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THE GOTHIC 1980S: THE DECADE THAT SCARED US (JUNE 8, 2019)

Conference Report by Thomas Brassington

***The Gothic 1980s: The Decade that Scared Us.* Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, 8 June 2019.**

Hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University's Centre for Gothic Studies and organised by Sorcha Ní Fhlainn (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK), *The Gothic 1980s: The Decade that Scared Us* was a one-day symposium focusing on the Gothic and Horror materials produced during or about the 1980s. The papers presented explored Gothic media and literature produced in the 1980s, contemporary media that was set in, or used the aesthetics of, the 1980s, how certain pieces of 1980s Gothic have had new significance attached to them in the 2010s. Across the day long inspection of 1980s Gothic, a range of theoretical models emerged, with a few particular strands running through the papers I was fortunate enough to see.

Ní Fhlainn opened the day by welcoming attendees to the symposium, calling it the fruition of her ongoing passion for 1980s popular culture. This passion was clearly resonant with the symposium attendees, who were all excited to discuss ranges of Gothic 1980s material. Following the welcome, Ní Fhlainn introduced the symposium's keynote speaker, Matt Hills (University of Huddersfield, UK), whose address identified a series of strands that percolated throughout the symposium panels I attended. These strands were nostalgia for the 1980s, parallels between 1980s conservatism and the Western Anglophone's political climate of the 2010s, the significance of trashy objects and ephemera to 1980s Gothic, and the long 1980s as a concept. Hills' keynote was entitled "Unpicking the *Threads* of a 'Market in Anxiety': 1980s Nuclear Gothic" and presented an expansionist argument that encouraged conference delegates to think differently about the 1980s and its artefacts. Hills achieved this by focusing on the relationship between 1980s Gothic and humour, locating this relationship within the aforementioned strands. Doing so enabled the keynote to identify the political potential of humour for minoritarian groups in the context of Reaganomics for example.

The first set of parallel panels explored a collective nostalgia for the 1980s and the prominence of Horror hosts in the 1980s. I presented in the panel "1980s Hosts and TV Horrors." My paper explored 1988's *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* using feminist camp as a conceptual lens. This was followed by Thomas Wilson (University of Wolverhampton, UK), whose paper explored the anthology television series *Freddy's Nightmares* (1988-1990) and the extended commodification of

Horror icons like Freddy Krueger. Laura Johnson (University of Manchester, UK) presented the final paper, which drew parallels between 1986's *River's Edge* and Netflix's *Riverdale* series (2017-current). These papers all dealt with the concept of the long 1980s – one of the day's running themes – with my own exploring how 1980s cult icon Elvira has developed a new significance in the 2010s, Wilson's exploration of the unnatural extension of Krueger's life span through continued market ventures of the *Nightmare* franchise in the 1980s, and Johnson's considering how *Riverdale* recontextualises 1980s aesthetics for contemporary popular culture. As well, it became apparent that the case studies in this panel were generally not considered 'good' films or television shows within a wider cultural discourse – the importance of trashiness to the Gothic 1980s was alluded to throughout the day. The Gothic mode has been consistently demarcated to these areas of non-respectability, lowbrowness, and generally as being in 'poor taste.' However, where scholars have traditionally aimed to work around this and elevate the importance of the Gothic, the papers throughout the day seemed to more readily accept the trashy state of 1980s Gothic, using it to launch investigations into how a trashy perspective may produce fresh insights into the surrounding cultures of these Gothic objects.

The second session's panels were on "Werewolves and Vampires" and "1980s Creations and Adaptations." I opted for the panel on "Werewolves and Vampires" to attend in session two. This panel's three speakers were Carys Crossen (Independent Scholar, UK), Stacey Abbott (University of Roehampton, UK), and Hayley Louise Charlesworth (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK). Crossen's paper explored lycanthropy in early 1980s films; Abbott's explored generic categories using 1987's *Near Dark* as a case study; and Charlesworth's considered 1980s vampires through a bisexuality studies lens. Crossen's paper considered how werewolves in the 1980s engage with the antifeminist backlash produced against the backdrops of Reaganomics and Thatcherism. Abbott's similarly touched on 1980s political conservatism, highlighting how Gothic's ambivalent presentation makes it difficult for us to wholly categorise 1980s Gothic as supporting or subverting the politico-cultural systems of the decade. Charlesworth's bisexual analysis of '80s vampirism tied the panel to the overarching theme of the long 1980s through her analytic method relying on current queer studies methodologies. Coordinating itself with Abbott's paper, Charlesworth's also deployed Gothic ambivalence to suggest a space for ambiguous bisexual presentation in vampirism, which is normally encoded negatively with vampiric parasitism.

The third, and final, panel I attended – "Theorising the 1980s: Satan, VHS, and Scholarship" – featured Mark Jancovich (University of East Anglia, UK), Charlotte Gough (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK), Noel Mellor (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK), and Tracey Mollet (University of Leeds, UK). Jancovich's paper sought to challenge common perceptions of 1980s horror as dominated by slasher films through a survey of 1980s Horror films and then calling to attention slasher flick's encoded right-wing sentiments. Jancovich's dual approach presented how the multitude of non-slasher Horror films in the 1980s offer material which can enable a more vibrant understanding of the cultural landscape of the period and its Horror productions, rather than the relatively fixed view looking at 1980s slasher flicks can produce. Gough's paper focused in on a series of films that perpetuated the satanic panic of the 1980s on the screen, pulling these films in line with the political climate produced by Reagan and backlash towards the progression of minoritarian rights

that bookends the 1980s. Mellor's talk laced the trashiness thread of the conference into the panel with his paper, which explored a series of direct-to-video films and their uses of the occult. Mollet's paper was moved to this panel following a last-minute absence and brought the long 1980s thread to the panel through her exploration of *Stranger Things* (2016-current). Mollet explored how 1980s aesthetics in contemporary popular culture are often tinged with a neo-conservative nostalgia and used *Stranger Things* to consider how a fusion of contemporary attitudes and 1980s aesthetics may present a method for managing that nostalgia.

Following the final session was a wine reception and book launch of Ní Fhlainn's *Postmodern Vampires: Film, Fiction and Popular Culture* (2019). The symposium closed with a screening of 1987's *The Lost Boys* that was delivered in association with Pilot Light Festival.

The Gothic 1980s: The Decade that Scared Us was well-delivered and had an exceptional atmosphere. All the papers I managed to see produced a good deal of stimulating discussions around the idea of the Gothic 1980s and the symposium's broader strands. The breadth of papers, as well as depth of conversations, clearly demonstrated the capacity for this symposium's theme to function as a vibrant area for Gothic and Horror studies. By embracing ephemera and Gothic trash, *The Gothic 1980s* worked to challenge the dominance of other artefacts as characteristic of 1980s Gothic. The symposium enabled stimulating conversations within pertinent cultural and political discussions. Given the success of the symposium, Ní Fhlainn suggested that a sequel may be in order, as well as the development of more scholarly projects on the Gothic 1980s. Indeed, at the 2019 International Gothic Association conference, Ní Fhlainn confirmed that a sequel academic event was in the works.

BIONOTE

Tom is a PhD candidate at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis, "Dragging the Gothic," uses drag performance to propose new methods of queering the Gothic. He is interested in contemporary literature, media and culture, expressions of gender and sexuality, and popular culture.