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THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF OLIVER: PROPERTY AND GOTHICISM IN *SALTBURN*

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"England is the most class-ridden country under the sun."
George Orwell

Abstract

By re-creating the Gothic trope of the visit to the rich friend's house, *Saltburn* (2023) exemplifies how matters of property and class may carry cinematic Gothicism outside the realm of the (literal) haunted house. Post-modern in its constant reference to literary works from which it appropriates plot and characters, the film offers a transgressive turn by following the rise – not the fall – of a common man as the owner of the house he desires. Given the low social mobility in the society portrayed, his achievement updates the Gothic tradition of establishing a new order to an old, disrupted environment. The present study examines this hypothesis based on sociological and literary sources regarding matters of class and property, and by drawing a parallel between the film and Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher".

Keywords: Gothic in cinema; clash of classes; *Saltburn*; "The Fall of the House of Usher".

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The Gothic trope famously summarized in "girl who gets a house" (Fisher 2004, 73) shows no signs of exhaustion neither in literature nor in cinema. Spatiality, territorialism, and matters of property have been widely explored by the Gothic since its genesis. Let us not forget that real estate agent Renfield visits the castle of Dracula, who is himself looking for an English home – and this is only one illustration of such motif.

The intrinsic relationship between the Gothic and territorial dispute in the context of private property has been recently revisited by the film *Saltburn* (2023), written and directed by Emeral Fennell. It narrates the conquest of a mansion in the English countryside by an ambitious Oxford student from the suburban middle class. In close dialogue with *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), by Evelyn Waugh, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), by Patricia Highsmith, among other literary and cinematographic truisms, the film was lukewarmly received by journalists ("watchable but sometimes weirdly overheated and grandiose," Bradshaw 2023) and mostly talked about among the audience thanks to some questionable scenes ("convoluted plot maneuvers and clumsily orchestrated sex scenes," Wasser 2023). Fair criticism does not prevent it, however, from well exemplifying – and updating – a key-element that permeates the entire Gothic tradition: a special house. As Morris (2023) wrote, despite all the buzz generated by frontal nudity and libidinous acts, "the only pornographic thing about the movie is the house."

In *Saltburn*, Oliver Quick (Barry Keoghan) goes to macabre lengths to conquer a house of his own – to take over and occupy Saltburn, his friend Felix Catton's (Jacob Elordi) family house. The film is not horror in genre, but more of a drama with some suspense, in palpable dialogue with romantic Gothic. Without any pretense of originality, it fits into the poor-friend-visits-rich-friend cliché. As it can be confirmed by virtually the entire history of cinema, it benefits from the imagery; the Gothic, visually suggestive as it is, has always found fertile ground in the audiovisual form: "In the early decades of cinema, and certainly during the silent era, the idea that cinema itself was spectral meant that film was seen as an ideal medium for the Gothic and horror stories popular in novels and plays" (Cherry 2009, 61). Dream-like sequences, Victorian settings and costumes, eerie landscapes, threatening noises, and imposing castles and houses – they all become vivid and appealing on screen.

In recent fiction, decaying haunted houses so constitutional of the Gothic atmosphere have frequently been substituted by desirable homes with no secret dungeons or hidden bodies – but sinister nevertheless in their inaccessibility, as we have seen for instance in the *Twilight* series, in which tasteful vampires live in a sleek modern mansion, and in the German thriller *Das Haus* (2021), depicting a highly technological architectural creation. While at first the literary Gothic transported readers to declining surroundings, with "ruined abbeys, feudal halls and medieval castles with dungeons, secret passages, winding stairways, oubliettes, sliding panels, and torture chambers" (Cuddon 1992, 381), 21st-century cinema has been presenting us with the alternative of

beautiful, unachievable houses, nonetheless still Gothic due to metaphorical hauntings, family conflicts, and crimes.

Saltburn offers us such a house. Pretending to be a charity case for his rich friend, Oliver digs up an invitation to spend the summer at Felix's family home. There, he becomes accustomed to a neo-aristocratic lifestyle and harbors various obsessions, the greatest of all with the property itself and the hedonism it offers. Oliver's summer with the Catton family is idyllic, with sweet *far niente* by the lake and the pool, surrounded by beautiful semi naked people and close to the one who seems, at first, to be the object of his desire, Felix. His final interest in the house, above everything and everyone, reveals itself as a plot twist.

Oliver disembarking in front of majestic Saltburn (30min53sec) marks the beginning of the film's second act. Saltburn is in reality Drayton House, a 700-year-old, therefore medieval in origin, private property with 100 rooms in Northamptonshire, England. Interiors and gardens were also used in filming, besides the imponent façade. *The New York Times* reported its owner's discomfort with the sudden visit of tourists and even invasions after the filming location – previously confidential – was inadvertently revealed by a TikTok: "Drayton House, a Grade I building that is protected because of its historical nature, has been privately held for hundreds of years" (Moses 2024).

