

Gothic and comics: excess, embodiment and artifice

This paper will explore some of the connections between comics and the gothic tradition. It will identify tropes of the literary gothic and discuss the ways in which these can be identified in comics narratology.

It begins by briefly establishing the relevance of the gothic tradition to contemporary British and American comics, focusing on tropes such as recycling, absorption, and the problematisation of narrative identity and diegetic borders. It demonstrates the presence of these narratological strategies in examples taken from pre-Code American horror comics and the 1970s British girls' comic *Misty*.

The second half of this paper then argues that many points of comics narratology can be rearticulated using gothic literary theory. These include the depiction of time as space, the mobility of visual and verbal perspective, and the active role of the comics reader. The remainder of the paper focuses on comics' reliance on an excess of perspective in the creation and articulation of their storyworlds. Using the theories of Charles Hatfield, Thierry Groensteen, Gerard Genette and Wolfgang Iser, this paper identifies four main areas of narratological excess in comics:

- A supportive or subversive relationship between panel contents
- An excess of style (color, line, emanata, effects)
- An excess of perspective (embodied or disembodied)
- Multiple or hidden levels of diegesis

The paper concludes by defining these processes as examples of gothic excess, as they foreground the question of authenticity, problematise narrative identity, and interrogate diegetic boundaries.

SLIDE 1 INTRO

At a glance it might seem that contemporary comics and the gothic tradition are completely unconnected. Unlike the canonical and literary Gothic, comic books in the UK and the USA are often seen as a mass-market industry of disposable entertainment. Horror and comics have a long and intertwined history. Gothic can also be found in American disposable pulp magazines that prefigured US comics, such as *Weird Tales*. Its revivalist tendencies mean that gothic stories frequently retell old or traditional tales – far removed from our understanding of Romantic authorship. Gothic has also long been identified as containing a dual sense of play and fear, apparent in early parodic and reflexive works such as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), or the ghoulish humour of the later American Gothic (for example Edgar Allan Poe). The playful and subversive nature of the comics medium (with its emphasis on caricature and exaggeration) can be viewed similarly, and also summons gothic excess; and many comics genres also recall the gothic literature of sensation in their subject matter and style. Conversely and more recently, comics have been reinvented as 'graphic novels' and have enjoyed a burst of critical attention and literary awards. Technological advances together with talented 'star creators' have resulted in the medium establishing a kind of canon of its own.

SLIDE 2

Gothic has all too often been reduced to a set of trappings (haunted castles, persecuted heroines, ghosts and demons and so forth). This paper hopes to go beyond the surface and instead consider the gothic as a **mode** of writing, with a sprawling reach, that has absorbed and subverted so many genres and invaded many media. I'll begin by briefly establishing the relevance of the gothic tradition to contemporary British and American comics, focusing on tropes such as recycling, absorption, and the problematisation of narrative identity and diegetic borders. Will use a few case studies to demonstrate the presence of these narratological strategies in examples taken from pre-Code American horror comics and the 1970s British girls' comic *Misty*. In the second half of this paper I'll then argue that many points of comics narratology can be rearticulated using gothic literary theory. These include the depiction of time as space, the mobility of visual and verbal perspective, and the active role of the comics reader. Will conclude by focusing on comics' reliance on an excess of perspective in the creation and articulation of their storyworlds, using the theories of Charles Hatfield, Thierry Groensteen, Gerard Genette and Wolfgang Iser.

SLIDE 3: EC

The earliest horror comics were adaptations: historians cite the "New Adventures of Frankenstein" (*Prize Comics* Issue #7, Briefer 1940) as the first American horror comic serial (Markstein 2009; Watt-Evans 2010): a updated version of Shelley's tale in which the monster (named Frankenstein) is a rampaging horror. Other early horror adaptations included "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (*Classic Comics* #12, 1943) and "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" (*Classic Comics* #13, 1943). Ron Goulart (1986: 314) then identifies *Eerie Comics* #1 (Avon Publications, 1947) as "the first out-and-out horror comic book": an anthology of six occult stories that included ghost and zombie tales.

By 1948 crime and horror comics had taken over American newsstands, the most controversial of which were published by EC Comics. Despite their notoriety, Jim Trombetta (2010) notes that EC only published 3% of the crime and horror titles available in the early 1950s, when 50-100 titles were released monthly, most being published by Atlas (later Marvel). Trombetta claims that the pre-Code horror comics are Kafka-esque, and that they "show[ed] the inner self as the most dangerous place of all". The pre-Code EC comics deal

mainly in “O. Henry” stories of poetic justice where characters received gory supernatural payback for their crimes, depicted in lurid, evocative art.

