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REIMAGINING THE GOTHIC 2018
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Conference Report by Luke Turley

Reimagining the Gothic 2018: Aesthetics and Archetypes. **University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, 26th to 28 October 2018.**

On the last weekend of October 2018, with a chill in the air, the University of Sheffield hosted its fourth 'Reimagining the Gothic' conference, bringing together for three days a collection of speakers from across both the UK and the globe. The conference attracted a variety of attendees with a mix of Literature and Media scholars as well as others from outside the Arts and Humanities. This year's conference focused on "Aesthetics and Archetypes" within the Gothic, considering how representations of the Gothic have evolved, developed, and changed since the genre's inception.

The first panel I attended, entitled "Personifications, Symbols and Personas," began with Helen Black's (St. Mary's University, UK) paper on the various cultural meanings of ravens, crows, and other corvids – for example, as an omen of death or as a servant of a god. This was a very fitting way to begin a conference focusing on Gothic archetypes by looking at one of its oldest familiars. Following Black was Thomas Wilson (University of Wolverhampton, UK) and their paper on Horror anthology television hosts. They mainly focused on Frank Gallop and their appearances in *Lights Out* (1946), which served as a way of American viewers welcoming the Gothic into their homes and they argued this contributed to the increased consumption of the Gothic as well as Horror in the middle of the twentieth century. The papers were well linked as they both dealt with popular figures and archetypes and how they impacted our perceptions of the Gothic.

The second panel I attended served in part as a continuation of a previous Sheffield Gothic conference, "Gaming the Gothic." Up first was Stephen Curtis (Lancaster University, UK) who considered the aesthetics of death in video games. Stephen moved through a variety of video games, considered the trope of Death as an end-game boss and also asked how Death manifests culturally in contemporary contexts. The second speaker, Richard Gough Thomas (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) delivered a paper on *Ravenloft* (1983). They considered the influence of the Gothic on this role-play game (RPG) and on *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) as a whole, particularly their marketing and franchising. Finally, they asked whether the Gothic and the teamwork required for the RPG are compatible. Daniel Pietersen's (Independent, Edinburgh, UK) paper used Play Dead's recent video game, *INSIDE* (2017), to establish what they called stages of aversion: dread, fear, horror, and terror. Pietersen, by using the successive levels of *INSIDE*, explained that these stages were indicators of change and that aversion increased as the possibility and scope of what was changing grew eventually leading into terror, where change dismantled all known meaning. All the papers

linked well together especially as they not only highlighted in-game Gothic elements but how these games created a Gothic feeling for the player.

We wrapped up Friday with a keynote delivered by Catherine Spooner (Lancaster University, UK). Spooner's keynote "'Baby, the Stars Shine Bright': Happy Gothic in Japan" applied their concept of Happy Gothic – established in their most recent work, *Post-Millennial Gothic* (2017) – to Japanese manga after being inspired by their recent keynote at a conference in Japan. Spooner began by addressing the different cultural exchanges between Western Gothic and Japanese Horror, looking at Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) and the American remake. Spooner then discussed the popular manga, *Black Butler* (*Kuroshitsuji*) (2006), using it as their key text and highlighting its style based on the British aristocracy and the butlers that served them, chosen in part as a way to appeal to British and western audiences. Spooner argued that examples of Japanese Gothic employ a form of reverse Orientalism; *Black Butler*, for example, uses the aesthetics of the British Victorian period as a consumable for Japanese readers. Overall, Spooner suggested that Japanese Gothic challenges Western perceptions and can actually open up our readings of Western Gothic.

On Saturday the first panel I attended focused on "Space and Place" and opened with my own paper on instances of the "Island Gothic" within the video game *Tomb Raider* (2013) and the film *The Wicker Man* (1973). I argued how the Gothic could utilise the enclosed space of an island to create heightened levels of claustrophobia and terror. Following on was Kenneth Lymer (Independent, UK) whose paper, "A Warning to the Curious," focused on the creation of digital portfolios through 3D images of antiquities. Lymer argued that such collections are in fact uncanny as they are divorced from any context with no background or setting for the items they display. Overall, the panel made some curious suggestions about how the Gothic engages with space and what this means for how the audience experiences both horror and the uncanny.

The panel "Gothic Television" began with Carly Stevenson (Sheffield University, UK) who considered male father figures in *Riverdale* (2017) as well as highlighting the repeated Gothic tropes within the series of murderous fathers, incest, doubles, gothic mansions, and family rivalries. Emma Nagouse (Sheffield University, UK) also considered *Riverdale*, comparing the character of Cheryl Blossom and their near-rape at the hands of Nick St. Claire with the biblical figure of Susannah. They highlighted the significance of such storylines in the 'MeToo' era especially on television which as Nagouse explains has a long history of reinforcing rape myths and stereotypes. Samuel Nash's (Sheffield University, UK) paper on *Twin Peaks* (1990) highlighted the uncanny nature of the television series, looking at the repeated doppelgangers of Laura Palmer. They further argued that the show found the uncanny hidden beneath the polished surface of small towns, demonstrating *Twin Peaks*' clear influence on *Riverdale* as well as on many contemporary Gothic television series.

