

14TH INTERNATIONAL GOTHIC ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (JULY 31 – AUGUST 3, 2018)

Conference Report by Charlotte Gough

"Gothic Hybridities: Interdisciplinary, Multimodal and Transhistorical Approaches." 14th Conference of the International Gothic Association, Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies, Manchester, UK, 31 July – 3 August 2018.

The fourteenth annual conference of the International Gothic Association (IGA), hosted by the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), boasted a scale unprecedented by events of previous years; reflecting and accommodating the explosion of interest, growing diversity, and appropriate recognition of the Gothic in academia over the past decade. Held across four days, with eleven parallel panels in each of three sessions per day, the work of over three hundred delegates from around the world was showcased. This year's theme focused on interdisciplinary, multimodal, and transhistorical approaches to Gothic 'hybridities,' highlighting the Gothic as a mode that – in its inherently hybrid nature – is made up of disparate aesthetics, themes, and concepts that are mutable, self-referential, and ever-evolving; one which is able to move across and interrelate a variety of art forms, disciplines, cultures, and contexts, particularly in our modern, technological world. This theme is no better represented metaphorically than through the figure of Frankenstein's monster, and as this year marked the bicentenary of the publication of Mary Shelley's masterwork, *Frankenstein* (1818) was central to proceedings. The Centre also organises the annual Gothic Manchester Festival, now in its sixth year, which offered an innovative array of events for attendees and members of the public alike to enjoy throughout the conference.

The conference commenced on Tuesday 31st July with networking events, beginning with the Postgraduate Researchers Board Games Social, followed by the evening's wine reception with an opening address given by the Lord Mayor of Manchester, June Hitchen. This took place in the appropriately lavish setting of the Manchester Art Gallery, accompanied by music from the Manchester String Quartet. Speeches from Malcolm Press, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University, and the Centre's own Linnie Blake, were given, discussing the forthcoming activities as well as the particular significance of Manchester as host city.

With thirteen parallel panel streams, Wednesday 1st August marked the first day of conference panels and the morning's session I attended on "The United States: Salem/Satan" provided a stimulating start with an expansive and cohesive exploration of the dialogue between the national hysteria surrounding occult practices and their fictional representations intrinsic to America's Gothic past. Charles L. Crow (Bowling Green State University, US) began by discussing works featured in the *New England Magazine* 1891-1892, including Charlotte Perkins Gillman, which

recalled the violence of the Salem witchcraft scare, and offered an interesting reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) in this context. Dara Downey’s (Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland) complimentary paper impressively identified how the problematic entanglements of the fictional and non-fictional accounts of Tituba as a black slave and witch ultimately reflected the period’s Puritan, patriarchal anxieties. Charlotte Gough (Independent, UK), then concluded the panel by presenting this issue in contemporary cinematic representations of occult evil – framed through fragmented male subjectivity and the postmodern, hybridisation of tropes in Gothic Film Noir – as a symptomatic interrelationship between post-war masculine trauma and Satanic-Panic in the 1980s and 1990s. The proceeding panel “Neo Victorian Film” included an interesting examination of the gender politics at work with uncanny doubling in Hollywood’s cycle of such cinema, 1939-1945, from Carolyn King (University of Kent, UK). Subsequent papers detailed how Gothic elements and texts are fused with historical allusions in period pieces, with Victorian inventions and attractions as settings for mystery and murder; such as magic shows in *The Prestige* (2006), (Katharina Rein, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, University of Berlin, Germany), and music halls in *The Limehouse Golem* (2017) (Nora Olsen, Independent, Germany).

The afternoon’s keynote from Angela Wright (University of Sheffield, UK) “Gothic Recollected in Tranquillity: Mary Shelley and the Art of Remembering, 1814–1830” delivered a wonderful and insightful comparison of the sublime nature of *Frankenstein’s* writing and the experience of reading it. Wright posed that simply evoking an image, tied too firmly to the past, cannot fully articulate the emotional experience of the novel in the present. So too should Shelley’s work, like the monster, be considered irreducible to a particular origin or influence, but instead made up of fragments of the human condition, with the work’s past, present, and future as a dynamic conception offering the potential for new interpretations.