SLIDE: EYES

Exceptional artists produced some of the most memorable and horrific images ever to appear in comics, including the now-notorious “injury to the eye” motif. Examples of this include the covers shown here. Of “The Terrible 25 of Pre-Code Comic Book Horror” covers currently listed at *Bleeding Cool* (Seifert 2010), nearly a third involve injured – or injurious – eyes. Trombetta remarks on the dominance of this image and also notes the often-overlooked “injury from the eye” in these early comics (2010: 147). In comics, eyes and seeing are a dangerous business.

SLIDE: COLORAMA

Narrative identity was also played with and problematized by these comics. Readers would be directly addressed by the host and also sometimes within the narration of stories. Two examples are “Colorama” and “The Brain-Bats of Venus”. The first and last pages of “Colorama” are shown here and the story begins with second person address “You are driving on the street with the million neon lights! [...] The comic is also drawn entirely from the perspective of the protagonist (including “our” hands on the steering wheel in the opening pages) whose vision degenerates until he can only see black (the story then concludes with an all-black panel).

SLIDE: BRAIN BATS OF VENUS

Identity is also interrogated through both narrative style and content in “The Brain-Bats of Venus” (*Mister Mystery* #7, Wolverton 1952) which also uses second-person narrative throughout (“Your spaceship is out of control over Venus, Rod Crenshaw! [...] You come out of your unconsciousness [...] Then you look down...” (1-2)) Crenshaw and his partner Reese Bitnur are attacked by monsters which turn out to be “Venusian” creatures possessed by the sentient Brain-Bats (which can detach themselves and fly away). Bitnur dies and is possessed by a Brain-Bat, and Crenshaw locks himself in a food storage compartment to avoid the same fate (“I’ll not willingly become a walking dead man!” (4)). He tries to stop the ship from returning to Earth, forcing it to crash, but when he wakes in the wreckage he feels

a new sense of sympathy for the Brain-Bats and the narration concludes: “Then comes the realization that you, Rod Crenshaw, died in the blast – and that the thoughts now coursing thru your revived brain are those of a Brain-Bat that escaped the blast – to make of *you* – a *zombie!*” (7). The second-person address merges the reader’s identity with that of the protagonist, and in the final silent panel the Brain-Bat looks directly at us, breaking the fourth wall. Medium and content both align here to problematize the borders of identity.

As well as this use of embodied point of view, horror stories often included dense language and multiple embedded layers. The EC stories were often narrated by the host and then include complex interior flashbacks narrated by characters. In addition, endings often featured witnesses responding to or clarifying the horror (Trombetta 2010: 148). Complicated structure, intelligent and ironic plots, and evocative artwork were characteristic of EC’s pre-Code output.

SLIDE: GIRLS’ COMICS

Gothic stories and horror also featured heavily in British girls’ comics of the 1970s and 1980s. Chapman (2011: 111) discusses the emergence of girls’ comics in the 1950s and argues that their popularity with both genders was due to their “superior storytelling and characterization” (110)

During the 1970s and 1980s a turn towards darker horror took place in this genre in particular. *Misty* was published weekly by Fleetway between 1978 and 1980 (#1-101), then merging with *Tammy*. It was an anthology comic with both serialized and one-shot stories, dealing in supernatural and psychological horror. *Misty* and DC Thomson’s *Spellbound* were the first British horror comics since the 1950s and *Misty* in particular draws on some of the tropes of the previous generation of American horror comics. For example it has a host figure, Misty – a gothic, vampy looking woman with long black flowing hair – who welcomed readers to the comic each week on the inside cover (although did not introduce individual stories). *Misty*’s stories had a dark and spooky twist and frequently a moral message – telling tales of Faustian bargains, magic items, special powers, alternate realities and so forth. It also used embedded stories and complex flashbacks in a similar manner to the American horror comics.

SLIDE: THE DUMMY

For example, hidden layers of diegesis are used and the falsity of the medium is exploited in “The Dummy” (#4). Protagonist Rhoda wants her father (a ventriloquist) to love her as much as his dolls, and makes a wish on a rabbit’s foot given to her by Beattie, who plays a fairy in his act. Beattie’s initial appearance uses the stylisation of the medium to mislead the reader into thinking she is a real fairy godmother (appearing behind Rhoda in a mirror on the second page shown here) before this is debunked in the subsequent panel. Next a false ending (situated at the end of the story’s third page) tricks readers into thinking Rhoda has been transformed into a ventriloquist’s dummy as a consequence of her wish. Repeated panels are used to show the transformation of Rhoda into a doll. Happily, the final page then debunks this again by revealing it to be a nightmare shared by Rhoda and her father, as a consequence of which he changes his ways. Sophisticated storytelling and use of the medium creates this hidden hypodiegetic level, a story-within-a-story, which is complicated further by the rare presence of a “host” stand-in: Bertie, a ventriloquist’s dummy from the tale. Bertie introduces the story by addressing the reader directly from outside the main diegesis (breaking the fourth wall to look directly at us and introducing himself and the story with “Hello, Boys and Girls...”) however he then features in the tale itself and reappears in the final panel, again breaking the fourth wall to wink at us from within the main story.

