). As such, Greek myth gives Esch a framework through which to understand and contextualize her situation, placing her amongst a long line of women who were branded grotesque and deviant, but who persevered in the face of a patriarchal and racist society. The figure that looms throughout the text is Medea, notorious for murdering her children and becoming the quintessential symbol of monstrous—or grotesque—motherhood, but also the archetypal 'other': a witch and barbarian (non-Greek) in the eyes of Greek society, she is an example of how the oppressed victim will strike back against their oppressor.

Esch views her relationship with her child's father, Manny, as parallel to the one between Medea and Jason, romanticizing their affair, but also recognizing its toxicity. Manny is solely interested in Esch sexually and does not reciprocate her deeper feelings and Esch understands, but cannot fully accept it. Of Medea, Esch says, "But even with all her power, Jason bends her like a young pine in a hard wind; he makes her double in two. I know her" (60). Esch is torn between her devotion to her family, particularly her older brother Skeetah, and her love for Manny, which mirrors Medea's dilemma, being forced to choose between her brother and Jason. In one version of the myth, Medea "kills her brother herself…chops him into bits: liver, gizzard, breast and thigh…" (225), an atomized list reminiscent of the myriad injuries on the fighting dogs' bodies. In fact, Medea is most closely related to China, both in her battle with Kilo and from committing infanticide. After the latter incident, Esch describes China as "bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea" (191) and the reader is left to wonder if Esch will follow her to a similar violent conclusion, given the parallelisms between the girl and the dog.

Medea's power is also linked to Hurricane Katrina, the inevitable conclusion to which the story is heading. Hurricane Katrina was often figured in the media as a "monster of the Atlantic" and Ward, who lived through the catastrophe, explains that "Medea is in Hurricane Katrina because [Medea's] power to unmake worlds, to manipulate the elements, closely aligns with the storm" (qtd. in Hoover 4). In the storm's aftermath, grotesque images of bloated bodies circulated in the media, bodies which Katrina had exhumed in a perverse kind of rebirth. Esch talks of Katrina as "the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes…" (337), highlighting the storm's power to both create and destroy. What was brought to the surface, however, were not only bodies, but also "racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy… in which entire populations are considered disposable" (Giroux 307). Lacking the resources and means to escape the storm, Esch's family ignores the call for evacuation and brace for its impact,

aware that they might lose their lives and livelihoods in the process. Their situation mirrors that of countless families in the wake of the storm, who were later blamed by the media and officials for not heeding the alarm, deeming their losses as the product of their personal choice and not the result of chronic, structural disenfranchisement. The storm highlighted existing inequalities and the environment of debility they were bred in which disproportionally target poor, Black Southerners. To use Giorgio Agamben's terminology, these people's lives were relegated to the status of *zoē*, bare, animalistic life, and their *bios,* their political existence as citizens, was excised. *Zoē* is the reality for grotesque characters appearing in Southern Gothic fiction, characters who exist in the margins and have no control over their lives and destinies. For Ward, their physical or mental difference is only the symptom, not the cause of this exclusion. What pushes these characters to the edges of society is their inability to "contribute to the prevailing consumerist ethic" (Giroux 309), their unwillingness or inability to participate in an economy of production and consumption that characterizes modern America. As Esch says, "Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes" (337), indicating that she knows the cycle of poverty and debility has not ended with the storm.

Despite the catastrophe, there is a subtle sense of optimism running through the later part of the novel. Katrina destroyed, but what followed was a form of rebirth, a renewed awareness of the faults and prejudices of the system and hopes of reform. Esch's changing attitudes towards her pregnancy indicate that the storm has brought about a reconfiguration of values and priorities. Toward the end of the novel, Esch's identification with Medea intensifies, but does not take the violent turn of the original myth. Esch confronts Manny about the pregnancy and forces him to acknowledge her:

> … all I have ever wanted, here. He is looking. He is seeing me, and his hands are coming around to feel the honeydew curve, the swell that is more than swell, the fat that is not fat, *the budding baby*, and his eyes are so black they are all black, and they are a night without stars. All I have ever wanted. He knows. "Fuck!" Manny yells, and he is throwing me up and off of him (195, emphasis added)

When she is finally seen for who she is, Esch can acknowledge the foetus as a "budding baby," despite Manny's disgusted reaction. In a later confrontation, when Manny questions the paternity of the child and calls her a slut, she erupts and attacks him: "This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. I rake my fingernails across his face, leave pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood" (270). The fight between them mirrors the one between China and Kilo, but in this instance, it is Esch doing the damage, attacking and disfiguring Manny just as Kilo had done to China. She refuses to be stigmatized and have her motherhood and womanhood diminished, marked as grotesque and other for her state.

As Esch's approach to herself and her pregnancy change, the kindness of the people around her is also revealed, fuelled by the storm and the need to rebuild the community. When her father discovers the pregnancy amidst the chaos, he is not cross or disgusted, like

Manny; instead, he is gentle and understanding, saying only that she needs to see a doctor to "make sure everything's okay…So nothing will go wrong" (326), so Esch will not have to repeat her mother's fate. Her father's subtle interjection points towards a gradual break of the cycle of violence and intergenerational trauma that has marked the family's life. When asked by Big Henry, one of the neighbourhood boys, who the father is, Esch replies, "It don't have a daddy." Henry, though, answers, "You wrong… This baby got plenty of daddies" (254). Esch is not a single mother in the traditional sense, as she is supported by a community similar to that found in *Beloved* (1987). In Morrison's novel, that community comes together and their united song finally banishes Beloved's spirit. In *Salvage*, after the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, the community's joint efforts not only rebuild what was lost, but also foster new life out of the debris. Thus, Esch's story moves from grotesquery to hope, from decay to regeneration.

V. Conclusions

Ward uses the conventions of the grotesque to consider the impact of addiction and teenage motherhood and their correlation with racial and socioeconomic factors in the rural South. In doing so, she writes against traditional Gothic narratives which cast Black people as "objects of discourse, rather than as social agents" (Wester 53) and which allowed White writers and readers to meditate upon complex realities and behaviours without having to claim responsibility for them. Her Gothic tales speak against the strictly sociological narratives imposed on Black communities. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), Ward presents statistics on poverty, drug addiction, police brutality and death rates within Mississippi's Black communities. What those sociological statistics tell her is that a Black life is worth nothing in the South: "in searching for words to write this story," writes Ward, "I found more statistics about what it means to be Black and poor in the South,"(433) more numbers than human stories. Ward insists on the Gothic essence of those disparaging numbers and statistics, noting that "We were bewildered. There is a great darkness bearing down on our lives, and no one acknowledges it" (250). Her work gives words and voices to the men and women deemed merely unfortunate statistics. Her oeuvre also reclaims the labels of "grotesque" and "savage" which Black Southerners have been time and again stigmatized with. According to her, "[savage] has a different meaning for us [Black Southerners.] For us it means that you're a fighter and that you're a survivor… We still survive and we still claim for ourselves a certain sense of dignity or humanity" (Hartnell 212). Ward's characters are indeed thorns in the side of the society which produced them—but, she insists, they are also human. Her work demands that the reader not look away from their plight.

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GHOSTS OF BRITAIN: A HAUNTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE 21ST-CENTURY FOLK HORROR REVIVAL

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at investigating the American folk horror revival of the 2010s, focusing on texts such as Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) or Robert Eggers's *The VVitch* (2015). This survey of the folk horror revival will inevitably lead us to the genre's past, particularly to the so-called Unholy Trinity, comprised by three films released in Great Britain during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This temporal and geographical dislocation will be situated against a larger background of cultural production, arguing that the appearance of the folk horror revival sheds some light on the debate on nostalgia and pastiche as the predominant artistic modes under late capitalism. The notion of hauntology, as explored by Jacques Derrida, Mark Fisher, or Katy Shaw, will be used throughout the essay in order to provide a firm theoretical ground on which this debate can take place.

Keywords: American folk horror, hauntology, nostalgia, *Midsommar*, *The VVitch*.

I. INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen an increase in the number and popularity of folk horror films. The re-emergence of this horror sub-genre is particularly intriguing because it involves not only a temporal relocation but also a geographical one. The origins of the folk horror film can be traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s in Britain with filmmakers such as Robin Hardy or Michael Reeves. However, many of the contemporary iterations of the genre come from across the Atlantic (see Robert Eggers's *The VVitch* [2015], Ari Aster's *Midsommar* [2019] or Malgorzata Szumowska's US-produced *The Other Lamb* [2019], among others). Unfortunately, and despite recent efforts by Adam Scovell, Andy Paciorek, and other scholars, folk horror

remains largely under-theorised. Therefore, the first aim of this article is to contribute to the budding theorisation of folk horror.

Furthermore, this article also aims to investigate the folk horror revival through the lens of a wider debate on cultural production in late capitalism. The concept of hauntology is central to this debate. Derived from Jacques Derrida's late writings, hauntology can be understood as the study of cultural spectres, "a science of ghosts, a science of what returns. It destabilizes space as well as time" (Shaw 2). Hauntology has been seeping into discussions of art and nostalgia, first in popular music and gradually in film and literature as well. It ought to be stated that the relationship between folk horror and hauntology is entirely symbiotic. Hauntology is as useful to folk horror studies as folk horror is to hauntology studies. The emergence of both terms in academia is a recent and, perhaps more importantly, geographically bound phenomenon. Folk horror and hauntology studies have been so far tied almost exclusively to the British Isles. However, the recent appearance of an American form of folk horror forces us to re-evaluate this geographical connection. At this point, it bears asking several questions: how does this new American folk horror compare to its British counterpart from past and present? Can these new folk horror films be comfortably lumped with the rest of horror revivals and remakes being currently released? Are the films of Eggers and Aster as ripe for hauntological analysis as their transatlantic cousins?

II. Running Out Of Past: Remakes And Revivals

It is worth investigating this folk horror revival through the lens of a culture obsessed with its own past. Writing in 2011 about the music trends of the 2000s, Simon Reynolds argues that the first decade of the new millennium "has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once" (10). His book Retromania (2011) explores revivals and pastiche in popular music, following the steps of Marxist literary critics like Raymond Williams or Fredric Jameson. The latter's theories on the prevalence of the so-called "nostalgia mode" are echoed throughout Reynolds's work. Although their scope and target are different, both Jameson and Reynolds suggest that artistic production in late capitalism is under a state of arrested development, incapable of escaping its past precisely because the hegemonic social order has forced us to forget "how to think historically in the first place" (Jameson 1) and to altogether give up on progress, here understood as the establishment of a new social order. Reynolds calls the 2000s the "Re" Decade, a span of time when the shadow of the past looms over cultural production more than at any other previous time, when revivals and pastiche reign supreme and occupy a privileged position in the music industry. Ten years after the publication of Reynolds's book, his words still ring painfully true. Though Reynolds writes about popular music, film is not exempt from this backward-looking craze. A cursory glance at the 50 highest

grossing films of the 2010s reveals that almost all of them are sequels, remakes, spin-offs or some sort of combination of the three.[1]

Horror film has also been hit by a nostalgia wave. Although there might be an argument for horror as a genre that has always looked to its past and favoured film franchises,[2] the truth is that the past few years have seen a proliferation of remakes (*IT* [2017], *Child's Play* [2019], *A Nightmare on Elm Street* [2010], sequels/reboots *Halloween* [2018] and *Blair Witch* [2016]), and purely nostalgia artifacts like *Stranger Things* (2016-ongoing) that take horror's historical tendency to looking back at its past to the next level. Now, folk horror has also been brought back to life. Are the new folk horror films part of this revivalist tendency? In order to answer this question, an expanded discussion on nostalgia by way of hauntology will be provided. However, it is worthwhile to take a slight detour and delve into the specifics of folk horror first.

III. Folk Horror: A Short History

Despite the genre's origins harking back to the late 60s in film and much earlier in literature, the emergence of "folk horror" as a critical term is a very recent phenomenon,[3] particularly when studied in opposition to others like giallo, Gothic horror, or monster horror. In his book on folk horror, Adam Scovell argues that the term became popularised in 2010 when used by Mark Gatiss in his BBC documentary *A History of Horror*, and that it was coined as late as 2004 by filmmaker Piers Haggard. Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) is one third of what is popularly known as the "Unholy Trinity," completed by Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General* (1968) and Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973). These three films, all by British directors and released within five years of each other, are usually regarded as the three foundational texts of folk horror film.[4] The three films express similar anxieties, arguably as a knee-jerk

[1] There are several sources for this, and the fact that the list of films only differs slightly according to each source makes the point stand even more strongly. The most reliable list is based on IMDb-owned website Box Office Mojo, which tracks box office revenue in an algorithmic way: https://www.imdb.com/list/ls026040906/

[2] After all, what are the first gothic and horror films but adaptations of previous literary material? David Pirie's book *A Heritage of Horror* (1973) offers an insightful look at the relationship between horror film and gothic literature, arguing that the British horror films are "in no way imitative of American and European models but derive in general from literary sources" (10).