Afterwards, the final panel of the day, “Gothic and the Domestic Space,” began with an expertly argued paper from Lauren Randall (Lancaster University, UK) on the Gothic gloss of HBO’s recent series *Big Little Lies* (2017) – with its feminised hauntings and secrets of suburbia especially relevant to the ‘MeToo’ and ‘TimesUp’ movements. The other paper topics presented, through respective Derridean readings, the novel *Deadfall Hotel* (2012) as an inverted and cathartic hybridisation of *The Shining’s* (1980) ‘Overlook Hotel’ (Kerry Gorrill, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK); as well as the Gothicisation of space in *Crimson Peak* (2015), tying the ‘damaged daughter’ to her haunted house setting (Ann Davies, University of Stirling, UK).

The theme of “Sexuality and Gender on Television” kicked off the second day of panels. Máiréad Casey’s (National University of Ireland, UK) paper observed the recent trend in recycling iconic Gothic Horror narratives into TV format, cleverly demonstrating how *The Exorcist* (2016) serial reframes and ideologically re-appropriates the demonic possession narrative as a decidedly more progressive one of *female*-subjective trauma. Meyrav Koren-Kuik’s paper (Tel Aviv University, Israel) then noted the hybridisation of Victorian London and present-day settings, conflating the visual and the literary in “The Abominable Bride” episode of BBC’s *Sherlock* (2016), to comment on women’s continued struggle for equality since the suffragettes. Megan Fowler (University of Florida, US)

concluded by astutely arguing that the use of the supernatural in the otherwise slice-of-life series, Russell T. Davis' *Cucumber* (2015) – with the appropriate setting of Manchester's own Canal Street – presents the Gothic as a natural part of the abject nature of queer existence.

The following session "Folk Horror/Post Horror/Labelling Horror" offered especially thought-provoking work, as well as lively debate in the question and answer portion, on the problematic topic of *labelling*. Stephanie Cain (Liverpool John Moores University, UK) introduced proceedings by evaluating whether the term 'Contemporary Gothic' can exist today, with streaming services increasing genre sub-categorisation for personalised viewing, and suggested this very hybridisation as enacting the Gothic mode in the digital age. Matt Denny (Warwick University, UK) then proposed that the recent critical term 'Post-Horror' – elevating metaphysical film tropes whilst ideologically debasing the physicality of more 'mainstream' Horror – acts as a veritable return of the terror/horror distinction in Gothic literary scholarship. Continuing in this vein of value-judgments, Amber Huckle (Bath Spa University, UK) concluded by applying labelling theory to the characters in *Let the Right One In's* (2004) literary narrative, identifying the challenges of labelling in society.

The conference's second keynote, "Frankenstein and Monstrous Sexualities" from Marie Mulvey-Roberts (University of the West of England, UK), took place that afternoon, examining some of *Frankenstein's* incarnations in film and artwork – from the increasingly fascinating to the downright bizarre – which use the novel's themes and motifs as a means of exploring deviant sexualities; the trailer for the film *Frankenhooker* (1990) being a particularly amusing addition. The examination that followed of the novel's frontice piece – with its potentially homoerotic imagery – provided a new and original premise upon which to read the novel queerly.

The day ended with a final session on "The United States: Gender and Sexuality" in American fiction, tying in nicely with the keynote. Firstly, Lawrence Mullen (Arcadia University, UK) discussed how Edgar Allen Poe's narratives, including "Eleanora" (1842) and "Berenice" (1835), effectively dismantle gender binaries and assumed heteronormative standards. Sarah Cullen (Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland) then presented how the 'nightscapes' in women's short stories offers a liberating space for female kin networks beyond the rigid boundaries of the daylight world. This was rounded off with Robert Lloyd (Cardiff University, UK) who investigated the dynamic of inclusion-exclusion which defines critical considerations of Shirley Jackson as a Gothic writer as well as a housewife. He proposed that this dynamic may in fact be integral to understanding her position within American Gothic, rather than her marginalisation; a point also made in, and well-linked with, Bernice M. Murphy's (Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland) final keynote.