SLIDE: MADHOUSE

Misty challenged its readers with its “Nightmares” section and, although it seldom used direct address except on the inside cover, frequently dragged them into the story visually. For example, the cover of issue #21 is drawn from the embodied perspective of a creature looking through a window at two terrified girls, with “our” long-nailed hands and hairy arms extended towards them. Inside this issue, “The Eyes of the Gorgon” and the “Black Widow” stare straight out at the reader, breaking the fourth wall, in the title panel of both these stories (#21). In a different story, “Madhouse” (#90, 1979), there is also hidden layer of storytelling as the main diegesis is revealed in the final page to be a board game (with human characters) that is being played by giant sentient apes who resemble the antagonists from *Planet of the Apes* (1968).

Misty's layering of stories, use of visual perspectives and layout, and dark subject matter draw on the American horror comics tradition and are emblematic of the trends in British girls' comics at this time.

SLIDE:

Comics' stylized art, ability to create and sustain mobile perspectives, and the interaction of words and pictures create worlds that interrogate our notions of fantasy and reality. **Now want to conclude by using gothic criticism to reinterpret comics theory and identify the ways in which mobile and multiple perspectives are used to complicate narrative identity and disrupt clear diegetic boundaries.** Comics set their stories in alternate worlds that exist in self-conscious falsity and will approach these using the gothic notions of artifice, excess, embodiment and the Double.

Gothic literature has often attempted to call into question its authenticity through various methods. This is apparent from the earliest gothic texts (such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* which claimed to be a translation by "William Marshall" of a 1529 manuscript by "Onuphrio Muralto") to the contemporary (such as Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) which uses footnotes to weave two stories together). Tactics such as first-person or unreliable narration, textual addendums, paratextual material, publicity stunts and so forth have been employed to create the illusion of authenticity (whether believed or not). Ruthven (2001) summarizes this fascinating history, focusing on a variety of authors whose identities problematize the question of authenticity and noting periods of particular dominance. Critical response to Gothic has frequently focused on such literary fakery. For example Fred Botting's discussion of gothic simulations as reliant on "the play of the imaginary and real" defines this dialectic as another example of the double trajectory of Gothic (2007: 203).

Similarly, gothic narratives often rely upon notions of excess, whether stylistically (ornate language, visceral images and descriptions); structurally (embedded and layered stories, multiple narrators, unreliable statements); or thematically (horror that is either "indescribable" or "beyond comprehension"). These tropes can be linked to the dichotomy of the seen/unseen, which can be conjured conceptually or linguistically in Gothic. Either we

see too much (conceptually, an example such as the ghost or apparition, whose terror comes from the fact that *it should not be there*; and/or linguistically, if strategies such as visceral description and abject imagery are used), or we see too little (the concept of the never-revealed monster, for example; or linguistically the horror of “nameless things” that even the excesses of Lovecraftian prose “cannot describe”). Wendy Haslem (2008) argues that gothic projections are descended from experiments in “the limits of vision” explored by cinematic precursors, drawing on Immanuel Kant’s (1781) discussion of the split in perception between the seen and unseen.

SLIDE: Visual/verbal play

Comics draw both word and image together into a single signifier but the relationship between them can vary wildly. There thus exists a tension of “code versus code”, as Charles Hatfield (2005) identifies. Hatfield argues that the implications of word and image are frequently played against each other in comics: “to gloss, to illustrate, to contradict or complicate or ironize the other” (37). These varying effects seem to fall into two clear categories: word and image can *support* each other’s meaning or they can *subvert* it, doubling the meaning of the panel.

Various eggs – supportive (*Sandman* #1 “Sleep of the Just” where a lack of sleep has driven a soldier in the trenches insane. Here the extradiegetic narrator comments: “It’s *sad*. Stefan Wasserman went over the *top*” (#1, Gaiman et al 1991: 11) – phrase has dual meaning re the wartime invasion.

Supportive ‘she’s a scream’ – standup comedian esme gets electrocuted – and screams

Subversive (*Doom Patrol*: Cliff Steele/Robotman asks a companion “...is this a *book* or is it *real*?” (#21, Morrison et al 1992), referring to the “black book” that he is holding, but breaking the fourth wall to look directly at the reader. Here, the *image* complicates the dialogue.

Gaze assigned has ideological implications – summoning notions of pacifism, or raises questions about comics’ literary worth, etc. Doubles meaning of panel.