In the film, the tour of the house that Felix gives Oliver is laughable (c. 32min): passing quickly through rooms and staircases, he points nonchalantly to places named by colors (Red Staircase, Green Room, Blue Room); to "Henry VII's cabinet"; to the king's bedroom; and to "some fucking hideous Rubens". The teddy bear ("Daddy's old teddy") in the "long gallery" – a library – is a concrete reference to the plush toy carried around by a grown man in *Brideshead Revisited*. The sequence is ironic: for most people, such property looks more like a museum than a family home.

Almost halfway through the film, the butler Duncan (Paul Rhys) warns Oliver: "Lots of people get lost in Saltburn" (47min51sec). As it turns out, far from getting lost, he turns into the commander of the territory. Threatened to leave that world to which he never truly belonged, Oliver sets himself the task of eliminating each family member, one by one, starting with his friend Felix and ending with his mother, Elspeth, who finally leaves Saltburn to him as an inheritance. In an anti-hero's journey, Oliver's calculating plan unfolds so precisely that it can be seen as quasi-magical, giving the narrative a childish fable-like quality.

Fennell subverts the Gothic, while never abandoning it, in the inversion promoted by Oliver's successful trajectory. Instead of being scared, going crazy or fleeing as Gothic protagonists so often do, he is empowered by his new surroundings, reversing social order in his territorial quest. In the style of *Teorema* (1968), by Pasolini, Oliver passes from member to member of the family, in an almost artisanal work of manipulation.

Fennell's narrative can be seen as a twisted twin – or double – of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher", first published in 1839, a hypothesis that we will further examine. Its transgression lies in the depiction

of the rise, instead of the fall, of the idolized house, which is passed to a new owner who does not participate in the family's ancestralism. Oliver is a foreigner to that world and would possibly never access it through honorable meanings. This study also approaches *Saltburn*'s Gothicism as an architectural, property-related genre, one which has been perpetuated in both literature and cinema and which allows for a constant reinvention of the Gothic as a nightmarish search for housing.

Gothic revisited

Gothic has its roots in architecture:

> The term 'Gothic,' admittedly, originated in a confluence of history and architecture. The Goths were a northern Germanic European people whose ways and beliefs differed largely from those of Greco-Roman Classical civilization farther south. (…) Even with far more lighting than Romanesque buildings afforded, a sense of considerable shadowiness or obscurity is inescapable when one enters Gothic buildings or their cloisters. (Fisher 2004, 73)

As a genre, type, or mode of narrative, it has been featuring castles, mansions, manors, and every kind of large, imposing house since its genesis as popular European literature in the 18th century. Dwellings are intrinsic to the very notion of the Gothic, traditionally understood as "a story of terror and suspense, usually set in a gloomy old castle or monastery (hence 'Gothic', a term applied to medieval architecture and thus associated in the 18th century with superstition)" (Baldick 2001, 106).

The Gothic may have diversified its settings, moving to less medieval landscapes, but it rarely renounces to its spatial nature, specifically, to its spatial anxiety: "In an extended sense, many novels that do not have a medievalized setting, but which share a comparably sinister, grotesque, or claustrophobic atmosphere have been classed as Gothic" (Baldick 2001, 107). Interestingly, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the most famous novel from the first Gothic wave, was often referred by the locale in which it was written, Strawberry Hill, near London; "'Strawberry Hill Gothic' became a common term for any example of romantic gothicized architecture of the period" (Cuddon 1992, 381).

One could argue that the presence of the house is a convention in literature as a whole: "Houses and other buildings can frequently be the main setting for novels, and the layout of the rooms or the relations between the interior and exterior often determine the plot" (Tally Jr. 2018, 155). In British literature, this seems to acquire a special meaning, since large, aristocratic properties are often named and act as characters. There is a multitude of named properties in Jane Austen, from *Pride and Prejudice*'s famously "handsome" Pemberly to the turbulent Mansfield Park. Charles Dickens's Satis House, from *Great Expectations*,

and beautiful Gardencourt, from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, add to the tradition, as well as E.M. Forster's country house Howards End, featured in the eponymous novel. Enigmatic houses with secrets and conflicts are abundant in Gothic fiction. James concentrated *The Turn of the Screw*'s (1898) action in the English country house Bly. Decades before, in 1847, two Brontë sisters were responsible for planting a pair of properties into the Western imagination: *Jane Eyre*'s Thornfield Hall, by Charlotte, and *Wuthering Heights*'s Thrushcross Grange, by Emily. Later, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* would reinterpret *Jane Eyre* and create its own all-mysterious manor, Manderley.