[3] There is no mention of the term "folk horror" even in recent academic studies like Columbia University Press's *European Nightmares: Horror Cinema in Europe Since 1945*, published in 2012, or Wiley-Blackwell's *A Companion to the Horror Film*, published in 2014.

[4] In an attempt to avoid Anglocentrism, it ought to be stated that folk horror film existed before the Unholy Trinity. Horror scholars, Scovell among them, have made a commendable effort in recent years to reconcile the film history of countries like Finland with folk horror, citing Erik Blomberg's *The White Reindeer* (1952) as a prime example.

reaction to the countercultural movements of the late 1960s.[5] Rurality, anachronistic ways of living centred around tightknit societies, sexual liberation, cults: these are all thematic points of suture among the Unholy Trinity. However, each of the three films tackle these themes in a highly singular manner; they are simply too idiosyncratic and varied in tone for them to comprise a unified genre. *The Wicker Man* takes its cue from thrillers and even musicals, *Witchfinder General* appropriates a number of tropes from the Western, while the gory and racy *The Blood on Satan's Claw* borders on exploitation horror with its proneness to jump-scares and nudity.

It might be argued that the delayed emergence of folk horror as a critical category owes as much to the cult status of many of its main examples as it does to the inconsistent nature of the texts we are working with. It would be easy to cite irreconcilable differences and altogether renounce studying folk horror film as its own phenomenon. A perhaps bolder approach, which is the one that will be taken here, is to embrace these discrepancies and recognise them as an integral element of the genre. If a set of films as dissimilar as the Unholy Trinity is to be taken as the bedrock of folk horror film, it is only logical to oppose gatekeeping and accept texts that might deviate from the (admittedly unstable) standard set by these three films. This flirtation with genre is not exclusive to the Unholy Trinity; in fact, it is at the heart of the films of the British filmmaker Ben Wheatley, who, alongside his partner Amy Jump, has penned some of the most compelling folk horrors in recent times. Wheatley's 2011 film *Kill List*, for example, starts as a kitchen-sink drama, while 2013's *A Field in England* resembles a period comedy in its opening scenes only for it to gradually descend into horrific madness. Folk horror should be accepted as a critical category intrinsically destabilised by its intermingling with other genres. That is not to say, however, that any horror film with a passing relation to folklore or the rural merits being studied as folk horror. A certain degree of accuracy should still be pursued. Adam Scovell resists offering a singular definition of the genre, and, as has just been exposed, for good reasons. Perhaps the most satisfying definition of folk horror is one of the many offered by Scovell in the introduction of his book, where he defines it as "a work that uses folklore, either aesthetically or thematically, to imbue itself with a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes" (17). This definition touches on many shared features of folk horror films, from the musical numbers in *The Wicker Man* or *A Field in England* to the folk legends behind the plots of *The VVitch* or *Witchfinder General*.

Providing a taxonomy of folk horror is a near-impossible task, but the above-mentioned definition may still be expanded on by offering a set of tropes shared by several folk horror

[5] Once again Adam Scovell is the scholar to turn to. His book *Folk Horror* includes interesting discussions on the Unholy Trinity as a reaction to the cultural background of their time, tying the films' concerns with hedonism to the counterculture's interest in drugs or sexual liberation, and pointing out that the three of them were all released "during what can be called the British counter-culture movement, almost acting as signposts for its tidal high-point of 1968 in *Witchfinder* and the dying, post-Manson embers of Wicker in 1973" (24).

films. Part of the horrific aspects of these films is that the events usually take place in the outside and in broad daylight, thus subverting horror's predominant setting. The dark and closed spaces favoured by horror take the backseat; horrific events happen not only outside and during the day but also in communal settings. This is particularly true of these films' climaxes, which, as in most horror, pivot around death. The individualistic murder is here often replaced by human sacrifice. The true source of the horrific is not the murder itself but the fact that there is an audience observing and sometimes celebrating it. Folk horror tends to insert the viewer into these diegetic audiences, in what is effectively yet another turn on horror's usual strategy of affect, here understood by following Xavier Aldana Reyes's description of it as the way in which "our bodies may be moved by those we see on the screen" (3). In horror, we experience fear and dread vicariously by reacting to the horrific events happening on-screen. Folk horror adds another layer by which we are also horrified by the reaction (or lack thereof) of an audience that is more often than not complicit in this human sacrifice. The powerful last acts of *The Wicker Man* and *Midsommar* serve as perfect examples for this point, as it might be argued that both films force their viewers to be complicit with the diegetic audience by presenting the sacrificed outsiders in opposition to the more enticing and adventurous natives. In the former, the painfully dull and sanctimonious Sergeant Howie stands in stark contrast to the sexually liberated natives of Summerisle, while *Midsommar* spends a good portion of its running time depicting Christian as intellectually dishonest and emotionally abusive.

Following on the traits listed above, it might be argued that these films engage with the occult rather than the supernatural: it is also worth noting that, when the supernatural does emerge, it is usually after the characters have been exposed to drugs and other perception-altering substances (*A Field in England*, *Midsommar*), or by tying the supernatural to religious tradition (*The VVitch* or *The Blood in Satan's Claw*). These films are all marked by a necessarily isolating landscape—the banishment of the Puritan family in *The VVitch*, Sergeant Howie's inability to escape Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*, or the constant references to phones not working properly in *Midsommar*—, which can sometimes be outright oppressive and claustrophobic however open it might appear (*A Field in England*). Furthermore, precarious living conditions caused by the land itself are usually the triggers behind the plots (see the failing crops in *The Wicker Man* or *The VVitch*, or the quite literal image of the evil emerging from the ground in *The Blood on Satan's Claw*).

In some of these films, folk horror works by contrasting the dominant cultural practices of Westerners with those of the Other. It usually involves a set of characters that are transposed to an unfamiliar setting, at odds with their culture and religion. Think, for example, of the anthropology students—one of them conspicuously called Christian—visiting a Swedish cult in *Midsommar*, or the banishment to the woods of the Puritan family in *The VVitch*. Scovell identifies these settings with "skewed belief systems" (30) as places where progress has stopped. The notion of progress stopping, particularly when referring to areas outside the

influence of Western civilisation, is not without its problems. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that progress has taken an unexpected turn through a return of the occult. In any case, the introduction of progress grants folk horror a political and temporal dimension that eases our transition to hauntology.

IV. HAUNTOLOGY

A play on words between "haunt" and "ontology," the term first appeared in Jacques Derrida's essay "Spectres of Marx," published in 1993 as an effort to reconcile deconstruction with Marxism in the wake of the fall of communism. Opposing Francis Fukiyama's post-ideological defence of liberal democracy as the rightful ending point of history, Derrida ponders on the ghosts of Marxism that kept haunting world politics in the late 20th century. Derrida builds on spectrality as an unavoidable non-presence: just like repressed and deferred meanings come back to haunt the text, so does Marxism endlessly return to haunt the hegemonic social system: "No disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx's ghosts. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (34).

Though not de-politised by any stretch, "hauntology" was adopted as a music genre descriptor in the mid-2000s by critics like Mark Fisher or Simon Reynolds, who expressed a concern about the omnipresence of revivals and pastiche in popular music in the opening decade of the 21st century. Fisher, who became one of hauntology's most eloquent theorists and championed the term's inclusion in academic cultural studies, speaks of hauntology as a reaction to life under neoliberalism, where every single aspect of life is subject to market relations and late capitalist logic. Hauntology evokes a lament for the stifling of imagination provoked by these material conditions, effectively wondering out loud whether we have lost the capacity to imagine a different future. The future, Fisher argues, "is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production" (16). If there is no future in sight, Fisher argues, then cultural production will remain stuck in an inescapable loop of repetition and pastiche.

Fisher and Reynolds saw hauntology as an apt descriptor for artists keen on recovering lost futures whose implications went beyond aesthetics.[6] They used the term in order to describe the works of a number of mostly British electronic music acts that focus on the materiality of recording technology through noises like vinyl crackle or through physical deterioration of the material source of sound. Hauntological art foregrounds the interplay between technology and the past, exploring themes of longing and decay through sheer materiality. In

[6] The politics of hauntology reflects a longing for a social order progressively wound down with the establishment of neoliberalism. However, it would be an error to say that hauntology is a naïvely optimistic look back at the past. What is being longed for is not the past social order but the futures that said social order allowed us to dream up, the fact that it allowed "the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live" (Fisher 16).

music, that is best exemplified by the omnipresent vinyl crackle and sampling of records of bygone eras in *Burial's Untrue* (2007), or by William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* (2002-3), a series of four albums consisting of pieces of music that are being played on loop on a tape. The tape's gradual deterioration transforms the recording itself to the point of no recognition. Another prime example is *The Caretaker's Everywhere at the End of Time*. Released in parts throughout the 2010s, this six-stage album mirrors the effects of dementia by progressively distorting pre-war ballroom vinyl samples until they become a ghost of their former selves, with a handful of leitmotifs appearing several times throughout the six-hour album under different guises. Hauntology was initially posited in opposition to nostalgia. If nostalgia is the straight, sometimes uncritical introduction of past tropes tied up to a bygone social order, hauntology experiments with these tropes by granting them a ghostly character. However, the distinction between the two terms is not as clear-cut as many of the theorisers of hauntology wished it was. Fisher's short essay, "No Future 2012" (2020), is a good example of how easy it is for hauntology to become tangled up with nostalgia. Building his argument off Fredric Jameson's seminal text on postmodern pastiche, Fisher argues that

> The preoccupation with the past in hauntological music could easily be construed as "nostalgic." But it is the very foregrounding of temporality that makes hauntology differ from the typical products of the nostalgia mode, which bracket out history altogether in order to present themselves as new (716).

The counterargument to Fisher's point would be that products of the nostalgia mode can (and do) also foreground temporality, often through self-referentiality and self-awareness of their status as a recycled cultural artifact. What ultimately defines hauntology is not the foregrounding of temporality itself but the ways in which this foregrounding takes place through formal devices concerned with the materiality of the work of art. A nostalgic work might foreground temporality through self-awareness and meta commentary.[7] However, that does not necessarily make it hauntological. By venturing beyond self-awareness and meta discourse, hauntology thematises the dialogue between past and present through formal techniques that highlight the temporal incongruities that Fisher, taking up on Derrida's conception of time as "out of joint" (34) aptly names "the time-wound" (716). Hauntological art opens and navigates this time-wound, establishing a dialogue between past and present. Insisting on hauntology's dimension outside aesthetics, Fisher argues that the first hauntological records he encountered "sounded 'ghostly,' certainly, but the spectrality was not a mere question of atmospherics" (16). Fisher's point is evident: the spectrality of hauntological art goes beyond an aesthetic eeriness. Nevertheless, those ghostly sounds (or, in the case of film, analogous formal devices

[7] There are plenty of examples of this in horror film, particularly from the 90s onwards, like Wes Craven's postmodern slasher *Scream* (1996), whose investment in self-awareness grows with every sequel. More recent examples include Drew Goddard's *The Cabin in The Woods* (2011) or the horror-influenced comedy *What We Do in The Shadows* (2014).

that achieve the same effect) should be pushed to the fore if one is to differentiate between hauntology and nostalgia.

In music, these ghostly atmospherics are achieved through samples that, as Jamie Sexton puts in his valuable re-negotiation between hauntology and nostalgia, "can be transformed into more eerie sonic markers when treated with effects such as reverberation" (564). Sexton's introduction of the word "eerie" is not casual, and it opens up yet another avenue of communication between horror and hauntology. "Eerie" is, after all, a term commonly used to refer to unsettling art which involves questions of spectrality and presence. In his book *The Weird and The Eerie*, Fisher argues that the eerie "occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something" (61). Fisher's notion of eeriness fits nicely into the formal thematization of the time-wound in hauntological art. Formal devices like vinyl crackle or the degradation of physical tape exemplify that which is present where there should be nothing—we don't expect recorded music to incorporate sounds sourced from the act of recording itself.