The last day started with a session on "Weird Nature" with convergent papers on 'Dark Ecology' in Algernon Blackwood and Sarah Hull respectively. Henry Bartholomew (Exeter University, UK) firstly examined Blackwood's presentation of the natural world through the 'ghost story,' emphasising human's spectral 'solidarity' with the non-human which prefigures the disanthropocentric framework of dark ecology. Matthias Stephan (Aarhus University, Denmark) then examined the Gothic sensibility in *Haweswater* (2005) – which uses the real life event of the creation of Haweswater

Reservoir and the flooding of the village of Marsdale – as the land is eerily tied to the lives of the village's occupants. Laura Johnson (University of Manchester, UK) finished with an exceptional close-analysis of Atom Egoyan's film *Exotica* (1994) – complete with striking visuals – observing Canada's representation as an "in-between space," utilising the Gothic to write a history otherwise absent outside the cultural hegemony of the US; as well being a "pseudo-wilderness" linked to the primal nature of human and the nation's repressed history.

The next round of papers in "Reading the Gothic in Popular Children's Fiction" covered Gothic motifs and settings used in positive and transformative ways for its young protagonists. Nerea Unda (University of the Basque Country, Spain) discussed the subversive benevolence and protection of Gothic settings in the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), whilst Rebecca Lloyd (Falmouth University, UK) focused on Terry Pratchett's *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents* (2001), noting its parodic critique of anthropomorphism in literature, as well as animal mistreatment more broadly, with humans being the narrative's pervading threat. Samantha Landau (Showa Women's University, Japan) then presented on the duality of the 'Other Mother' witch-creature and uncanny 'Other House' setting which Gothically symbolise the negative changes to the protagonist's family structure and economic situation in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2008), as well as its American film adaptation (2009).

This preceded the closing address, given by Berthold Schoene, Head of Research and Knowledge Exchange in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, which introduced Bernice M. Murphy's final keynote, "Arsenic in the Sugar Bowl: Shirley Jackson's Comeback and the Depiction of Dangerous Women in Contemporary Horror and the Gothic." Murphy brilliantly demonstrated how contemporary Horror films portraying the subjective, psychological instability of young women – such as *Black Swan* (2011) and *Stoker* (2013) – are indebted to Jackson's work as one of the leading Horror writers of our time. Furthermore, the hybridity of Jackson's gender and genre was evidenced in her (highly gendered) critical portrayal – and marginalisation – as a curiosity/celebrity. Known as a professional writer and a practicing witch, she was thus quite the Gothicised figure in and of herself.

"Women and Madness," was the subject of the conference's final panel, beginning with the Gothicisation of nervous disorder symptoms in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), presented by Louise Benson James (University of Bristol, UK). The following papers both discussed "The Yellow Wallpaper," with Tomas Kolich (Charles University, Prague) first providing a fascinating reading in the context of the contemporary theory of decorative art and psychiatry, noting the hallucinatory, "optic horror" potential of wallpaper. Helen Pinsent (Dalhousie University, US) then postulated the text's ambiguous 'Jane' figure as a representation of the narrator's dual consciousness.

The conference concluded with an IGA Annual General Meeting and followed in style by a conference dinner at the Hilton Hotel. For some, the evening continued into the wee hours at the "GOTHIKA: A Gothic Vogue and Drag Extravaganza Club Night" at The Great Northern Warehouse. Overall, the conference and accompanying attractions provided an immensely rewarding experience, both personally and professionally, that I was honoured to have been a part of alongside friends

and mentors alike. An event of such scale that still managed to retain a wonderfully supportive and inspiring community atmosphere is not only a testament to the hosts, and the individuals that make up this flourishing field, but also an exceptional note upon which to begin my research as an incoming PhD student - at Manchester Metropolitan no less – with its renowned contribution and continued commitment to Gothic studies and specialism.

BIONOTE

Charlotte Gough is a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, specialising in masculinity, trauma, and Satanic-Panic in American Gothic cinema. Her research interests include the occult in popular culture and subjectivity, with an emphasis on gender and psychoanalytic theory, in Horror and Fantasy film.