Then there is Brideshead, Saltburn's inspiration. Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred & Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*, published in 1945, is a satirical novel that tells the story of a rich aristocratic, Roman Catholic family – owner of Brideshead – through the eyes of Charles Ryder, also at the center of a "poor-friend-visits-rich-friend" plot. Once welcomed into the Flyte family, Charles engages in a lifestyle that is paradoxically decadent and traversed by Catholic guilt, navigating through a class (and faith) to which he does not belong.

Saltburn draws from Waugh's work. *Brideshead* is mentioned during a dialogue between Oliver and Felix, in an almost self-deprecating indication that Fennell was aware of the closeness of the stories. "You know, a lot of Waugh's characters are based on my family, actually", declares Felix (16min38sec). In a foreshadowing move, the same dialogue reveals an obsession nurtured by a relative by marriage toward his family home: "Yeah, he was completely obsessed with our house" (16min40sec), Felix observes presumptuously.

Without declaring itself as a re-creation of Waugh's novel – while still exhibiting various links with it, in an intertextual-quasi-adaptation rapport – *Saltburn* offers its take on the "house as a character" tradition, also being named after the house it depicts. A set of other tropes, however, make Saltburn not just a country house in the fashion of great English novels, but a Gothic house specifically.

Right from the start, the film flaunts its flirtation with Gothicism and medievality. The font used in the opening credits alludes to medieval calligraphy. The architecture of Oxford University's grounds, the initial setting of the plot, reinforces the allusion with its combination of English Gothic, Palladian, and romantic Gothic Revival. Right at the start, we are also presented with an aerial tracking shot of Saltburn in bird's eye view – it is our first glimpse of the building around which the conflict will be centered. Then follows the film's title in scarlet letters occupying the center of the screen, surrounded by stylized thorny vines, to the resounding hymn of Händel's "Zadok the Priest".

It is also clear from the start that the appropriation of medievalism and Gothicism is not a serious one, but rather a satirical parody that does not fail to take advantage, nonetheless, of the commercial conveniences of such a popular mode of telling passion-ridden stories. Everything is presented by Fennell in a debauched manner. In the initial credits, the red letters decorated with what

appear to be gold studs are accompanied by Händel in an MTV-generation music video rhythm. There is no indication that the film, in its postmodern approach, will take itself too seriously, nor that its intention is to combine all the artistic trends quickly cited – medieval/Gothic (in the architecture and fonts), Baroque (in the music) – in any cohesive way.

Gothic traits, such as the problematic family at the center of the plot and the constant use of mirrors and staircases to establish atmosphere, are managed in a whimsical way, thus insinuating that all the appropriation is conscious and purposefully ironic. The (potential) fun of watching Fennell's film relies on our world perception from outside the diegesis, such as some notion of the aristocracy's financial and moral decadence and of the British caste-like social system. The film can only be truly entertaining if its ironic and parodic tones are recognized; for those to be established, however, viewers must be minimally literate in British wit.

In part, the construction of irony in *Saltburn* also depends on a prior knowledge of the mechanisms of the Gothic, relying "on our knowing the facts from outside" (Booth 1975, 133). In this sense, it is reminiscent of what Austen did in *Northanger Abbey* – another pseudo-Gothic tale named after a house –, which mocks previous popular fiction. The parodic irony can only work if the viewer is aware of the "girl [boy, in this case] gets a house" trope, and thus aware of the subversions that the film pursues.

Wayne C. Booth (1975, 255) proposed the construction of irony as a privilege of knowledge: "Dramatic irony always depends strictly on the reader's or spectator's knowing something about a character's situation that the character does not know". If previous knowledge is indeed there, a pact is built between director-screenwriter and viewers against the excentric characters that inhabit Saltburn: the frivolous mother, the distracted father, the needy children. The first appearance of Felix's family, in the TV room where they are all gathered too close to each other, despite the space offered by their enormous house – in a dissimulation of the common happy family stereotype – immediately establishes the ironic approach with which the invisible "hand of the director" treats them.

When we first meet them, Felix's mother, Elspeth (Rosamund Pike), and her friend Pamela (Carey Mulligan) are wondering where Liverpool is; they speculate about Oliver's origins: "Oh, it'll be some awful slum"; "Mmm. A sort of hellish squat" (35min12sec). Talking about alcohol and drug abuse among lower classes, something that is much too present in their own house, one of them says: "I think that's actually rather normal when you're poor. I think, when you're poor, that sort of thing does happen a little bit more" (35min52sec). The ignorance demonstrated by both, who, despite their apparently pompous and erudite surroundings, have no socio-geographical notion whatsoever, shows that we are facing a classic disparity: Oliver is poor but clever; aristocrats are rich but stupid.