As shown above, the link between hauntology and horror is not one that needs to be artificially drawn up. Film, particularly horror, has always been central to an understanding of hauntology. Note how, for instance, the hauntological music label Ghost Box draws samples from British horror films and TV from the late 1960s and early 1970s, from the work of Nigel Kneale to the Unholy Trinity.[8] The dialogue between hauntological music and film is at its healthiest and more open. The anxieties expressed by hauntological musicians are now being transmitted by horror filmmakers, who are manifesting them through formal devices (as in Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England*, which will be expanded on below) or through a thematic exploration of the time-wound, as in the work of the Americans Aaron Moorhead and Justin Benson, who specialise in science fiction-horror hybrids. As hinted at by its title, the latter's 2017 film *The Endless* involves a cult whose members are trapped for eternity in their own particular time loops. Almost working as a remark on the conflict between self-aware nostalgia and hauntology, *The Endless* presents a scenario where the terror stems precisely from self-awareness. Some cult members are well aware of their time-prison and try to escape it through violent death only to reappear at the exact same time and place. In what can be read as a commentary on nostalgia and the futility of metafictional devices to open valuable dialogue with the past, *The Endless* presents a situation where self-awareness never allows the cult members to escape the time-loops; on the contrary, it only sinks them deeper into despair.

An additional point in common between hauntology and folk horror is that they are disciplines intrinsically attached to the preservation of an alternative heritage. Both are interested in left-field forms of popular (we might even venture to call them "folk") heritage, as Jamie Sexton argues: "Ghost Box and its affiliates can be partly related to this surge of interest in marginal national history, in preserving a form of alternative heritage" (572). While not

[8] See Sexton: "*The Wicker Man* and *Blood on Satan's Claw* have both been cited as influential by Ghost Box (and have also had their soundtracks released by Trunk Records)" (574).

hegemonic, this heritage is still tightly bound with notions of nationality. At least in its musical manifestations, hauntology has mostly been regarded as a British discipline. The association between hauntology and Britain is surely aided by the fact that most hauntology scholars are British (see the aforementioned Fisher and Reynolds, or more recent academics like Katy Shaw or Adam Scovell), a trait shared by the cultural artifacts these writers tend to prioritise.

Folk horror is one of these prioritised artefacts. Again, the recurrent examples are British, whether they come from the past (The Unholy Trinity, Nigel Kneale's TV dramas and films) or from the present (Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* and *A Field in England*). Fisher argues that hauntology's Britishness is not accidental but consequential of a longing caused by "the expectations raised by a public service broadcasting system and a popular culture that could be challenging and experimental" (18). However, the past few years have seen an increase in the number—and, perhaps more strikingly, in popularity—of American folk horror films. Can we build a bridge between the new American iteration of the subgenre and hauntology? Do these films engage with their pasts through hauntological devices?

V. Folk Horror Revival: Hauntological or Nostalgic?

Music is one of the keys to answer this question. Robert Eggers's *The VVitch* (2015) serves as a particularly useful example. Eggers's brief to composer Mark Korven was to come up with a minimalistic and amelodic score that eschewed all electronics.[9] As a result, the film's soundtrack is comprised of traditional hymns like "Alas! And Did my Savior Bleed,"—which initially seem to be grounding *The VVitch* firmly as a period film—and a number of terrifying and atonal folk ambient pieces. The key word in folk ambient is "folk": Korven's score bears a number of similarities with electronic ambient music, most notably the omnipresence of drones, but it achieves this through the use of obscure traditional instruments like the nyckelharpa instead of through any digital sources. This generates an overlapping of timelines that destabilises *The VVitch*'s status as a period film and opens up the time-wound. Due to the use of left-field, drone-producing instruments, the score is ultimately more reminiscent of the electronic-laden ambient records of Brian Eno and Grouper than of any folk music made with analogue instruments. The score's spectral quality is indebted to the eeriness of the music itself as much as it is to the sheer materiality of the instruments used, allowing for the encounter between various temporalities—and, given that the film's characters are English settlers, geographies—to take place.

David Church notes in his book on horror in the 2010s that composing *The VVitch*'s score pushed Korven to commission the creation of a new instrument nicknamed "The Apprehension Engine." As Church points out, the instrument's sound is more terrifying "because their source seems more obscure, less readily pinned down via common referents in the listener's

[9] See Mark Korven's interview with Fact Magazine: https://www.factmag.com/2016/02/16/stream-thewitch-score-mark-koven-interview/

mind" (1). The absence of a common referent allows us to describe this sound as spectral. Korven's commissioning of *The Apprehension Engine* is a fascinating example of the conversation between material polar opposites opened by hauntology, whereby an analogue instrument is chasing the spectrality of the digital. Although *The VVitch* predates the commissioning of *The Apprehension Engine*, its score features the same sort of spectral sounds which this new instrument emits. *The VVitch* recycles aesthetic settings and plot points from the past: there are innumerable examples of horror films set in the woods, and Eggers's film's portrayal of a young woman whose Christianity is put into question is not particularly innovative for the horror genre either. However, the film's engagement with the past through the spectral nature of its score rescues it from the nostalgia mode; it is eminently hauntological in its exploration of the time-wound via an unresolved tug-of-war between analogue and digital.

Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England*, scored by his frequent collaborator Jim Williams, offers a different approach to the time-wound. What is at work in the score for Wheatley's film is not dissimilar to the hauntological experiments of *Basinski* and *The Caretaker*. The film's main theme is "Baloo My Boy," a popular Scottish song from the Early Modern period. The tune's first appearance in the film is diegetic, as it is sung by one of the protagonists. As in *The VVitch*, the introduction of a centuries-old folk song fences *A Field in England* as a period film. However, as the narrative advances and the deserters succumb to the mind-altering effects of the mushrooms they have consumed, the score turns more synth-based and experimental. By the film's ending, "Baloo My Boy" appears not sung by a character but as a heavily distorted version that is just reminiscent of the song's original form. The song's degradation through electronic means is effectively a way to tear a hole into the film's historical fabric, opening up the time-wound and shattering the barrier between diegetic and non-diegetic. This should be regarded as a hauntological trope: dis-synchronicity and anachronisms are brought about by formal devices concerned with the materiality of music, mirroring Katy Shaw's argument on spectrality and temporality: "the encounter with the spectre marks the point at which multiple temporalities meet and cross" (15).

As Wheatley and Williams explain in an interview in the Blu-Ray edition of the film, the shift from fairly traditional period music (from "Baloo My Boy" to the thundering drums as harbinger of war in the film's opening scene) to psychedelic electronic mirrors the deserters' changing perception of their physical surroundings once the effects of the mushrooms have finally kicked in. One might even go further and claim that it also mirrors the change of tone that occurs in the film's last act, where the comedic elements are brushed aside in favour of an engulfing sense of claustrophobic dread. The juxtaposition of traditional folk and electronic music is reminiscent of the hauntological sonic experiments of the Ghost Box label and others: like Julian House and Jin Jupp note, the artists working for the BBC Radio Workshop, from which hauntological music sources a series of samples, had "studied medieval music" (Sexton 577) and even made an electronic folk album.

This juxtaposition also plays into the analogue/digital polarity explored in *A Field in England*. The psychedelic last act of the film is completely reliant on visual effects that could only be achieved through digital technology. The blurring of the boundaries between analogue and digital, past and contemporary, heightens the film's hauntological affect. And, in this case, such blurring is not only restricted to music. In his paper on *A Field in England*, Joel McKim mounts a strong argument for the film's digital anachronism as the main indicator of its unsettling effect. McKim argues that the film's digital colour grading brings about "a complicated set of overlapping historical temporalities—the Civil War setting of the film viewed through the prism of a 1960s television aesthetic created via a contemporary digital technique" (48). As with the score in *The VVitch*, the time-wound is brought about by formal techniques whose concern with materiality situate the film at a temporal crossroads. Wheatley's exploration of the time-wound digs even deeper than Eggers's as it is not only limited to music. It might also be argued that it reinforces Fisher's argument about hauntology's inherent Britishness. One of the main exponents of the 1960s television aesthetic that McKim refers to is Nigel Kneale, whose sci-fi and horror work for the BBC in the 1950s and 1960s maintains its cult status in Britain (it has often been sampled by British hauntological musicians) but remains largely unexplored elsewhere.

So far, this essay's efforts have been placed on contemporary folk horror films that extend the genre's long-standing affair with hauntology. That is not the case of the work of Ari Aster, whose films Hereditary and *Midsommar* are among the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed horror titles of recent years. Although *Hereditary* bears a folk horror influence, the focus here will be on *Midsommar*, a film that openly engages with the history of the subgenre. Again, music is a convenient starting point. The score to *Midsommar*, composed by the electronic artist The Haxan Cloak, presents a neat distinction between the folk-oriented orchestral pieces ("Fire Temple," "Maypole") and the asphyxiating, over-pitched string pieces that, recycling a well-trodden horror trope, are reserved for the most shocking and horrifying scenes. The merger of digital and analogue present in *A Field in England* or *The VVitch* is nowhere to be found here. The score does include electronic elements, but they are not on an equal footing with its folk numbers, nor is there any amalgamation between the two. Unlike Wheatley and Eggers, Aster is not interested in the hauntological exploration of the time-wound through music. In fact, it could be argued that he is not interested in exploring the time-wound at all. Although *Midsommar* takes place in the present day, its setting in a remote rural commune in Sweden suggests both a geographical and temporal dislocation. However, said dislocation is explored only through certain aesthetics features (e.g. the score's Nordic folk influence or the film's costume design), not through formal devices related to the very materiality of the film as in Eggers's or Wheatley's films. In Aster, the barrier between different temporalities and geographies remains firmly in place because there is no attempt to bring it down.

Returning to Jameson's definition of nostalgia as ahistorical revisionism is particularly useful when discussing *Midsommar* in these terms. As previously argued, historical explorations of material conditions are central to past and present folk horror titles. These precarious living conditions, always tightly bound to the land itself, are the driving forces behind the plots of *The Wicker Man*, where a sacrifice is needed after a season of failing crops, of *The VVitch*, in which hunger turns the family against each other, and even in titles set in the present day such as Wheatley's *Kill List*, where the economic recession of the late 2000s forces two former British soldiers to accept a job offered by a shady cult. These material concerns are all but absent in *Midsommar* other than in the form of a passing reference to climate change made by one of the cult leaders ("and what poetry that it's now the hottest and brightest summer on record") that is never picked up on again. Following Jameson, Aster's film could be regarded as nostalgic in that it is not interested in thinking in historical or material terms. Due to this refusal, *Midsommar*'s intense climax differs from the one in *A Field in England*. Both films make use of similar technical wonders during their drug-fuelled last acts, doing a commendable job of evoking horrific disorientation through dizzy camera work and nightmarish music. The difference is that the formal blurring of temporalities grants Wheatley's film a historical dimension. By presenting these aesthetic components in dialogue with the past, *A Field in England* interrogates notions of decay and historical progress, whereas *Midsommar*'s ending remains impressive merely aesthetically. This contrast brings back to mind Fisher's and Reynold's defence of hauntology against nostalgia. Both are representations of backward glances, but hauntology ventures beyond aesthetics and encourages historical and political discussions of art.

Because of its ahistoricism, *Midsommar*'s relationship to folk horror works mostly as an aesthetic scaffold on which its familiar horrors are built. Unlike the folk horrors previously mentioned, Aster's film is not concerned with historical explorations of time and place but with the expression of affect. Like Ari Aster's 2017 debut *Hereditary*, *Midsommar* wears its scares on its sleeve: the film starts with a shocking image, as the protagonist's sister kills her parents and commits suicide. It is not so much the deaths themselves that cause the shock but Aster's insistence on showing us the pain they inflict on Dani, the protagonist. Aster continues folk horror's long-standing history of incorporating elements from other genres. The expression of grief by female characters is a recurrent trait in his work, which finds a middle ground between folk horror and exploitative, torture porn[10] films like *Hostel* or *Saw*. The difference in that, in Aster's case, the torture is not only physical but also emotional. Aster's focus on pain not caused by physical threat but by emotional distress offers a twist on folk horror's strategy

[10] Like folk horror, torture porn is another heavily contested subgenre. For an in-depth discussion of torture porn, see Steve Jones's book *Torture Porn: Popular Horror after Saw* (2013). The term is here to refer to a number of horror films released in the 21st century that are "primarily based around protagonists being imprisoned in confined spaces and subjected to physical and/or psychological suffering." (Jones 13).

of affect through the appearance of diegetic audiences complicit with the horrific events. *Midsommar* presents two of these complicit diegetic audiences. The most obvious one is the Swedish dish cult, whose members celebrate the brutal sacrifices taking place during the festival. However, there is also a complicit audience to Dani's grief from the very first scenes, as Christian and his friends remain apathetic to her tragedy, if not dismissive. Aster's incorporation of torture porn tropes into folk horror grants his films a sense of reckoning with grief and fear that goes beyond life-threatening bodily agony.

