

CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC IN LITERATURE AND FILM

George Ayres^{1*}

¹Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, SC, Brazil

Carl H. Sederholm^{2**}

²Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, United States

Antonio Alcala Gonzalez^{3***}

³Tecnológico de Monterrey, Santa Fe, Mexico City, Mexico

The word *Gothic* consistently suggests multiple meanings. From its ties to the Germanic Goths who, in their migrations across central Europe, Italy and Iberia, contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire and the reconstruction of cultural and political movements in European history to the colossal medieval cathedrals in France and then to Victorian horror stories and modern subcultures, the Gothic has acquired complex connotations that continue to make it a compelling object of study within a variety of fields. Fred Botting (1996) states, for instance, that “relations between real and fantastic, sacred and profane, supernatural and natural, past and present, civilized and barbaric, rational and fanciful, remain crucial to the Gothic dynamic of limit and transgression” (6). For him, the Gothic represents “a writing of excess”, of subversion, of crisis. For David Punter and Glennis Byron (2004), “the Gothic is more to do with particular moments,

* Professor at the Departamento de Língua e Literatura Estrangeiras (DLLE) of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), where he conducts the research project *As Narrativas de Desastre* on apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. Academic interests include film theory, science fiction, Gothic fiction, adaptation studies, cultural studies, among other related fields. He has worked extensively with Gothic literature and film, focusing on Victorian Gothic and the 19th century *fin-de-siècle* imagination. Email: ayresmousinho@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6947-6451>.

** Professor of Interdisciplinary Humanities at Brigham Young University. He is currently the editor of *The Journal of American Culture*. He has published essays on Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, Jonathan Edwards, Lydia Maria Child, and Nathaniel Hawthorne and is the co-author of *Poe, the 'House of Usher', and the American Gothic*. Sederholm has also co-edited several academic anthologies, including *The Age of Lovecraft*, *Lovecraft in the 21st Century*, *Adapting Poe: Re-Imaginations in Popular Culture*, *Forgotten Disney* and *The Weird: A Companion*. Email: csederholm@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0964-6997>.

*** Professor and chair of the Humanities Faculty at Tecnológico de Monterrey in Santa Fe, Mexico City; and founder of the *International Gothic Literature Congress*. He has co-edited special journal issues on Nautical Gothic (*Gothic Studies*) and the legacy of H.P. Lovecraft in the twenty-first century (*Aeternum*). He also co-edited the critical collections *Doubles and Hybrids in Latin American Gothic* and *Lovecraft in the 21st Century Dead, But Still Dreaming* (both published by Routledge). He has published articles and book chapters on creators such as H. P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, D. T. Neal, J. R. R. Tolkien, Ivan Albright, Carlos Fuentes and Juan Rulfo as well as the connection between the Gothic tradition and the lyrics of Underground Metal music bands. He is currently preparing an edited critical collection on the connections between the Gothic and the Anthropocene. Email: antonio.alcala@tec.mx ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8179-5746>.



tropes, repeated motifs that can be found scattered, or disseminated, through the modern western literary tradition” (xviii). Even though it is still not clear how the Gothic might be categorized, the topic still suggests a multitude of perspectives, historical shifts, resignifications.

The turbulent contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have only increased the ways new artistic productions have redefined the general understanding of the Gothic. Literary tropes such as the mysterious atmosphere of remote forests gained a geographical and cultural turn with the American Southern Gothic and its thematic resources in portrayals of racial conflicts, gloomy swamps, and the “ghosts” of the Civil War in modern society. Classic vampires have become vegetarian vampires in their moral attempts to avoid the temptation of human blood (Dungan 2022). Even the extravagant haircuts, dark clothing and leather utilized by bands such as The Cure and Siouxsie and the Banshees have been revived since their heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. The supernatural and the spectacular also continue to be a centerpiece in the appreciation of the Gothic among many subcultures (Spooner 2006, 91-94). Similarly, Gothic tropes and themes have often appeared in fiction that is not normally understood as Gothic. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” for example, has been recited in cartoons and adapted in music, including versions by the folk band Omnia to a whole album by Lou Reed. Even Dracula, the quintessential vampire, has become a recurring character in multiple places, including countless films, comic books, and videogames. The trope of the uncanny *doppelgänger* has gone from horror stories by E. T. A. Hoffmann and Robert Louis Stevenson to contemporary psychological horror films such as Jordan Peele’s *Us* and many others. This confirms that the Gothic is not ever-changing, but seemingly undying.