Former model Elspeth gossips and sows discord – living in isolation and alienation, these constitute her only activities. The patriarch, Sir James Catton (Richard E. Grant), is the landowner and an avid art collector, but presented as a

fool who most likely never worked for anything, having inherited the property. Venetia (Alison Oliver), the daughter, suffers from anorexia and lives in desperate need of attention. Farleigh (Archie Madekwe), the gay, black cousin, is a foster child of sorts who seems to be the only one aware of the cruel dynamics within Saltburn – because he is, too, as Oliver, dependent on the family's fickle charity.

Oliver is attracted by the family's eccentricity. Were they healthy and functional, how would he manipulate them? Their ways only intensify his obsession for the house and the lifestyle that comes with it. When explaining that they "dress for dinner", Felix apologizes, saying "I'm sorry that everything is so... old-fashioned". With fake apathy, Oliver responds: "No, it's wonderful" (39min23). Throughout his endeavor of taking over Saltburn, we see that he was sincere: what he seeks is the Old World's decadence and hedonism.

In addition to the majestic house, the poor visitor, and the unbalanced family, other Gothic elements include a very Victorian tradition – that is, morbid and sentimental at the same time: when someone dies, the Catton family writes the dead person's name on a stone and throw it into the river (thanks to Oliver, quite a few stones are thrown). Also, there is the motif of the double, often symbolized in the use of mirrors and other reflective surfaces throughout the film, denouncing Oliver as a dubious character whose intentions are difficult to understand. When Oliver looks out onto the university courtyard from his bedroom window, observing Felix Catton for the first time, we see the image of his face, in close-up, multiplied at least five times (4min18sec). At breakfast in Saltburn, the family is talking about Percy Shelley's Doppelgänger in the background while the camera frames an oval mirror with Oliver's close-up reflection on the left corner (43min52sec). The conversation about Shelley mirrors the plot of the film and works as a flashforward: "Shelley's housekeeper was cleaning one of the rooms when Shelley walked past the window and waved at her, so she waved back before she realized that Shelley was in Italy" (44min02sec). As Venetia narrates, a man resembling Felix and wearing a shirt of the same color passes behind her, outside the window, in a quick foreshadowing of the death of Felix that is to come.

Saltburn is also a collage of many well-known Gothic films that may or may not be known by its intended audience – most probably, given the choice of cast and the invasive pop soundtrack, young adults; even though references to the Harry Potter series and the horror film *The Ring* (2002) may seem like a desperate attempt either to locate the narrative in time (very palpably the first years of the 21st century) or to evoke nostalgia among middle-aged viewers. Anyway, cinematic resources are borrowed from older films/directors. The scenes overlooking the misty garden are reminiscent of *The Innocents* (1961), the celebrated adaptation of James's *The Turn of the Screw* directed by Jack Clayton. It also alludes to Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), among many other films in which damsels in distress wander about inhospitable grounds at night. Venetia walks through the vast garden of the house so that she can be seen by Oliver through his bedroom window. He uses one of these occasions to seduce her, in a sequence that is Gothic-clichéd in many layers: Venetia wears a long white nightgown and

behaves like a naive maiden; they both taste the blood of her menstruation like vampires; fog surrounds the house's imposing façade.

The iconography of the house reinforces Gothic themes as well. Statues depicting violent scenes of murder are shown in key scenes, such as when Oliver manages to manipulate Elspeth in the garden (52min24sec). The house itself is a reunion of Gothic tropes: a labyrinth, a lake, large windows, a long spiral staircase.

Clash of classes

The Gothic often manifests in the conflict between the dissolution of the old and the creation of a new order (Göç 2018), as it happens in *Saltburn*. The Catton family line is exterminated so that their house can gain a new owner. From a social perspective, Oliver's proceedings can be seen as an act of rebellion and resistance against the parasitic prevalence of aristocrats. As Wisker suggests, through Gothic we can defy "the established and complacent, undercut the dangerously comfortable and expose the fraudulently smug" (2016, 26).

As "fraudulently smug", the Catton family may be interpreted as representing a whole class that would belong in the past were it not for the peculiarities of the British class system. It is possible to suggest such an interpretation, overtly crossing fiction and sociohistorical reality, because fiction is not created independently from context: "The new historicist approach to literature mainly focuses on social and historical conditions which inevitably contribute to the process of artistic creation of the text" (Göç 2018, 4). As it turns out, families like the Cattons still exist in Britain: "Today, of course, we are accustomed to thinking of Britain's aristocracy as a quaint historical curiosity. (…) Habits and obsessions have barely changed" (Bryant 2017).

The class system in the United Kingdom – UK from now on – tends to be seen differently from those in countries with no monarchy or active royalty or aristocracy. While one tends to see Western societies as divided into three major economic groups (the poor/working class; the middle class; and the rich/the upper class), which may be subdivided into smaller groups (people living in misery, the superrich and so on), in the UK the persistence of a landed aristocracy complicates such scenario.