Like with *The VVitch* or *A Field in England*, the spectre of familiarity haunts *Midsommar*.[11] Unlike the two previously mentioned films, however, *Midsommar* only engages with these spectres aesthetically, through the sort of ahistorical aping decried by Fredric Jameson as "the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language" (17). In this sense, *Midsommar* is a fitting example of art born out of the nostalgia mode favoured in late capitalism. Whereas Eggers's and Wheatley's films engage with the past through symbiotic dialogue, Aster simply stares at it from afar, letting past and present stand as clearly separate entities. Although its exploration of grief is novel for folk horror, *Midsommar* can ultimately be seen as folk horror pastiche: it does not engage with its past ghosts through formal conversation but is simply satisfied with wearing their mask.

VI. Conclusions

The contrasting ways in which the folk horror revival films tackle their relationship with their past signals the opening of two diverging paths for folk horror. In the first one, traversed by *The VVitch* or *A Field in England*, the films engage in symbiotic dialogue with their ghosts through formal devices, linking their concern with temporality to the material fabric that shape them. The second path, best exemplified by *Midsommar*, involves a willing refusal to start a conversation with these ghosts. As has been demonstrated, connecting the folk horror revival to the wider conversation on late capitalist cultural production produces illuminating results on both counts, going beyond making value judgement on the aesthetic merits of these films. We can therefore conclude by stating that, in its myriad ways, the folk horror revival is paradigmatic of current modes of cultural logic.

A solid argument has been made for hauntology as an effective theoretical framework to explore the new American folk horror, particularly when placed in opposition to its British counterpart. There are good reasons why hauntology remains mostly a field of study concerned with British films and music, and as previously explained, the magnitude of formal explorations of time and place is greater in the films of Ben Wheatley than in Aster's, or even Eggers's. However, an effort should be made to free hauntology from its constraining

[11] This familiarity is amplified by the film's paratext, perhaps more tellingly with the casting of William Jackson Harper as an out-of-place intellectual in what is effectively a reprise of the actor's role in the popular Netflix sitcom *The Good Place* (2016-2020).

Britishness, as its usefulness as a critical tool to inspect art's relationship with its past overcomes all geographical bindings. Hauntology's concern with alternative heritage could open the door to an expansion of American folk horror film beyond the current revival, helping to draw up a genealogy of the subgenre that includes texts not previously studied under this light.

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SCHIZOID MASCULINITY AND MONSTROUS INTERIORS IN AMERICAN HAUNTED HOUSE NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose that the haunted house narrative, so central to American Gothic, has itself mutated in response to a backdrop of post-millennial social, political and financial collapse in a manner quite different to developments in the rest of the Gothic literary world. The narrative strand which has emerged presents the reader with a new form of the Gothic male protagonist, whom the British psychologist R.D. Laing would describe as a 'schizoid' subject (Laing 17). Fragile, failing and fragmenting, he escapes a failing career, marriage and parenthood by removing his family to a quasi-domestic space which promises repair. Often combining work and home, the house rises up to meet the male schizoid, not merely as the traditional Gothic setting, but as a sentient being; a monster in its own right. His entrapment in this new Gothic labyrinth that is constantly shifting, expanding and shrinking, provides a performative stage on which the schizoid male is forced into an existential crisis beyond the trauma of spousal and parental failure, ultimately forcing him to confront what it is to exist in space and time. A reaction to the rise of neo-liberalism and toxic masculinity, this type of narrative embraces the multiplicity of the Gothic's new forms and is evident in texts 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). Developing from their deeper roots in the Calvinist Gothic tradition of Hawthorne, Brockden Brown and Poe via the mid-century works of Stephen King and Robert Marasco, these new post- millennial narratives provide a space in which notions of masculine subjectivity are fundamentally challenged.

Keywords: schizoid, Bachelard, quasi-domestic space, masculinity, cosmic terror.

I. THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW STRAND OF THE AMERICAN HAUNTED HOUSE NARRATIVE

The haunted house has always existed at the heart of the Gothic mode, first as castles and country houses and latterly as suburban homes, prisons, asylums and hotels, providing a liminal space in which the protagonist is confronted by the supernatural. As Catherine Spooner points out in *The Contemporary Gothic*, the Gothic operates like a "malevolent virus" (8),

constantly mutating in response to contemporary anxieties such as gender, class and socio-political concerns. In this article I will be presenting a new iteration of the haunted house narrative in which the male protagonist is presented, not merely as unstable or insane, but as a subject in a more complex state of insanity. Most importantly, this subject finds himself in a hybridized setting, part domestic (in that it serves some or all of the functions of a home) and part workplace (either as a hotel, prison, asylum or where the character works from home). This setting does not simply provide a passive architectural space in which a haunting can occur, but responds to the presence of the masculine subject becoming a sentient being, a monster in his own right. This hybridized, quasi-domestic space then proceeds to mutate in ways that develop the traditional notion of the labyrinth into an architectural space that is intended to drive the fragile, schizoid protagonist into a confrontation with his deepest fears, memories and traumas. In identifying this key development in the haunted house trope, I aim to explain how the Gothic affect created is not in the more conventional sense of the sublime, the numinous or simply terror in the reader, but a more unsettling sense of Heideggerian angst at a cosmological level, generating a sense of nihilistic hopelessness. I will be identifying the historical origins and development of this new haunted house iteration that focuses specifically on the white middle class male, from its origins in the 1940s, as well as exploring the psychological construction of the male protagonist, the nature of the architectural space and the key contextual factors which have influenced its flourishing in the eco-gothic and new sub-genres of the Gothic from 2000 to the present day.

When early Gothic literature relocated its settings from an othered Catholic Europe at the end of the eighteenth century to the various home grounds of England, Scotland and America in works such as William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), the protagonist of the haunted house tale changed gender from female to male, acquired a family and downsized from the ancient castle to a more domestic setting. Rebecca Janicker sees the early haunted castles of European eighteenth century narratives as "crude symbols of menace rather than the meaningful encounters with complex supernatural entities that appear in later haunted house fiction" (Janicker 82). Kate Ferguson Ellis tracks the development of the nineteenth century idea of the middle-class abode as the "safe sphere of home" against the literary trope of the castle acting as the "dark opposite." It is a result of the development of "separate spheres for men and women," she claims, in which the home (the private sphere) became the specific domain of women while the new, industrialised world of work (the public sphere) became that of men (Ellis x). While many critics have commented on the setting of the haunted house, the focus has typically been on locating the home as a feminised, maternal or queer space. However, some of the recent work on the queer male protagonist and domestic space has been very pertinent, such as the work of Gero Bauer and Andrew Hock Soon Ng. Bauer explains the changes in the way that homes were occupied during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, recognising the shift to the "emergence of modern civil society" and observing the

resulting emergence of "new spatial arrangements" in the home to reflect the development of these public and private spheres (Bauer 17). He identifies in this development the emergence of the closet as a "specifically masculine space for men"—in which was housed the "resources needed to master the world" (Bauer 21). However, Bauer defines this space as one in which men conceal their homosexuality and so does not account for the role of the heterosexual male in Gothic domestic spaces. Hock Soon Ng does begin to identify the emergence of a symbiotic relationship between setting and protagonist, identifying "architecture" as "capable of implicitly influencing its occupant's subjectivity" (Ng 17). Overall, however, there is little written that explores the relationship between the heteronormative, white male protagonist and the broadly domestic setting that now features so prominently in contemporary American Gothic narratives.

The switch in gender of the protagonist might simply be more directly tracked alongside the transference of this particular strand of the Gothic to its New World setting, shifting as it does from the labyrinthine castles of the mode's European origin in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), to the middle-class houses to be seen in the works of writers like Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, reflecting the more egalitarian, post-revolutionary political foundations of a newly established American nation. The innocent young orphan girl is replaced by the independent young man, more representative of the themes of universal suffrage and the pioneer spirit key to America's search for its political ideals. In the aftermath of two World Wars, the Great Depression and the twin threats of the atomic bomb and the Cold War America, the twentieth century produces the beginnings of a more divergent instantiation of the motif. In particular, the horror films of the 1970s saw a return to the original and more visually tempting female protagonist, and this is reflected even earlier in the post-war works of a burgeoning number of female writers such as Shirley Jackson—and perhaps most famously, in the character of Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House*—such representations engaging with the changing attitudes to women that arise in the post-war era. Yet more importantly for my argument, the 1970s also sees the emergence of a new kind of male protagonist and a novel strain of the haunted house motif referred to by the Gothic writer Stephen Graham Jones as the "hungry house" in his introduction to Robert Marasco's novel, *Burnt Offerings* (200).

This new expression of the "haunted house" narrative reflects ongoing changes in the way that domestic architectural space is conceived and inhabited. The spaces described in texts that are part of this trope should now be described more accurately as hybridized, quasi-domestic spaces which are both home and workplace, reflecting the conflicted nature of employment and family life for the excessively troubled male protagonist, who reflects the dramatic political and social upheaval of post-millennium America. This expresses a fundamental collapse of American masculinity so extreme, that these entrapped, troubled men are left with few options except to consider their very existence. The most recent examples of this divergent haunted house form occur in texts published post-2000, such as *House of Leaves* by

Mark Z. Danielewski (2000), Thomas Ligotti's *The Town Manager* (2008), Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* (2005), Steve Rasnic Tem's *Deadfall Hotel* (2012), Grady Hendrix's *Horrorstör* (2014), Jon Padgett's *The Secret of Ventriloquism*, (2016) and Shaun Hamill's *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020); novels that generate a powerful Gothic affect—an unspecified, nihilistic, cosmic terror—that deeply unsettles the reader. It was not, however, the first outing for this new iteration, which could be seen to originate in L. Ron Hubbard's novella *Fear* published in 1941, though it really begins to develop in the 1970s with classic novels like Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), Anne Rivers Siddons *The House Next Door* (1978) and the short stories of Steve Rasnic Tem of the 1980s.

The more recent short stories and novels published in the 2000s occur within the context of what the journalist Hannah Rosin sees as the loss of "the old architecture of manliness" (Rosin 8). In her account of the latest American crisis of masculinity, Rosin describes a "mancession," as occurring thanks to the "post manufacturing age" dating from the recessions of the 1990s. She posits that the American male is left with only the "mancessories" of masculinity: "jeans and pickup trucks and designer switchblades, superheroes and thugs who rant and rave on TV and, at the end of the season, fade back into obscurity" (Rosin 9). She goes on to quote from Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*, who describes masculinity as "ornamental" (qtd. in Rosin 9). It is precisely this loss of the traditional concrete markers of masculine identity that seems to lie at the heart of this trope of haunted masculinity. In the premises of this kind of Gothic text, the male characters are in peril of losing everything that would identify them as a heteronormative, white man: the expected role as patriarch, a wife and children, their career and pride in their abilities as breadwinners. The "hungry house" to which they decide to escape, in the belief that it will allow them to re-establish their traditional masculine identity, is revealed to be a dangerous space where they are confronted by a truth which will exacerbate their existential crisis and force them into a schizoid state. I argue that these texts reflect contemporary fears of an end of patriarchy and the notion that American men will soon have no option but to re-engineer the traditional, patriarchal image of themselves, perhaps best represented by images of men in the 1950s, as the paterfamilias living the American Dream of home, family and stable career into a new, as yet unformulated model of masculinity, whose construction is fraught by "conflicting or unmanageable social expectations" (Connell 23). The traditional models of American masculinity have been drained of any meaning and those that are suggested as replacements elicit the recurring fear of feminisation and powerlessness. Faludi observes that men in the 1990s became like a 1950s housewife, "stripped of his connections to a wider world and invited to fill the void with consumption and a gym-bred display of his ultra-masculinity" (Faludi 823).

Faludi's suggestion here is that men have lost their connections to the traditional homosocial dimension of work and such loss sets them adrift, unable to fulfil the traditional heteronormative performative roles of father, husband, and most importantly, the subject who has symbolic control over the home and its physical spaces through its purchase and maintenance.

In Stephen King's novel *The Shining*, for example, Jack Torrance has lost his job as a teacher and his career as a writer is stalled. The opportunity to move to the Overlook Hotel provides him with a traditionally practical and masculine role as caretaker. In Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Will Navidson is forced into his "cozy little outpost" (Danielewski 8) to perform the role of husband and father but finds that this home refuses to be obedient to his wishes. Both Jack's and Will's careers belong to sectors outside those traditionally associated with American masculine ideals—which revolve around steel and oil industries, as well as manufacturing processes such as car assemblage. Such occupations demand participation in the homosocial public sphere, allowing men to publicly demonstrate their economic power and to dominate in the private domestic sphere. Will's career as a photojournalist and Jack's unsuccessful career as a writer require solitary work, outside both private and public spheres, demonstrating purely intellectual and aesthetic qualities which result in the production of the symbolic representation of actions, rather than the tangible products of traditional manufacturing industries. Jack's ostensible career teaching in a private school is one that he rejects as representing his sense of economic powerlessness and lack of status in the homosocial sphere.