The final panel focused on "Gothic Performances" and began with Hayley Louise Charlesworth (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) analysing the ever-unexplainable Eurovision Song Contest under a Gothic lens. Charlesworth considered the spectacle and excess of the contest and looked at three winners of recent years: Lordi, who performed as monstrous demons; Conchita

Whurst whose costuming was inspired by bearded ladies; and Netta, the most recent winner, whose performance was controversial given both its culturally appropriative nature as well as Israel's, whom they represented, ongoing campaign against Palestine. Evan Hayles Gledhill (University of Reading, UK) paper looked at music videos of the 90s and their influence on Gothic aesthetics, namely Brad Pitt, who Hayles argued typified white masculinity at the time, and their performance in *Interview with a Vampire* (1994). Finally, Collette Balmain (Kingston University, UK) considered performance of BTS, a K-Pop band, and how they challenge concepts of masculinity through the story telling and characterisation in their music videos. Balmain argued that BTS' story world utilised the Gothic to highlight what in Korean culture was unstable and unreliable, particularly ideas surrounding masculinity and gender. All the papers made fun work of different forms of spectacle and all highlighted the Gothic's ability to destabilise conventions.

I began the final day of the conference by attending a really compelling panel on "Female Bodies and Storytelling," beginning with Karen Graham's (University of Strathclyde, UK) paper on the "Ballet Gothic." Graham argued that ballet movies – a subgenre of dance movies – existed as a form of the Gothic and used *Red Shoes* (1948) and *Centre Stage* (2000) as examples. They used the depiction of ballet injuries, particularly the bleeding and distorted feet of a dancer, as instances of "Body Gothic." Charlotte Gough's (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) paper also focused on ballet and the Gothic, with a focus on Horror this time. Gough considered how ballerinas as an overtly idealised image can also be used to disrupt patriarchy. They used the film *Suspiria* (1977) as an example of how renouncement of such ideas can both destabilise the male gaze and be transformed into an example of female independence. Finally, Jo Ormond (Lancaster University, UK) considered the film, *Red Riding Hood* (2011) as an example of feminist retelling. Ormond began by considering the radical feminist re-appropriation of the witch figure, referring to Diane Purkiss' *The Witch in History* (1996). This analysis was then applied to *Red Riding Hood*, specifically considering the independence of characters such as the Grandmother who lives in the woods rather than the village, and her granddaughter – Valerie – the film's version of Red Riding. While Ormond's paper may seem out of place next to two ballet focused papers, the emphasis on female self-hood and the dismantling of both patriarchal ideals and normativity could be felt across the entire panel.

The conference concluded with a panel on "Queering the Gothic" with two excellent papers from Emily Marlow (Sheffield University, UK) and Ffion Davies (Bath Spa University, UK). Marlow considered Edward Nygma, also known as The Riddler, as a Jekyll and Hyde figure in the television series *Gotham* (2014-2019) and considered the depiction and significance of the Penguin's – another famous villain from the *Batman* comics – romantic attraction to Nygma. Davies' paper revisited Carol J. Clover's notion of the "final girl" (the survivor of attacks within Horror and slasher films) adapting it into "the final boy," reviewing a series of both twentieth century and contemporary Horror films. Davies argued that "final boys" existed only where they could be depicted as being in a lower societal importance than the normally white, virginal, female victims of horror; in this case they were most often either non-white, queer, non-sexually active, or a combination of all three.

Many other events took place during the conference which are worthy of note including numerous exciting panels, all of which were undoubtedly excellent with many of my fellow delegates singing their colleagues' praises; it was a shame I could not see more of them. On Saturday evening, there was a ticketed creative showcase open to the public which was accompanied by a lecture from comic writer, Kieron Gillen (Independent, London, UK) of *The Wicked + The Divine* (2014) fame. The amazing organisers of the conference, Lauren Nixon (Sheffield University, UK) and Mary Going (Sheffield University, UK), also ran both a roundtable and their own panel. Their panel focused on their own – and I quote them here – "indulgent" side-interests: Going delivered a paper on the long running television series, *Supernatural* (2005-current), and Nixon discussed gender and the female gaze within K-Pop. The roundtable served as a Question & Answer on a number of issues and drew on Nixon and Going's knowledge as conference organisers as well as their experiences as PhD students. The enquiries ranged from arranging your own events to dealing with the stress of study, writing on challenging topics, and finding mental health resources; all of which Going and Nixon answered well. As a then first-year PhD student, this was I felt an important demonstration of solidarity amongst academics in a profession which can be difficult at the best of times and highlighted the necessity of support networks which are still not available across all universities. Overall, the conference was an incredibly enjoyable experience and a credit to its organisers; I thoroughly look forward to their next event.

BIONOTE

Luke Turley is a second year PhD student at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis focuses on post-millennial Speculative Fiction and the Anthropocene. His wider research interests include the Gothic, Fantasy, ecocriticism, and television studies and he recently co-organised the *Gothflix* conference which explored representations of the Gothic and Horror in Netflix programming.