"The concept of class is therefore obsolete. The proletariat and bourgeoisie have had their day", announce Marshall *et al* (2005, 1) at the start of their study – carried out around the time portrayed in the film – on social class in Britain. However, their initial hypothesis will soon prove itself problematic. While the classic Marxian division may be in truth obsolete, the perception of people is that not only there is still a class divide, but "social identities are widely and easily constructed in class terms" (146). In a survey conducted by Marshall and his coauthors, people were asked to describe the sorts of individuals whom they thought of as upper class, middle class, and working class. As it was shown, people from Britain tend to relate class to occupation or employment. Regarding upper class, however, the survey indicated a quite specific take: "In fact, the majority

(65 per cent) conceived the upper class in terms of social status; that is, as those having some sort of hereditary title – the 'aristocracy' – or living a 'hunting, fishing, and country house' (upper-class) life-style" (147).

Owning a country house suggests wealth, even if that is not always the case. The larger the property and its surrounding grounds, the closer to a stereotyped (and romanticized) notion of landed aristocracy: "Behind the beauty of the British aristocracy's stately homes and the sometimes romantic and eventful lives they led, lies a darker story: a legacy of theft, violence and unrepentant greed" (Bryant 2017). The owning of property – stolen or not – has long been a mark of social status: "Both the feudal manor and the capitalist family firm depended on the conservation and accumulation of property. Private possession of land and capital required a stable marriage system, with unambiguous rules about inheritance, legitimacy, and remarriage", explain Marshall *et al* (2005, 199).

To understand *Saltburn* as a depiction of a clash of classes with a Gothic touch, it is necessary to keep such notion in mind: in Britain, more so than in the so-called New World, the upper class leads an extremely exclusive and excluding lifestyle. Unless you are born into it or marry into it, there is no feasible way of achieving an upper-class status that is particular to landed nobility. Hard work with the expectation of social mobility – if there is any; current studies show that social mobility is either inexistent or scarce, especially among the poorest and the richest in the UK (Erve *et al*, 2023; Goldman Sachs, 2022) – will most probably prove itself and arduous task. In the best-case scenario, one can become rich; in the UK, however, that is not enough to "pass" to the upper classes. Rich businesspeople, as company owners and such, live in a different world from aristocracy and are not seen as "belonging".

In *Saltburn*, Oliver's quest symbolizes the impossibility of social mobility through noble means. And not because he is poor, even though he pretends to be so; he is middle class, raised in a nurturing, conservative lifestyle that he seems to detest. Middle class could not be further from upper class; the poor, at least, may draw rich people's attention as an exotism (as the film well displays). Middle class tends to be seen as bland, tacky, and stuck in the middle. This explains why Oliver pretends to be the poor orphaned child of a recently deceased father who suffered from substance-abuse; it is much more captivating to his rich friends than his true origins. Oliver exaggerates his situation to arouse his friend's compassion, fully aware that, as a representative of a class without title or fortune, but capable of living comfortably, he would not be able to awaken any compassion. He understands how rich people cultivate a fake indifference for everything else, except for those who offer them an opportunity to exhibit shock and commiseration.

In the first half hour of the film, Oliver feels (and indeed is) excluded at Oxford. As viewers, we infer that his exclusion is due to a combination of lack of money, status, and family connections within the realm of the university. When Felix quickly captures a girl's attention, his colleagues insinuate that the reason for

his prodigious skill with women is status. To achieve the same success as him, you would need to "get yourself a title and a massive fuck off castle" (18min50sec).

When talking about his place of origin – the town of Prescot, in Merseyside – to his supervising teacher, Oliver is confronted with the belittling "Hmm, never been. Never been... Prescot" (6min33sec). Soon this same teacher, who seems to despise Oliver's effort to read all the books from the recommended bibliography, becomes enchanted by Farleigh, who arrives 20 minutes late for the meeting, but whose mother is a former Oxford classmate of the teacher, whom he admired "from afar".

In the gloomy cafeteria, in the film's first dialogue, fellow student Michael Gavey (Ewan Mitchell) insinuates that Oliver would be a "Norman no-mates", in reference to another protagonist in Gothic cinema, Norman Bates from *Psycho* (1960). Like Michael, Oliver is clearly out of place among the already formed cliques – by class, by origin, by common friends, it is all implied – who dine lively around them. It does not take long for Oliver to betray Michael in the name of his obsession with Felix, the rich, handsome, and stylish heir who reincarnates *The Talented Mr. Ripley*'s Dickie Greenleaf.

As it is expected from a privileged but rather soft-hearted young man, Felix acts condescendingly towards Oliver. Even so, entering his world is still a challenge. A friend of Felix says that Oliver would have no one to talk to at a party: "No one wants to sit next to fucking Oliver. (...) Cause he's a scholarship boy who buys his clothes from Oxfam" (19min47sec). Later, dressed in a rented tuxedo, Oliver is mocked by Farleigh, who suggests that he is "almost passing", to which Oliver responds, with dissimulated naivety: "For what?" (26min52sec).