Like Faludi and Rosin, Michael S. Kimmel points out that the American blue collar male worker has been hard hit by economic recession. He notes that, "80 percent of all the jobs lost since November 2008—a number in excess of 5 million—were jobs held by men." (Kimmel 14), while Rosin argues that the increasing predominance of a "service and information economy" rewards skills traditionally associated with women rather than men, such as, "social intelligence, open communication, the ability to sit still and focus" (Rosin 5). The focus of this Gothic form on protagonists who are writers, teachers or employed in "service industries" directly parallels the economic decline of those American industries most associated with men and the concomitant fears of feminization.

Historian Howard Zinn provides a crucial historical underpinning to the arguments of critics like Faludi, Rosin and Kimmel by delineating the origins of America's economic structures during the nineteenth century rise of industrialist elites, embodied by figures such as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. These magnates controlled the most economically powerful industries—railways, steel and oil—and quickly learned to join hands financially and politically in order to create "an interlocking network of powerful corporation directors" (Zinn 258). The government (often consisting of members of the wealthy industrialist elite) always sought to promote economic and social stability. Nonetheless, the pattern of economic boom and bust that was established and persistent levels of unrest and workers' strikes of the period seem to support Zinn's socialist critique, based on the idea that "the capitalist system was by its nature unsound: a system driven by one overriding motive of corporate profit and therefore unstable, unpredictable and blind to human needs" (Zinn 387). He points out that the middle classes in America exist as a kind of aspirational steppingstone to the world of the super-rich upper classes. To maintain the illusion of the American Dream as a political tool for control of the masses, according to Zinn, the government has always ensured that the

economy was "doing just well enough for just enough people to prevent mass rebellion" (Zinn 382). It can be no accident then that the male protagonists in the post-millennial texts I explore such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Steve Rasnic Tem's *Deadfall Hotel* (2012) and Shaun Hamill's *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020) are middle class. These texts suggest that American men perceive middle class status to be a kind of Gothic liminal space that simply exists to be traversed on the way to membership of the upper classes. A sense of Gothic tension for the middle-class American male is derived from his being subjected to the constant double threat of failure to move into the upper class and the risk of falling back into the working class.

This kind of protagonist is described as psychologically unstable, just as his position in American society throughout history has always been a precarious one. He is engaged in a struggle to inhabit the liminal space of the middle class, a space whose ill-defined borders move, shift, disappear and reappear at the mercy of the vagaries of an inherently unstable economy. The mutating nature of the settings I explore reflects this economic uncertainty, especially as this aspect has become especially marked as the home begins to merge with the workplace thanks to the development of technology and the necessities of the COVID-19 pandemic. In all the texts examined, a hybridization between the home and the workplace becomes increasingly marked: in *The Shining* the protagonist is a resident caretaker; in *House of Leaves*, while Navidson claims at first that he just wants, "to create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children" (Danielewski 8), he also uses that record to gain funding so he can turn the experience into a documentary. (Danielewski 10). In more recent novels, the hybridisation of the domestic setting becomes more complex. Grady Hendrix's 2014 novel *Horrorstör* is set in an IKEA-style store laid out as a labyrinth of fake domestic rooms in which the protagonists seek to escape the malevolent presence of the Victorian prison which lies beneath its foundations. Shaun Hamill's *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020) is set in the protagonist's home, which is also where he and his family plan and build their family business, a haunted house attraction.

II. LAING'S SCHIZOID PROTAGONIST

To analyse the development of this fragile male protagonist and to explore the reasons for the changes observed, it is key to focus on the connections existing between the psychology of the gendered male subject and the social conditions of his production. In this article, I draw on the ideas put forward in R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1964), His account of the schizoid subject allows a more nuanced and revealing exploration of this aspect of American Gothic narrative than is possible with other more modern accounts of masculine subjectivity.

Laing, a member of the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s, reacted against mainstream Freudian psychoanalysis, proposing his view that the Freudian approach resulted in a series of binary oppositions that split the patient's behaviour into normal/abnormal too reductively:

> The most serious objection to the technical vocabulary currently used to describe psychiatric patients is that it consists of words which split man up verbally in a way which is analogous to the existential splits unless we can begin from the concept of a unitary whole, and no such concept exists, nor can any such concept be expressed within the current language system of psychiatry or psychoanalysis (Laing 19).

For Laing then, it seemed to make no sense to begin from a point where the subject was treated as a mere set of symptoms outside the context of the subject's relationship to others and the world: "This difficulty faces not only classical Freudian metapsychology but equally any theory that begins with man or part of man abstracted from his relation with the other in his world […] we can be ourselves only in and through our world" (Laing 19). Laing wanted to move away from the Freudian focus on the past as the key motivating factor for psychological disturbance. What he believed was that the production of the self was to be found in the subject's interaction with others and the world and indeed, Laing clearly references Heidegger's notion of "dasein"—or "being in the world" in his introduction: "I shall try to show that there is a comprehensible transition from the sane, schizoid way of 'being-in-the-world' to a psychotic way of being-in-the-world" (Laing 19). This framework allows us to carry out a more detailed analysis of how this now masculine subjectivity is constructed; to focus not just on their family/childhood history, but on their immediate and wider social context.

III. Jack Torrance's Ontological Insecurity

The schizoid male protagonist is not just "insane" in the sense that characterises the nineteenth century narrators of Edgar Allan Poe's *Black Cat* (1843) or *William Wilson* (1839), for example. Rather, he is described in the "modern" manner identified by Laing as "schizoid." Laing details the schizoid subject as having "a rent in his relations with his world" and "a disruption of his relation with himself," so he is "not able to experience himself together with others" or be "at home in the world," and is therefore forced to live in "despairing aloneness and isolation," unable to "experience himself as a complete person but rather as "split" in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves" (Laing 17). According to Laing, the schizoid subject longs to be seen and understood by those around them but this is coupled with a crippling fear that this recognition will result in their "engulfment"—that is to say, the fear that their identity will be consumed and absorbed by the other. Their response to this conflict is to split into a "true self," which preserves their authentic self, and a "false self," which presents a mask or persona to the outside world that allows them to avoid engulfment. The pressure of this conflict often forces the schizoid subject to avoid the threat of engulfment by isolating themselves from others or by objectifying them in order to depersonalise them and so make them less of a threat. As a result, the schizoid subject will often prefer to be hated by others as a way of avoiding relationships that could result in engulfment. In this new iteration of the haunted house narrative, therefore, we see male protagonists like Jack Torrance whose ontological insecurity was propelled by an unpredictably

cruel and violently abusive father: "'Runt of the litter,' he would say, and then cuff Jack lovingly and laugh" (King 244). His father's cruelty to his wife and sons leaves Jack with a deep-rooted inability to maintain relationships which are always already compromised and whose psychic construction is correspondingly fragile. Jack himself recognises that his experiences have left him broken psychologically, in effect diagnosing his own schizoid nature: "there was a broken switch somewhere inside, or a circuit breaker that didn't work" (King 177). Jack's schizoid tendencies are first revealed by his horrified and guilty reactions when he breaks his son Danny's arm, enraged after the boy spilled beer on the manuscript of his play. Coupled with the conflicts intrinsic to his failing marriage, this event exacerbates his fear of engulfment by his family. Jack reacts by indulging in lengthy drinking binges with his friend Al Shockley and groups of students through which he seeks to avoid his inability to be, as Laing would put it, "alone with himself in the world," yet fulfil his need to be "seen and recognized, in order to maintain his sense of realness and identity" (Laing 114).

Jack's presence in the Overlook hotel prompts it to change its shape; the Colorado Lounge, its bar stripped of alcohol for the winter, is returned to its 1920s heyday, populated with partygoers and its bar restocked and staffed by the barman, Lloyd, who forces Jack to confront the alcoholism that threatens his marriage. The ghosts of staff members, bartender Lloyd and murderous caretaker Delbert Grady, appear in order to goad Jack with his fear of engulfment suggesting that "[a] man who cannot guide the course of his own wife and son can hardly be expected to guide himself" (King 390). Jack's intention to rewrite himself literally and metaphorically in order to repair the threatened psychotic split is derailed, just as is his early writing success as his writer's block returns. The constant work inherent to the maintenance of the hotel piles the pressure on his mental condition as Jack needs to make daily repairs and monitor the furnace. Indeed, many of the texts that form part of this trend reference the space's tendency to decay and parasitic infestation such as those of insects and cats experienced in Tem's *Deadfall Hotel*. Ultimately, the combination of career-related pressure, family conflict, taunting of the ghostly staff and exacting nature of the constant maintenance lead to an exaggeration of Jack's failings, resulting in what Laing calls petrification. Jack begins to disengage emotionally from his wife and son, "'I love you too,' he said, but he was only mouthing the words" (King 294). Jack's petrification is accompanied by the process of depersonalisation—in order to survive, Jack must reduce others to the role of objects who pose no threat of engulfment but can provide "constant confirmation …… of his own existence as a person" (Laing 46). At first, he begins to refer to his wife Wendy and son Danny, not by name as previously, but only as "bitch," or "the boy" (King 443). Tormented by his own sense of failure, Jack's behaviour becomes typical of the patterns described by Laing as he oscillates between extremes: "complete isolation or complete merging" (Laing 53), until he feels the urge to "throttle" Wendy and physically abuse Danny: "The sound of Jack's open palm striking Danny" (King 295, 323). Eventually, the split in Jack's personality is so complete that he is left with "no sense of existence as a 'unitary whole'" (Laing 19), as recognised by Danny at the

end of the novel: "It wore many masks, but it was all one. Now, somewhere, it was coming for him. It was hiding behind Daddy's face, it was imitating Daddy's voice, it was wearing Daddy's clothes. But it was not his daddy" (King 466). Jack realises that the hotel is sentient and it is explicitly working to do him harm and that, "the Overlook was having one hell of a good time" (King 308) in doing so.

IV. Will Navidson's Ontological Insecurity

In *House of Leaves*, Will Navidson's ontological insecurity begins with the protagonist's dysfunctional childhood which bears a resemblance to that of Jack Torrance's in *The Shining*. His family experience is marked by a highly dysfunctional father, "an alcoholic prone to violent outbursts or disappearing for long periods of time" and a mother who "left them all to pursue a career as an actress" (Danielewski 22). However, the key event that drives his schizoid split is the choice to photograph Delial, the "Sudanese child dying of starvation, too weak to move even though a vulture stalks her from behind…" rather than save her from her condition (Danielewski 368).

Will is initially very close to his fraternal twin Tom but the relationship serves to represent the splitting of Will's true and false self, highlighted by Danielewski's comparison to the biblical twins Jacob and Esau. While their ontological insecurity has the same cause, Tom and Will exhibit contrasting schizoid responses that result in the splitting of all positive and negative qualities between the two of them. Compared to Navidson's success, "Tom won no awards, achieved no fame, held no job for more than a year or two…" (Danielewski 246). Their estrangement occurs when Will marries and has children which leads to Tom describing himself as "orphaned at the age of forty" (Danielewski 250), and reflecting that "he felt like a part of him had been ripped away" (Danielewski 319), these experiences allowing the true and false selves to exist independently.

The ontological insecurity caused by his childhood and the guilt over abandoning Delial, simply exaggerates Will's fear of engulfment, causing him to seek isolation by being constantly away from home. Just as Wendy threatens to leave Jack Torrance if he does not give up drinking, Will's wife Karen threatens divorce if he does not settle down to create a proper family home. Consequently, the family moves into the house at Ash Tree Lane which his son Chad immediately perceives as sentient; he says: "It's like something is waiting" and the house then proceeds to catalyse Navidson's schizoid split (Danielewski 9). As Laing says, the schizoid subject is "torn between his desire to reveal himself and his desire to conceal himself" (Laing 37) and when forced into the family home, he resorts to recreating it as a workplace, distancing himself from the family by turning the process into a documentary. Will has no direct voice within the novel, his character is constructed through third person accounts and a series of films that, at first, seem to be like an artful and persuasive construction of his position on the side-lines of reality, observing others. He does so always with the intention of

somehow manipulating his audience to believe in his constructed false-self, by not hesitating to "constantly include in his film evidence of his own failings" (Danielewski 17).

Like the Outlook Hotel for Jack Torrance, the house at Ash Tree Lane awakens to Will's presence. While the family are away for a weekend a mysterious closet appears in the master bedroom. Will's measurements of the space tell him it cannot exist in reality: "The width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by ¼"" (Danielewski 30). During the course of the novel, the closet proceeds to expand into grey-black and featureless rooms, corridors and staircases that constantly change shape and defy the laws of physics. Unable to control this space, that should be at his command, Will invites Tom, who possesses all the traditional, practical skills usually associated with American masculinity, to help him investigate the strange happenings in his home; it is clear to the reader that the arrival of Tom is, to an extent, an attempt to heal Will's psychic split.