Gothic stories routinely address themes of subversion, monstrosity, and the marginal. Moral standards of a given society whose political landscape is fictionally portrayed help determine what a monster is, and the Gothic tends to get into detailed representations of its monsters, including the iconic creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to the mysterious headless horseman in Washington Irving’s short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and its adaptations. The monster is often cast out from their social environment, feared and scorned, and frequently combated. The existence of the monster or other marginalised characters can also be racially charged at times, as in the case of the cultists in H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu”. Such figures, as well as other almost ubiquitous conceptual and creative elements of the Gothic, have been recently updated through critical intersections with contemporary topics including “new technologies, the cybergothic, the rise of queer theory [as well as] disability theory and ecocriticism” (Hughes 2018, 9). All these multifaceted strands of criticism “have *retheorized* what the Gothic is most fundamentally about and so given it a new importance as an object of valuable study” (Hogle 2006, 31, author’s emphasis). The enduring popularity of Gothic fiction has allowed for such intersections and readings of both old and new narratives.

This issue of *Ilha do Desterro*, titled *Contemporary Gothic in Literature, Film and New Art Forms* emphasises critical approaches to the multiple artistic and discursive turns and crossroads the Gothic has undergone. This collection of original articles written in English and Portuguese is the result of a collaboration among national and international researchers encouraged by contemporary questions and dilemmas concerning the Gothic as a stylistic anchor, as discourse, as a collection of motifs, or as a significant aesthetic perspective. Gothic inspired works of literature, film and other narrative art forms are brought together here to suggest how contemporary critical perspectives can create new ways of analysis.

The first article, titled “O Mundo Liminar: Gótico Decolonial em *El Mundo de Arriba Y El Mundo de Abajo*, de Mónica Ojeda”, by Moacir Marcos de Souza Filho, employs one of such modern critical perspectives to shed light on cultural complexities strengthened by Gothic portrayals. The paper approaches Ojeda’s short story while considering issues of decolonial identities and geographical - as well as cultural - borders, corroborating the concept of her fiction in the collection *Las Voladoras as Andean Gothic*.

Next, Rafael Conter challenges horror genre patterns in “Animais Assassinos: As Fronteiras do Filme *Natural Horror*”. In his article, the author details the features of *natural horror* cinema and investigates issues of hybridism and the hazy frontier between human and nonhuman as represented in such films, questioning narrative tropes like the *locus horribilis* and the logic of *slasher* films to determine what constitutes the fictional portrayal of nonhuman animals as monsters in certain horror films.

Sethuparvathy S. and Smita Jha examine female trauma and the mythological figure of the Yakshi in order to propose a Gothic reading of S. K. Pottekatt’s *Tales of Athiranippadam* in their article “The Haunting of Historical Memory: Marking Colonial Trauma in *Tales of Athiranippadam*”. The article works within the complexities of myth and symbolism in order to position its critical perspective on the colonial vestiges left in the imagination of a culture within its recreations of mythology.

In “The Rise of the House of Oliver: Property and Gothicism in *Saltburn*”, film becomes the focus of analysis again as Cynthia Beatrice Costa and Fernanda Aquino Sylvestre engage in the study of class and political change through a Gothic lens. The 2023 thriller comedy *Saltburn* is the point of culmination of this paper’s investigation, but only arrived at after a careful recollection of narrative tropes about private property from Stoker’s *Dracula* to Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”. The article tackles the clichés as well as thematic and narrative nuances of a film that plays around and challenges established fictional motifs about haunted manors and gloomy atmospheres.

Luciana Colucci returns to the founder of Gothic fiction in “Horace Walpole, Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto*: an Aesthete’s Insurgencies Among Excess, Extravagance and Maximalism”. Through the legacy left by the English author and politician in his fiction and in the lavish aesthetic expression of the Strawberry Hill castle, Colucci seeks to reconstruct Walpole’s artistic trajectory

and its long-lasting influence on Gothic literature and art. From the architectural details of Strawberry Hill's concept to the Italian literary influences that he himself had to the opulence of the spaces that he inhabited, the article provides a detailed analysis of Walpole's aesthetic vision.

Finally, Mohammad-Javad Hajjari explores the Gothic sublime and a postmodern horror in "Gothic Entrapment Within Textuality in Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium*". By working with the metafictional elements of Gothic texts and particularly of Paul Auster's novel, the article touches on the story's awareness of its fictional aspects, thus reinforcing postmodern ideas on the process of writing and engagement with the text as an element that can be found throughout the history of Gothic fiction as well. The author draws on Maria Beville (2009) and her ideas on representation in postmodernist fiction that bears Gothic features, which works as a pivotal basis for the article to build its central argumentation.

Works cited

- Beville, Maria. *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*. Rodopi, 2009.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. Routledge, 1996.
- Dungan, Sophie. *Reading the Vegetarian Vampire*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. "Theorizing the Gothic". In A. Powell et al. (eds.) *Teaching the Gothic* (2006). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hughes, William. *Key Concepts in the Gothic*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Punter, David and Glennis Byron. *The Gothic*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Spooner, Catherine. *Contemporary Gothic*. Reaktion Books, 2006.