In an initial key-sequence, camera work manages to suggest a play of power. In his first interaction with Felix, when he lends him his bicycle (thus reversing, albeit temporarily, the positions of power), Oliver first sees him from top to bottom, as Felix is sitting at the foot of a tree next to his bicycle with flat tires. The camera is positioned behind him, in a slight *contre-plongée*, so that Oliver briefly occupies a superior position. Once Felix stands up, however, being much taller than Oliver, he soon towers well above him; with the camera positioned at Oliver's eye level, we now see Felix slightly from below, quickly repositioning the power play. Oliver has to look up to communicate with him, which is made explicit in the close-up of Oliver's face, with the actor's clear irises turned upwards, in almost reverence – a look that will be repeated several times throughout the film.

As viewers, we do not know exactly where Oliver's obsession with Felix ends and where his decision to take over his house starts. Being devoted to Felix would certainly block him from being free, plus keep him at the risk of being discarded at any given time, when the rich friend got tired of him, even if the discovery of his true origin – a nice two-story home inhabited by sweet parents who used to take their children to Mykonos every year – had not ruined their relationship (and led Oliver to enter survival mode and act murderously). The ease with which rich people discard supposed friends is illustrated by cousin Farleigh's downfall and Pamela's comical expulsion from Saltburn (and later death). People want to

stay there forever; the family, however, uses them as company solely while it is convenient. It is their territory, and it shall not be invaded.

When Pamela, who is been living in Saltburn for months and whom the family wants to get rid of, mentions her cousin's flat as a future residence, Elspeth presses her: "Oh, that'll suit you very well, a nice little flat. (...) I loved living in a bedsit in my 20s. It's so freeing to live all in one room. And much less cleaning to do" (40min21 sec). For the viewers, the fun of the situation is seeing the matriarch in a formal dress and jewelry, in the dining room of a palace that she never has to clean, encouraging her supposed friend to live in a bedsit. The edition cuts, in fine irony, to Pamela's reluctant reaction, followed by Elspeth's husband's joy at the possibility of getting rid of the unwanted guest.

Farleigh, Pamela, and Oliver, who live under precarious circumstances at Saltburn, turn against each other in the belief that the Catton family can only willingly support that many dependents at once. In the embarrassing karaoke scene, for instance, when Farleigh sets up a trap to humiliate Oliver (1h10min02sec), the chosen song is "Rent", by the band *Pet Shop Boys*, with the chorus "I love you, you pay my rent".

The conflicts between the dependents may distract, however, from the pettiness of the Catton family. One could argue that accustoming people to a certain lifestyle just to send them home at the first inconvenience is rather cruel behavior. Fennell's film, however, stumbles into slippery territory when portraying Oliver as the vampiric one, as the unreliable narrator who confuses viewers about his true intentions though a series of vague voice-overs, and as the player who would rather eliminate people closest to his reality, as Pamela and Farleigh, as a means of self-servicing. Is the Catton family the innocent one, victimized by such social climber? Especially regarding Felix, it may be interpreted so:

> Even when he realizes he's been deceived, Felix behaves with impeccable politeness towards Oliver's mother before honorably ferrying Oliver back to Saltburn, the Cattons' country estate, where he gently asks the interloper to leave. By contrast, Oliver is at one point shown with blood literally dripping from his mouth. No wonder the film's been described by *Dazed* as "a satire that never bares its claws" while London's *Evening Standard* newspaper called it "profoundly anti-upward mobility." (Yossmann, 2023)

Like so many famous *arrivistes* in fiction, Oliver takes advantage of family dysfunction to carve out his takeover of Saltburn. Despite this, the parasitic nature of the life led by the Cattons as representatives of a class that feigns grace while exploiting and using friends and servants alike – dozens of them, considering those gathered outside when Oliver leaves Saltburn after Felix and Venetia's deaths – is also undeniable.

Murder is however the most serious of crimes, and Oliver practices it with ease and wit. He shows no empathy, which is perhaps an impediment to being considered a revolutionary of the social order, at least not a well-intentioned one. Following the sudden death of their son, the Catton couple initially reacts in a

surreal way, but soon the satire tone of the film gives place to a rather tragic one (that does not last long, but is enough to unbalance the narrative), preventing viewers to keep interpreting what they see as pure satire. The entire circumstance surrounding Felix's funeral takes on an almost literal Gothic atmosphere, composed by a medieval cemetery and the sexual violation of the tomb carried out by Oliver under the sound of rain and a religious choir. The pain of the grieving parents is palpable, as is that of the sister.