Initially forbidden by Karen to enter the space, Will has to send in substitutes for himself in the form of Tom and a team of experienced explorers but it becomes clear that the person the house really wants is Will. Driving the team to madness and murder in its ever-expanding and mutating rooms and corridors, the house finally swallows Tom alive: the house is literally the "hungry house" and willing to force the protagonist into its depths. Once inside, Will is finally trapped on a balcony overlooking a bottomless abyss and he is left, quite impossibly, with only a printed copy of *House of Leaves* and enough matches to read it by. The documentary film he has been working on records his descent into madness as the balcony disappears and he falls into the void: "So there is no bottom. It does not exist for me. Only my end exists" (Danielewski 472). While Jack Torrance dies at the end of *The Shining*—unable to reconstitute his schizoid split—Will Navidson survives. Rescued from the house by his wife Karen, he emerges alive but emotionally and physically damaged in an unexpectedly positive resolution. As with many of the texts that belong to this strand of the haunted house narrative, the male protagonist emerges from his experience in the hungry house made whole, but always with a caveat. Reunited with his family, the final images of Navidson carry a dark existential warning—that existence is always under threat from unknowable cosmological forces. As Will films his children trick or treating, he captures "the empty road beyond, a pale curve vanishing into the words where nothing moves and a streetlamp flickers on and off until at last it flickers out and darkness sweeps in like a hand" (Danielewski 528).

V. Identifying the Monstrous Interior

To analyse the symbiotic inter-relationship between the male protagonist and the sentient quasi-domestic setting in these narratives, it becomes necessary to go beyond the concept of the haunted house as simply a liminal space which hosts a supernatural manifestation and focus more closely on the psychological function of specific architectural spaces within the home. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, published in 1958, remains a highly influential work on the philosophy of architecture and provides a way of considering how the quasi-

domestic space can set about influencing its occupants. It is referenced in the extensive footnotes of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and the 2014 Penguin edition of *The Poetics of Space* opens with a foreword written by Danielewski himself, in which he says Bachelard's work "has everything to do with how our comprehension of space, however confined or expansive, still affords us an opportunity to encounter the boundaries of the self just as they are about to give way" (Bachelard vii). This statement supports my view that Bachelard's theory has great potential in the criticism of Gothic literature, providing a framework to understand the domestic space in its widest sense. In her consideration of the relationship between Bachelard and Gothic space, Rebecca Janicker helpfully points out that "any space which is regularly used by, and thus bears the mark of, human occupants can fundamentally be seen as a kind of 'home away from home'," meaning that a space such as the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*, becomes a domestic space in the same manner as the traditional home in *House of Leaves* (Janicker 397). For Janicker, these Gothic domestic spaces serve to provide "encounters with ghostly presences that work to estrange protagonists from their daily lives, forcing them to see previously-accepted versions of their "reality in a very different light" (Janicker 430).

The application of Bachelard's theories on narrative and space is a relatively unexplored line of investigation in the Gothic field, having only emerged in the last twenty years. It has been adopted by a range of critics including Fred Botting in his article: "Horrorspace: Reading *House of Leaves*" (2015), Dylan Trigg in *Topophobia: A Phenomenology of Anxiety* (2017) and Katherine Hayles in "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*." However, currently only Townshend has moved beyond the interpretation of the symbolic nature of space to articulate the relationship between character and space in terms of topophilic or topophobic environments, and at the moment there is no research exploring the relationship between setting and protagonist using both Laing and Bachelard. My approach might be viewed as philosophic rather than literary, but I argue that it redresses the gaps in current literary theory that prevents it investigating the existential nature of the relationship that I believe arises in this emerging, sentient space that shapes male subjectivity in a way that goes beyond that extends beyond psychoanalytic means.

We can draw from Bachelard's critical frame when approaching these haunted house texts in order to identify the role that the individual spaces of the settings play in the ontological crisis undergone by the protagonists. Bachelard appears to capture the quintessence of what it is about the relationship between inhabitant and space serving to illuminate why the spaces in *The Shining* and *House of Leaves* appear to become the living monsters of the text. Bachelard argues for the "trans-subjectivity of the image"—the fluidity of meaning that occurs between subject and object within an architectural landscape—that he considers to be like a "phenomenological experiment" which is exactly what occurs inside the Overlook and the House at Ash Tree Lane (Bachelard xix). In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard sets out to create a literary taxonomy of rooms, making many references to Gothic literature such as the works of Poe. Within such a taxonomy, the closet of *House of Leaves* would be associated with order and

identity for Bachelard and so the fact that it is the closet whose impossible proportions irrupt within the home at the centre of *House of Leaves*, implies disorder from the outset. It is no surprise that, associated as they are with greater clarity of thinking, higher floors (as in above ground level) rarely appear in in the novel; however, the novel describes a wealth of staircases which, for Bachelard are always heading downwards to cellars which generate an "anthropocosmic fear" (Bachelard 23). These are coupled in *House of Leaves* with functionless empty rooms, endless corridors and corners which all imply uncertainly and transition.

VI. Conclusion

This iteration of the haunted house narrative can therefore be seen to emerge set against the decade of recession that would lead up to the rise of neo-liberalism under Ronald Reagan's presidency. *The Shining* delivers one of the earliest representations of the crisis of masculinity as Jack Torrance struggles to reconcile the traditional values of the 1950s he has inherited from his father with the more modern ideas of fatherhood emerging in the 1970s. The Overlook Hotel is represented not just as the setting of the novel, but as a character in its own right. The hotel manager Ullman's detailed account of the hotel's history recounts its passage through the hands of its successive owners: the capitalist adventurers, the politicians, the prohibition gangsters and culminating in the faceless corporations of the 1970s, much as any character in a narrative might be introduced. Such framing presents the hotel as a place which not only provides a setting for the action of the narrative, but also exists to situate Jack within a microcosm embodying the society that results in the contemporary crisis of American masculinity.

In narratives written post-2000, the representation of domestic space becomes more complex and explicitly threatening for a protagonist whose fears and anxieties have become more terrifying in a world of vanishing solutions. Accounts of specific rooms become more highly charged and their changes become more pronounced and claustrophobic. Will Navidson's eighteenth century, colonial home, embodies all the traditional ideals of the American Dream, but instead of providing the "cozy little outpost for me and my family. A place to drink lemonade on the porch and watch the sun set" (Danielewski 8), it revolts against him to reveal the futility of his existence on a cosmological scale, generating a sprawling black, featureless underworld of staircases, corridors and empty rooms whose existence defies the laws of physics.

Spaces in these narratives mutate with the specific intent to provoke a Heideggerian sense of angst in the protagonist. For Bachelard, the home is an oneiric space of memory and this is a key function of the sentient, simulacral and hybridised spaces found in this haunted house trope: the unmappable, decaying labyrinth of the hotel in Tem's *Deadfall Hotel*, the constantly reformulated haunted house attractions of Hamill's *A Cosmology of Monsters* and the home in Ellis's *Lunar Park* which slowly mutates into the protagonist's childhood home, all serve to return him to his key memories of trauma, forcing him into an existential crisis. Descriptions consist predominantly of corridors and corners which, for Bachelard, always imply

change and transition, perhaps explaining how post-millennial protagonists survive the hungry house when pre-millennials do not. The message is that he exists in an incomplete and transitional state, doomed to failure, and worse, subject to the whims of the cosmos. The price of survival for the schizoid male protagonist seems to be the realisation that traditional models of American masculinity, and indeed of humanity itself, have failed him and the solution is to retreat to a vanished past, accept a "diminished" masculine model or become obsolete. The Gothic affect of the narratives in this strand of the haunted house narrative therefore induces a terror in the reader that goes beyond simply failure as a husband, father and worker to embrace the terror of existence itself. In the end, it is Laing's sense of existential crisis which aligns Bachelard's taxonomy so well with this new Gothic trope. Laing perfectly describes the existential crisis forced upon the protagonist by the sentient, hungry house comparing it to the world created on stage by Samuel Beckett: "With Samuel Beckett, for instance, one enters a world in which there is no contradictory sense of the self in its 'health and validity' to mitigate the despair, terror, and boredom of existence" (Laing 40).

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MISCELLANEA

American Influence and Representation in Japanese manga and anime—BNHA's All Might

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ABSTRACT

When talking about manga, we are typically referring to Japanese comics. The term is often mistaken and used interchangeably with the word anime, which contrarily to the written comics refers to the animated adaptations of Manga or to original animation products. Since 1970, Japanese Manga and Anime have experienced an unprecedented popularity, introducing an innovative way of telling stories and portraying reality eventually absorbed into our Western culture. This article examines the animated series adaptation of Kohei Horikoshi's *Boku No Hero Akademia*, paying particular attention to one of the main characters: All Might.

Keywords: manga, anime, BNHA, American culture, Japanese culture, adaptation.

When talking about manga in Western popular culture, we are typically referring to Japanese printed and digital comics. Outside Japan, the term is often mistaken and used interchangeably with the term anime, which instead refers to the animated adaptations of manga, as well as original animation products. Since the 1970s, Japanese manga and anime have experienced an unprecedented popularity abroad (Brenner 11), introducing an innovative way of telling stories and portraying reality eventually absorbed into Western culture.

Among the first to use the term manga is Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), a Japanese artist, engraver, and painter who coined the word to describe his collection of drawings, pictures and sketches (Shodt, "Manga! Manga!" 35). With time, collections like those created by Hokusai and their natural evolution into more complex stories have become a solid base for other forms of art and media, such as anime indeed. While it might be easy to assume that anime is the natural evolution of manga, this process was far from linear and it was not developed within the limitations of Japanese culture. In fact, right after Hokusai's death, Japanese history witnessed an event that took a heavy toll on the country's culture and artistic expression. After obtaining its long-craved independence in 1776, the government of the

United States of America started a phase of expansion which—among its main goals—aimed at the annexation of the Southwest, pushed by a particular interest in the Pacific trade. In order to pursue this goal, in 1853 a representative of the government was sent to Japan with the task of establishing a commercial and political relationship. Yielding to the pressure, Japan had no choice but to open its ports and to begin trading with the United States, initiating a relationship whose strength would result in reciprocate indelible influence on both cultures. In fact, this period of continuous changes has been employed as the setting for historic narrations numerous times and has undoubtedly represented the start of a profound contamination of Western elements in the Japanese culture (Brenner 3).

I. Japan and the USA: The Origins of a Mutual Contamination

In such a political climate, Japan was bearing pressures from not only American but also European powers in search for new commercial deals. The Japanese government decided to take advantage of notions and innovations peculiar to the Western civilization to strengthen Japan rather than protecting its traditional culture. The period between the second half of the XIX century and the first years of the XX century provided to the Western world an extremely rich set of remarkable discoveries in both technological and scientific fields. Within a few decades, the world's first international exposition took place in London in 1851, the emancipation of slaves was proclaimed in the United States in 1863, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876, and just a couple of years later Edison refined the electric lamp. Meanwhile, Japan had just abolished the feudal system thanks to the so-called Meiji Restoration, the series of events which brought the governmental power back to the Emperor after two centuries of *shōgun* [military dictators] reign. The introduction of Western innovations in such a radically different society resulted in the creation of a tremendous gap between the lifestyle of the Japanese masses and the technological civilization pushed by the government. This phenomenon has been accurately explained by Dr. Raphael von Koeber, a German philosopher who spent eighteen years in Japan at the end of the XIX century:

> Japan's attitude in adopting European culture was problematic in every aspect. The Japanese did not try to transplant the roots of the plant, but simply cut off eye catching flowers. A a result the people who brought the flowers were respected enormously, but the plants that could have produced such blossoms did not come to grow in our country. (Watsuji 72)

From being extremely grateful for the gifts Western people were bringing to their country, Japanese people started to suffer an intense inferiority complex, which led them to believe to be unable of being agents of their own modernization. This inferiority complex survived this transition period and remained still even when Japan became a major military power (Irokawa 51–68).

Furthermore, a new period of intense cultural contamination was represented by the post-World War II American occupation of Japan, which lasted—at least officially—until 1952.

After the overwhelming defeat endured by Japanese people during the war, the country was characterized by a devastated landscape in which the only signs of civilization were the American soldiers patrolling in their jeeps. Even after the end of the occupation—thanks to the San Francisco treaty stipulated between the two countries—American soldiers remained on the Japanese islands taking advantage of a treaty's clause that allowed them to keep a series of military bases along the whole territory. Their presence in the cities and the image of those American men in uniform riding jeeps were assimilated in a drastically different way from local adults and children. From the adults' point of view, Americans were a constant reminder of their country's defeat, a symbol of loss and oppression; however, children often saw American soldiers as fascinating people driving extraordinary vehicles and dispensing free candies. With time, the charm radiated on children began to hit also the initially reluctant adults.

The jeep itself became the symbol of the American glamour almost immediately after the end of the war. The Japanese biggest economy driver was represented by the toys production industry, which began to take the American vehicle as a model for toy reproductions. The success of the toy grew frenziedly and unstoppable across the ocean. After Japanese children had bought and loved it, the little jeep spread also among American soldier in Japan who kept it on their real jeeps as a souvenir helping the toy to reach America itself. The diffusion of toys that represented or reproduced objects related to war and violence created a wave of nationwide protests in Japan around 1951, but despite the evident contribution of those toys (the jeep in particular) in idealistically transforming the oppressors in admirable allies, they were too loved by the public to be banned. Also, as Alt stated, "Thanks to toys, Japan could finally begin rebuilding it export trade. The only condition was that the products clearly be marked MADE IN OCCUPIED JAPAN" (12). At this point no past (and present) oppression, cruelty or injustice could stop Japan from being infected by the international idealization of American culture which still survives in the present days (Alt 12–24).

In this time frame Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989)—one of the founding fathers of Japanese manga and anime and often referred to as *manga no kamisana* [God of manga]—embodied more than anyone the American influence in the Japanese arts of the XIX century. Inspired by popular American cartoons and encouraged by the newly conquered Japanese freedom after the long period of censorship and oppression due to World War II, Tezuka Osamu started a massive production of manga. By then, the term manga had completely changed its meaning from the Hokusai's conception of it. Prior to Japan's modernization, the term was used by Hokusai and others as a collective word, referring to a certain quantity of drawings with different illustrations and styles not necessarily connected by a common narrative. By the time Tezuka Osamu began his artistic career, the term had already evolved to indicate a specific style of drawing and telling stories and was about to evolve again, gaining explicit references from modern novels and cinema (Berndt 3–6).

Tezuka focused his work on a specific genre that has been called *shōnen* up to the present. The word *shōnen* literally means "boy" or "youth" as originally the target of this genre

was supposed to be mainly composed by young boys. Angela Drummond-Mathews explained that "*Shōnen* manga typically follow the pattern of the heroic journey" (70), a concept elaborated by Joseph Campbell who studied the rites of passage that every hero has to deal with. Drawing on Campbell's work, Drummond-Mathews stated that

> The hero leaves a place of familiarity to cross a threshold or barrier into a world of unfamiliarity. [He/she] must suffer trials, usually with assistance from a helper figure or a shaman. The hero will likely suffer some kind of nadir and atonement that will be followed by gaining a boon, wisdom, power, or a magical item that can be brought back upon the return to benefit the world (70).

The post-war manga proposed by Tezuka Osamu also had a whole new printed format: the comic book were small, cheap, and characterized by red covers, often referred to as simply *akahon* [red] or "red books." Tezuka's signature and his innovative way of creating Japanese illustration can still be seen in the typical representation of the characters' big eyes, which do not resemble Japanese physical appearance but rather evoke all-American characters such as Betty Boop and Mickey Mouse. Although he was profoundly influenced by the American culture, the artist was successful in creating his own style: a mix between Japanese tradition and American innovation, that marked the start of a long history of Japanese manga and anime production. Tezuka was very fascinated by the cinematic techniques used by the animation works produced The Walt Disney Company and the Fleisher Studios, which led him to try and bring some of their methods into the manga productions. For example, he applied motion picture technology by drawing sketches while impersonating the role of a film director. He drew as if he was watching the scene through the camera lenses. He was also convinced that the manga format could be used to tell every kind of stories: from comedy to drama and from adventure to horror. For this reason, he was one of the first to conceive longer story arcs with deeper character developments (Brenner 6–7).

His early work is still celebrated as a masterpiece. For example, *Astro Boy* (1952), which was later adapted into an animated series, attracted the attention of Walt Disney who complimented Tezuka for his work and suggested a collaboration in the future. Similarly, *Jungle Emperor* (1954) gained growing popularity in the USA with the title of *Kimba the Lion*. When it was released in 1994, Disney's *The Lion King* sparked a controversy around the evident resemblances between the latest Disney cinematic masterpiece and Tezuka's work. A member of the Disney staff who collaborated on the project even referred to the film protagonist calling him "Kimba" but Roger Allers, one of the directors—who was later interviewed about the issue—declared that there was no connection between the two animated works. Moreover, it was in the public domain that Disney and Tezuka had worked together in the past, as some of Disney's graphic designers helped Tezuka's team with the use of color techniques for the animation of *Kimba the Lion*. In the early phases of the scripting of the animated series, the protagonist was even called "Simba" and only later adapted to "Kimba" to avoid a problem with the

legal registration of the commercial brand, since the word "Simba" means "lion" in African Swahili. Disney avoided the problem by excluding the protagonist's name from the title.

The end of the controversy came with an open letter to the Disney Studio sent by Machiko Satonaka, a well-known Japanese animator, in which she asked for a few lines regarding the origin of the story to be included in the movie. Satonaka's intentions were the ones of many Japanese artists and Tezuka's admirers; however, the Japanese mainstream public was too passionate about the Disney work to be involved in the controversy, that found its end soon after Stonaka's letter.

As the market of manga and anime kept growing, it also evolved giving space for more genres and categories to emerge. For example, people who fell in love with manga when they were kids struggled to find new stories that could satisfy their need of an adult representation, so the *gekiga* [dramatic pictures] genre was born. This new type of manga introduced adult themes into the narration, including morally gray characters, violence, sex, and criminality (Brenner 8). In the 1970s, the world of manga and anime also witnessed the birth of the *shōjo* [girl] genre targeted mainly at the female universe, with female creators and main characters producing a sort of female version of the *shōnen*.

Eventually, manga and anime reached worldwide popularity and pervasiveness even in the West, phenomenon that has been growing ever since. Through the years, the range of categories has become richer than ever, with thousands of titles and genres being available and new stories in the making. For example, a relevant further evolution is the emergence of digital comics, that is to say comics adapted for the digital format or even born specifically to be read on the screen. Even if the manga market is still strictly supported by the selling of physical copies, the digital formats have highly encouraged the diffusion of titles around the world.

Unsurprisingly, the US mainstream public has been extremely fascinated with Japanese manga and anime. In the 1990s, the US comics industry experienced a big manga boom, when editors finally conceded to the necessity of a massive translation work and distribution of Japanese titles which, until that moment, were spread only by committed fans. In short time, the Western public became familiar with the changes brought by manga and anime, including reading from right to left and watching anime episodes with English subtitles, thus sealing the mutual contamination that has begun over a century earlier (Brenner 11).

Such a cross-contamination has continued up to the present day and it has kept on bringing some American elements (and sometimes stereotypes) into very popular manga and anime. This paper will examine Kohei Horikoshi's *Boku No Hero Academia*, paying particular attention to one of the main characters: All Might.

II. Boku No Hero Academia

Boku No Hero Academia (commonly known to the international audience as *My Hero Academia*) is a *shōnen* manga created by Kohei Horikoshi and published for the first time by the Japanese

publisher Shueisha in 2014. As mentioned above, the intended audience for this kind of manga is represented by young boys and—as coming-of-age stories—the narrations often feature a set of treated themes such as family, friendship, sacrifice, and commitment in order to better themselves and/or achieve a particular goal. *Boku No Hero Academia* which is still being published after 31 *tankōbon* [volumes], presents all of these features and has almost immediately met the public's favor, becoming one of the most popular *shōnen* manga of our time.

Two years after the first publication, Bones Studio adapted the print comic into an anime series, of which five seasons have been aired originally by JNN. Since 2016, the title has become a transmedia franchise. Besides the anime, three video games have been developed by Dimps and published by Bandai Namco Entertainment (the first one for Nintendo 3DS in 2016, followed by two adaptations for Play Station 4, Nintendo Switch, Xbox One and PC in 2018 and 2020), a mobile game has been released in several English-speaking countries for iPhone and Android in 2021, two spin-off manga were published, four Original Anime Videos (OAV) and three theatrical films were released between 2016 and 2021. For the purpose of this study, the anime series (2016–present)—which is very faithful to the comic version both at a visual and at a narrative level—will serve as the basis for the analysis.

Kohei Horikoshi's work is set in a fictional world where eighty percent of the population has a superpower referred to as a "Quirk." The main character is Midoriya Izuku, a young boy about to start high school who decides to attempt the entrance test for one of the most famous hero academies in all of Japan: The UA High School. The main existential problem Midoriya must face is that he is one of the few of his generation to be born without any Quirk. Despite this impediment, he believes that his willingness to help those in need and his wide knowledge on superheroes and their powers will give him a chance to enter the academy. Right when it is time to sign up for the test, Midoriya is involved in an accident instigated by a villain character. A mud monster kidnaps one of his current classmates, Bakugou, and he decides to intervene to save his friend's life. Bakugou and Midoriya are eventually saved by All Might, not only the Number One Hero in Japan and the protagonist's biggest idol, but also the one who inspired Midoriya to become a hero despite lacking a Quirk. After observing the bravery and the selflessness shown by the young boy, All Might decides to reveal his most precious secret to him: All Might's Quirk, a power based on super strength and speed called One for All, which is hereditary and can be transferred even to someone who does not have any special ability. Nearly at the end of his career, All Might is looking for the next possessor of One for All, who could take his place. After seeing Midoriya's heroic stance while facing the mud monster to save his friend, he is convinced that the young boy would be the ideal successor. It is from this moment on that Midoriya will start his training to enter the UA Hero Academy and begin his journey to become the next Number One Hero.

Referring to the American influence in Japanese manga and anime mentioned at the outset of this article, the character of All Might represents the embodiment of several American stereotypes. The hero's connection with the American culture is clear since one of his first

appearance in Episode 1 (min. 19:10). After saving Bakugou and Midoriya from the mug monster, All Might traps the creature into two plastic bottles in order to bring him to the police. While showing the way in which he took advantage of the monster's Quirk to beat him, All Might is depicted as surrounded by red, white, and blue stripes sprinkled with stars in a quite clear reference to the American flag. Also, the scene evokes the style of old Coca Cola advertising images, where smiling men and women held the bottles to show to the public what kind of drink made them that happy (Fig. 1).

Figure 6 All Might showing to Midoriya the bottled up mud monster (Season 1, Episode 1).

In addition, the Number One Hero often uses American expressions (ex. "Yes," "Repeat after me," "Nonsense!" etc.) and his hero suit is embedded with the colors of the American flag, making him look to an extent like a Japanese anime version of Captain America.

III. All Might and Captain America

All Might and Captain America have a lot in common indeed, starting from the physical appearance. The two of them are blonde, big, muscular men wearing a fitted superhero uniform colored in blue, red and white. While interpreting their heroic-self, the two men behind the mask also assume similar positions and make comparable moves (Fig. 2). For example, All Might's legendary attack is the "Smash": a strong fist in which he gathers all of his strength. Even if Captain America does not use a specific name for his attacks, he frequently knocks down his enemies with his fists especially in the early phases of his history as a superhero, when he is still not in possess of the round shield that will become his personal weapon.

Figure 7 On the left, the cover of the first volume of *My Hero Academia* (2014). On the right, the cover of *Captain America* #76 (1941).

However, All Might and Captain America have a lot more in common than just physical appearance. Both Steve Rogers and Toshinori Yagi (the two heroes' real names) were not privileged enough to be born with powers. In their early years, the physical appearance of both characters did not match the greatness and bravery of their hearts. Put more simply, they were two profoundly heroic men with a weak "normal" human body and thus unable to help those in need. Both characters share a physical transformation: after receiving his superpowers, Captain America becomes physically exceptional, while All Might keeps two "forms" of himself: the Hero (or Muscle) form, and the True form. In the first, he has a stereotypical hero body shape, much similar to Captain America's one and corresponding to Neal Cohn's American Visual Language definition. While speaking of possible defining features of the American visual language, Cohn identifies three "dialects" in which American drawers are used to express their art: Kirbyan (typical of the superhero comics), Barksian (especially used in cartoons) and Independent. In this particular case, both Captain America and All Might's design are attributable to the Kirbyan dialect (Cohn 139–144). The style is named after the cartoonist Jack "King" Kirby, but through time has received the influence of several artists and, of course, of Japanese manga. Its main features are physically exaggerated personages (very muscular men and extremely curvy women) and standardized facial traits such as "angular jaw, pronounced cheekbones, and distinct eyebrow muscles, especially in men" (Cohn 141). Moreover,

Kirbyan figures often assume dramatic or dynamic poses. Going back to All Might double physical form, in his second one (the True form) he appears much shorter and thinner.