In this context, Oliver's abusive attitude places him in a diabolical position that harms the viewers' complacency. Outside class representation, one can read his character as a psychopathic social climber. From a sociological perspective, however, seeing the petty and empty-hearted family go through grief at the hands of Oliver's manipulation could lead to the interpretation that usurping access to the economic comforts they enjoy is only fair. Who would be the cruelest in this game: Oliver or the Cattons?

When Venetia describes Oliver as a moth (c. 1h50min), attracted to "shiny things" and struggling against the window, desperate to get in, the representation of an entire class is put into question through her elitist discourse: is the wanting for a better life really reprehensible? Why would the poor not want to enjoy the luxury and comfort to which a very small class has access? Access, but no natural right, as the Cattons seem to believe. Portraying Oliver as a vampire – with his mouth literally covered in blood after his sexual mid-film encounter with Venetia – who eats people from the inside out (as Venetia also accuses him) puts him in disadvantage in *Saltburn*'s social competition.

Nonetheless, perhaps the film does provide us with enough ironies that we can invert interpretation and understand Oliver as the smart vampire who takes over the lair of other vampires. Family drama allows such understanding: when Farleigh asks his cousin Felix for money to help his mother – Sir James Catton's sister – the family's blindness to how their own comfort was inherited becomes quite clear: "That's exactly why Dad's concerned about helping her. He doesn't want to enable her. He wants her to learn to stand on her own two feet" (1h03min07sec). Felix argues that his father has been very generous toward his sister, and that the well has now run dry for her. Confronted when Farleigh raises the possibility of being humiliated for being black, Felix repeats the solemn tone: "That is low, Farleigh. (...) Is that where you wanna take this? Make it a race thing? What the fuck? I mean, we're your family. We hardly even notice that you're different, or anything like that" (1h03min50sec). The complete lack of self-awareness and class consciousness makes Felix as clueless as his parents, showing that inheritance is not just patrimonial, but of an entire mindset that would allow him to maintain Saltburn without guilt.

In addition to being a social climber within his right to bring down vapid rich people and an exterminating vampire, there is a third way of interpreting Oliver as a character: he can be seen as purposefully dubious or multifaceted, impossible to decipher. Maybe there is no way, based solely on Fennell's narrative, to know exactly what his reasons are, nor to what extent his actions can be

interpreted through more sociological or psychological means – both are equally valid. Fennell has declared her aim at in the least one ambiguity: "And I hope it's [the film] part of the classic Gothic tradition where love and hate are very, very close together" (Clarke 2023).

Like Poe's narrators, Oliver is ambiguous in his own derangement, as is the case with the unnamed narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher", as we will further discuss next.

The fall of the house of Catton

As already suggested, Gothic presents "anxieties and fears about class" (Simmons 2017, 30). In Gothic fiction, large estates are the vehicle through which the poor come into contact with the rich and their way of life. Such estates, as Saltburn, house both landlords and servants in a common space of volatile coexistence.

Often, Gothic narratives start with a common person going to a wealthy family's house; this foreign space will then be the setting of a clash of cultures and the discovery of sinister secrets – up close, the visitor discovers that the rich live on the verge of madness and self-destruction., Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is one of the most remarkable takes on the clash of classes within the realm of a large property.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher", often considered one of "Poe's greatest achievements in the short story" (Fisher 2004, 88), an unnamed narrator visits his friend Roderick Usher's house, who asked for his help due to an illness. From the beginning, the narrator is disturbed by the house: "What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?" (Poe 2021 [1839]). Both his friend Roderick and his twin sister Madeline, the last from their bloodline, are sick and suffering from cataleptic attacks – Madeline dies and is entombed within the house. Roderick believes that his house is alive, sentient, and will be responsible for his fate, which is confirmed by multiple disturbing noises heard by him and the narrator. Madeline comes back, and both she and her brother are then entombed by the falling house, from which the narrator manages to escape.

The parallels between *Saltburn* and Poe's story are evident, since many of them have become customary in Gothic tales – such as the aforementioned family secrets, the presence of doubles (or twins), and the violence practiced within the four walls of a house that has its own personality. Both are certainly tales of "disintegrating psyches" (Fisher 2004, 89), but with different outcomes. One irreverent parallel might be the vampire-related one. Fennell herself has declared *Saltburn* to be a film about vampirism – referring to Oliver as the metaphorical vampire, for he is the one "besotted" and thus led to vampirize his object of desire (Clarke 2023). As we argued before, vampirism can be perceived on both sides, Oliver's and Cattons'. In the case of "The Fall of the House of Usher", vampirism is often interpreted more literally, as the Ushers'

hereditary curse (Kendall, Jr. 1963). According to this reading, Madeline is a vampire and Roderick her final victim.