Steve Rogers received his superpowers from the super soldier serum, while Toshinori received his from the previous possessor and his mentor. Hence, they both received their abilities after demonstrating their value and obtained those powers through an external intervention. After being granted the powers, they both became a symbol of peace and stability for their country, and they took the responsibility to protect their people from villains of any kind (All Might is often referred to as "The Symbol of Peace").

Despite their considerable physical appearance and undisputed success, they are both very sensitive characters who suffer from the weight of the responsibility on their shoulders. Eventually, their story and their heroic actions prove they will never stop being humble and grateful for having the possibility to protect those in need. In fact, they avoid awards, which they feel they do not deserve. Adding to that, they are always moved by selfless motivations and never act to obtain glory or fame.

Finally, they both feel like not being personally indispensable for the sake of the symbol. They are conscious to be simply the ones who are impersonating it in that present moment, but they are well-aware that at some point they will have to pass the baton to someone else. Captain America's legacy is represented by his shield. After Steve Roger's death in the comics (2007), the shield will be passed to Bucky Barnes and then to Sam Wilson (aka Falcon), while in the Marvel Cinematic Universe it is Cap himself who entrusts Sam Wilson with the weapon. Also here, All Might will need to choose the next possessor of One for All and, as briefly mentioned above, his legacy will be entrusted to the young but brave Midoriya Izuku.

IV. All Might and Uncle Sam

Captain America is not the only inherently American character to which All Might refers. This is particularly evident in Episode 4 of Season 1. After accepting to be All Might's successor, Midoriya starts his preparation to inherit the One for All Quirk. To that end, All Might puts the young boy through the "American Dream Plan," an intensive training that will make his mind and body strong enough to receive his idol's superpower and make use of it in the best way possible. On the day of the entrance test, All Might makes Midoriya eat a strand of his hair to transmit One for All to him and sends him to face his future. The young boy will not be able to deal with the high-level exam he has to face, but he will eventually be able to show the examiners his heroism by saving a girl's life during the test. Beaten down after the exam, Midoriya returns home thinking about what he is going to do with All Might's superpower now that he failed the entrance test. Nonetheless, in an unexpected turn of events, he receives this message:

> The entrance exam […] was not graded only in villains points! How can a hero course reject people who save others and do the right thing? […] Rescue points! And they're given

> by a panel of judges. Midoriya Izuku: sixty points! […] Come, young Midoriya. This is your hero academia. (Episode 4, min. 21:45)

The video message, recorded by All Might, plays while Midoriya watches the beloved idol handing out his hand in a scene much reminiscent of an Uncle Sam poster (Fig. 3). In fact, just as the character of Uncle Sam attracted American men to the army, in this specific scene All Might is recruiting Midoriya to be the next symbol of Peace and, thanks his newly acquired role as teacher at the UA, he is recruiting new students to be the next generation of Japan's superheroes.

Figure 8 All Might invites Midoriya to join the U.A. Hero Academy after passing the entrance test (Season 1, Episode 4).

In Episode 11 of Season 3, All Might makes his final call for Midoriya to be the next Number One Hero. After defeating his biggest rival, a villain capable of absorbing infinite Quirks called All for One, All Might senses the last spark of power left in him expiring, leaving him exhausted and powerless in front of the cameras. Instead of taking his last shot of glory, All Might decides to use that visibility to send a message: he points a finger directly to the screen. Midoriya, who has been watching All Might's last fight from afar, sees that sign and reads the message behind it, bursting in tears. Replicating the same gesture depicted in Uncle Sam's poster, All Might is not only recruiting Midoriya as a soldier of justice but as the future leader of those who fight for that justice.

V. All Might and Major Glory

A more recent American cartoon character whose resemblance with All Might cannot go unnoticed is the Cartoon Network's star Major Glory. The character has been introduced to the

world in 1996, when the popular American network aired for the first time the *Dexter's Laboratory* series (1996–2003). The show deals with the adventures of a little genius boy called Dexter, a precocious scientist and inventor who spends all of his free time in a secret lab where he tries to invent high-tech items or carries out dangerous experiments. In between these vicissitudes and the protagonist's issues with his older sister Dee Dee who continuously enters the lab without his permission, the viewers also get to know some recurring side characters. Among them, Major Glory is a super-hero parody of both Captain America and Superman whose main values are justice, freedom, and patriotism. It is worth drawing a physical comparison between him and All Might, because of some additional elements that make Major Glory even more graphically similar to the Number One Hero in Japan than Captain America.

Figure 9 Major Glory (*The Justice Friends* [1997]).

Again, Major Glory wears a superhero suit colored in red, white and blue as a reference to the American flag. He appears like an extremely muscular, tall, and blonde man, but this time there is more. Major Glory wears a very peculiar golden helmet, which shape evokes an eagle, another very popular American symbol (Fig. 4). In fact, the whitehead eagle symbolizes the American government since the XVIII century, when the majestic animal was chosen for its exclusive belonging to the American territory and its fitness in representing values of strength, freedom and power. On the other hand, All Might does not wear any headpiece, but has a really extravagant hairstyle with two long locks of hair that stand straight above his head, forming a shape suggestive of horns or rather the wings of a golden eagle. Captain America also sports two little white wings on his blue helmet both in the comics and in the cinematic transpositions, but they do not have the same predominant visual focus that the ones worn by Major Glory and All Might have. Major Glory and his friends were much appreciated by the audience, so much so that in 1997 Cartoon Network made a spin-off series dedicated to them titled *The Justice Friends*, a cartoon parody of both DC's *Justice League* and Marvel's *Avengers*. Finally, All Might and Major Glory share the same superpowers—albeit only the former's One for All powers are hereditary—as they are both extremely strong and fast. A funny contextual element that finds correspondence in this analysis is that Major Glory is supposed to be the nephew of Uncle Sam himself, who also appears as a character in *The Justice Friends* animated series. He is presented as the

patriotic spirit of the USA and has trained Major Glory to become the mightiest American hero, just as All Might is training the young Midoriya in *My Hero Academia*.

VI. All Might and the USA

At this point, it becomes clear that the character of All Might was created to process and celebrate American popular culture and to embody stereotypical American values. As Romagnoli and Pagnucci explained while discussing the origin of superheroes and their intrinsic cultural functions, superheroes are often a "personification of society's morals. Specifically, superhero stories embody American culture dichotomy between good and evil" (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 8). At the core of such phenomenon lies the fact that superheroes—as intended in contemporary mainstream popular culture and originated as being an American product — preserve their original set of moral values even when inserted in a different territorial, cultural, or temporal context. In traditional US superhero comic books the line between good and evil is particularly stressed and it rarely becomes blurred. Even though this is not the case for every *My Hero Academia* character, it is the very definition of All Might.

In fact, throughout the series there are several morally gray characters, especially among the UA Students. For example, Bakugou bullies Midoriya but still strives to become the next Number One Hero; another of Midoriya's classmates, Mineta, is used to harass almost every female character he comes into contact with but he turns out to be indispensable in several critical situations. Nevertheless, All Might never fails to be the most powerful and fair among the heroes. He always knows what is the best way to take advantage of his Quirk to solve the situation and save everyone who is in danger, but he is also highly aware of the responsibilities that come with his powers. The dichotomy between good and evil is also stressed by the resemblance between All Might Quirk's name and the one of his fierce rival All for One. While names such as "One for All" and "All for One" might remind the audience of the renowned motto of Dumas's three musketeers, they acquire a nuanced meaning in *My Hero Academia*. One for All, All Might and Midoriya's Quirk, is an explicit example of their role, as superheroes, in representing good moral values. The Quirk is one for all, that is to say that it can be transmitted to everyone, and it evolves thanks to each possessor's different abilities. So, One for All is a symbol of equality, dedication, and acknowledgment of everyone's different traits and talents. On the contrary, All for One, the biggest villain on the series, has the power of stealing Quirks from others, and he uses this ability to gain more power, make people suffer and perpetrate criminal acts. So, he is a symbol of egoism, criminality, cruelty and moral corruption.

The origin of All Might's deep connection with the USA is not left unexplained. In 2018, an anime film called *My Hero Academia: Two Heroes* was released, its plot set between Season 2 and 3 of the series. In the film, All Might and Midoriya are leaving for a brief holiday on I-Island, an artificial island where the use of Quirks is completely free from legal boundaries and the most renowned scientists work to create technology supporting the heroes' work. On

this occasion, All Might and Midoriya are hosted by Professor David Shield and his daughter, Melissa Shield. It is not clear if the two character's surname is a reference to Captain America's weapon, but all things considered it might be. Professor Shield is an old friend of All Might, having been All Might's wing man in the past. In addition, he designed All Might's hero suits and is one of the few to know about the secret of his power.

A few flashbacks show how the two met: when he was still a student, All Might traveled to the USA and got involved in an accident caused by a villain. After saving many people including the young Professor Shield, the two became friends and David offered to create a hero suit for All Might that would support him during his missions without getting damaged. After this episode, All Might and Professor Shield worked side by side, at least until Toshinori decided to return to Japan to become the Number One Hero he was destined to be. Despite this decision, All Might will forever cherish the time spent in America, his looks will inevitably be influenced by Professor Shield's design style and he will call his legendary attacks after some American places. In fact, throughout the series there is a number of attacks defined as "Detroit Smash," "California Smash," "Carolina Smash," and similar US-inspired names (Fig. 5). Going back to Episode 11 of Season 3 All Might will name his final fist to beat All for One "United States of Smash."

Figure 10 All Might defeats the mud monster with a "Texas Smash" (Tankōbon volume #1, p.30).

In 2019, an OAV episode gave even more context to All Might's connection to the USA. Though the episode is very brief, the viewers get to see All Might witnessing the defeat of his mentor, who moments before dying points at him the same way he will later point at Midoriya, saying a powerful "I'm leaving the rest to you" (Fig. 6). After this traumatic event, All Might finds out that his mentor would have wanted him to leave for the States to train until he was ready to fight the evil All for One. Respecting her last wishes, All Might leaves for the USA. All Might's love for America was probably originated by the peace he found in the States after his dramatic loss. Also, the enthusiasm for the new country and the friendship with Professor Shield helped him become stronger and ready to take his mentor's place. Put more simply, All Might lived the American Dream and this experience had the power to influence not only his style and language, but his whole story as Japan's Number One Hero.

Figure 11 All Might's mentor recognizes him as her rightful successor right before losing her last battle (*My Hero Academia: All Might Rising* [2019]).

VII. Conclusions

All Might's character in *My Hero Academia* is only one of the many examples of how American culture still has a strong influence on Japanese manga and anime productions. As Roman Rosenbaum explained while speaking of the role of manga in representing history, the graphic language of manga has, throughout the years, became a sort of *lingua franca* that strengthened the already existing bridge between Japan and the West world. The world's current and persistent fascination with Japanese culture in general and manga in particular is very similar to the deep Japanese infatuation for America mentioned in the introduction of this article. This creates an infinite contamination circle between Japan and the United States, where popular culture plays a lead role in keeping the respective interest and appeal alive (Otmazgin 1–25).

In the specific case of superheroes, which are—as mentioned above—an American cultural expression by definition, the contamination is exceptionally evident. Even if the archetype of the superhero is nowadays globally used by any type of media, it succeeded in preserving a lot of its original traits through space and time. There are, for examples, some common elements shared by almost every superhero: their origin is often connected with a tragedy which shaped their empathy towards others, they are usually solitary figures who are obsessed with their very ambitious goals and finally they always have some kind of weakness that help humanize them in people's eyes (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 5–18). All Might presents each one of these traits: his hard work to become the Number One Hero in Japan with the aim of being a symbol of peace for his people began when he received the One for All Quirk but increased after his beloved mentor died. Furthermore, he is presented as a solitary hero

despite throughout the series it is explained that most famous heroes have a team of sidekicks who help them[1] and, since the opening episode of the very first season, the viewers knows that All Might's most recent fight with his nemesis left him permanently damaged and his time as a superhero is running out. As all the elements considered in this analysis have proved, these correspondences are not casual and with the series still being in the making, it will be extremely interesting to observe how the character of All Might will evolve in expressing and representing more of the well-cherished American values and archetypal superhero features. In this regard, the production of *Boku No Hero Academia* Season 6 has already been announced. Meanwhile, the latest tankōbon volume of the manga introduced a new all-American female hero named Star and Stripes, the Number One Hero of the United States. Considering this analysis, her character's introduction will surely give new materials for further investigations on the topic.

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[1] In Season 4 a new character, Sir Nighteye, is introduced as All Might's former partner, but the two interrupted the business collaboration since, due to opposing views regarding the next possessor of One for All.

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