Under a more sociohistorical light, "The Fall of the House of Usher" has been seen as "portraying the dilemmas and conflicts of the fall of the common man on the brink of industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism in the United States" (Göç 2018, 4). Mirroring such approach, we can argue that *Salburn* also captures a fall – of the aristocratic old ways – and the rise of a world of "commoners", in which the cleverest will conquer more territory.

Both Oliver and Poe's narrator seem sometimes more attached to the house than to the people in it, even though their attraction towards their hosts is also palpable: "Yet, rather more interestingly, throughout the story there is an ever-present sense of awe towards the Ushers, in spite, or perhaps because, of their aura of fading decadence and the horrors with which they live" (Simmons 2017, 8). The same could be said about the Cattons, who keep their charisma through the end. Oliver, however, is not seduced – at least not enough to prefer their company to the company of the house.

There are important differences. While Oliver gains control of the house, Usher's home seems to overpower its narrator: "The narrator flees as the house cracks and sinks into the tarn, but the events in which he has participated influence him so much that he cannot choose but tell the story" (Fisher 2004, 90). Saltburn is only haunted in a metaphorical sense; differently from the ever-cracking House of Usher, it is not a decaying old house, but a rather pleasant, bright one is spite of its size. Usher's dwellings are sad: "Very quickly, attention is drawn toward the building proper, which is 'melancholy', a 'mansion of gloom', so thinks the onlooker" (Fisher 2004, 89). Saltburn is more of a dream house than a nightmarish one, in accordance with the new cinematic Gothic trend to depict desirable homes to audiences that could never afford them – which, in a consumer-oriented voyeuristic society, can be an even more distressing experience than watching an old, haunted house like the one of Usher.

The House of Usher and Saltburn are not just about hauntings or luxury, respectively. The Gothic house symbolizes the place *fantastique* where unexpected things can happen, the promise of excitement, adventure, and horror. Usher's narrator is interested in the family secrets of the master of the house: "A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins" (Poe 2021 [1839]). The experience of the Gothic house is the antidote to the mundane; in the *Saltburn* universe, the antithesis of the predictable middle-class life that Oliver is trying to escape at all costs. In a way, so is the house of Usher from the narrator's point of view, who behaves hesitant and curious at the same time.

While the House of Usher is literally falling apart, in *Saltburn* the Gothic house is a place of stability. At the end of the film, Elspeth invites Oliver back to the estate, assuring him that it is "exactly the same", and we then understand that his plan of conquering territory is coming into fruition years after he set

himself out to the task. We finally learn that his monologue, heard in voice-over in strategic moments during the film, is directed at Elspeth, who soon after their new meeting appears to be in a coma, most probably provoked by him.

Finally, a key difference between "The Fall of the House of Usher" and *Saltburn* is their sense of morality. While in Poe the deviant aristocratic behavior, with all its excesses (and possible vampirism), is somewhat condemned and the narrator is freed from it, in *Saltburn* the main character embraces it; he is now in control of that decadence, living in a large country house where he can wander the long halls while using cocaine and dancing naked. He longs for the Old-World, aristocratic way of living. Once he gets rid of Elspeth, his last victim, Oliver shows contempt toward the family who formerly occupied his now home. He brags: "Spoiled dogs, sleeping belly-up. No natural predators" (2h01min32sec) – thus declaring himself an artificial (and successful) predator, and, by proximity, a Gothic leadman.

This does not alleviate Gothic anxiety, however, as his conquest is constructed in a macabre way and his future may seem uncertain. After all, it is not uncommon for Gothic (anti-)heroes to end up in self-defeat, self-consummation, self-annihilation (Kendell Jr. 1963) or simply trapped in a house, such as in another one of Poe's short stories, "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846).

Final considerations

By appropriating strategic Gothic traits – aristocratic decadence, the obsession with a house, family secrets – *Saltburn* updates the fall-of-the-house trope by turning it instead into a rise of the house at the hands of a new owner. As we argued, the film can be understood as a class study in syntony with our times, as it mocks the lengths to which a middle-class person would have to go to steal and inhabit an aristocratic abode: in a society with so little mobility, one that despises erudition as merit, would there be any other way rather than mass murder?

Oliver may symbolize the fall of a parasitic class, which, however charismatic, is no longer as efficient in its need to subjugate others in the name of its own survival. And the rise of the common man, who also sees himself as entitled to selfishness, to access hedonism as a lifestyle. He is no longer content with idolizing; he wants to live the idol's life. Therefore, the film can be understood as a character study as well, as much as a story of obsession.

As well-crafted fictional works often do, in spite of all its excesses, *Saltburn* allows for different interpretations. In this brief study we chose to explore social class tension not only as a possible layer in Fennell's narrative, but as a Gothicism present in the "poor-friend-visits-rich-friend" plot. Such visit is prone to conflict, demonstrating the impossible coexistence among the economically different and leading to extreme situations that are so dear to the Gothic tradition.

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