These instances of doubling can exist at an intradiegetic or extradiegetic level. Their combination within the panel means their juxtaposition is always available to the reader but not necessarily to the characters within the diegesis or storyworld. Doubling is a key trope of the gothic, as is apparent from some of its most famous texts. Comics' use of visual/verbal play frequently creates a gothic doubling of narrative meaning by addressing the reader on two levels at once.

SLIDE: Artificiality and style

Wolfgang Iser takes pains to establish that "literary language" (the text) is not attempting to imitate reality. He points out that a "continual process of transformation" (switches and interactions between the different perspectives of author, reader, character and narrator) "leads back into itself and not into a composite image of reality" (1980: 102-3). As such, the signified of the comics panel is its own diegesis, or storyworld. Although Iser acknowledges that "signs by definition refer to something outside themselves" (141) he also points out that the "image-building" that takes place during the act of reading eliminates the subject/object division as "the image is a manifestation of an imaginary object" (140). If viewed this way then comics (like other forms of literary language) become an example of a performative speech act that brings into being its own story. Annalisa di Liddo identifies this in her discussion of Alan Moore's *oeuvre*, naming comics "an intrinsically performative medium [...] where the illusion of mimesis is incessantly broken by the blatant antirealism of the lines that intertwine on the page" (2009: 168).

Comics' stylized art therefore creates a self-conscious alterity; one that is depicted with conscious falsity, and can reinforce fantastic content. In this way comics enter the hyperreal and, like gothic literature, call into question their own authenticity. Traditionally, the hyperreal is evoked through a notion of the original: it can be identified in our privileging of branding over product; in treating reproductions as the "real" thing, and in mass culture. Comics overtly deny the concept of the "real" (through their stylized, fictional content) and exist only in a mass-produced state (there is no "original" comic artifact that is then duplicated/copied). Pages of art exist, sketches exist, scripts exist and so forth: but there is no primary or unique artifact of the comic with what Walter Benjamin would call an original "aura". Comics thereby evoke the hyperreal through an excess of style.

Line and color enhance this falsity. For example, returning to the example of stand-up comedian Esmé, the background scenery in the panel (which has been minimal anyway) completely vanishes, color becomes non-realistic, and words are also stylized.

Stylized words like this also feature heavily in *Arkham Asylum*, where the dialogue and image of the Joker emphasise his anarchic nature, while Batman's speech remains in precise and closed-off.

Or in this example from *Hellblazer* a stoned character comments 'I'm out of my face', and the reversed order of the letters requires interpretation by the reader that disrupts the diegetic immediacy.

It should be noted that these types of "emotive seeing" are often attached to the feelings of a particular character, and so it could be argued that the signifying properties of color and line also have an impact on perspective and diegetic depiction (for example if we are seeing things literally colored by a character's emotions then arguably this could qualify as an intradiegetic visual). I move now to a discussion of this area.

SLIDE: Dis/embodied perspective

In comics, panels often move quickly between different diegetic layers – one panel may assign an extradiegetic (or disembodied) viewpoint to the reader (such as a bird's eye view of a scene), while the very next one may give us the embodied point of view of an intradiegetic character – that is, from within the story. As Lefèvre (2012) notes, perspective and composition therefore also affect the presentation of the comics alterity. Again, I would argue these exist at a level of excess. Unlike prose fiction, comics can be infinitely mobile in presenting their narrative. They can immerse us in the story by giving us the literal point of view of a character, show us a scene from a physically impossible viewpoint, jump between extra- and intradiegetic points of view, and so forth.

Lser defines the (literary) text as "a series of changing viewpoints" (p68), which he also labels a "serial arrangement of perspectives" (1980: 103). The reader has to occupy certain (and variable) standpoints at various points. This page taken from *Preacher* demonstrates this

mobility. Panel 1 gives us a close-up of Tulip's face from an unassigned viewpoint (therefore extradiegetic and disembodied). However panel 2 then offers an embodied position: looking sidelong at Jesse through Tulip's eyes. We have been seamlessly transported to an intradiegetic position. Panels 3-4 then illustrate Jesse's memories (arguably a hypodiegetic level as a story (memory) embedded within the diegesis), as signified by the switch from dialogue to narration that frames his words (indicated by a change from speech bubbles to narrative boxes). These two panels offer us the embodied intradiegetic viewpoints of both Jody and the child Jesse from within this flashback/memory. Panel 5 then returns us to the main diegesis, but with a disembodied extradiegetic perspective (and one that has additional affect from a (lack of) color and composition – the background has been removed and Tulip has been cropped out of the panel: both color and composition emphasize Jesse's isolation and empty despair (doubling the affect already given by his pose: eyes closed, looking down despairingly). Finally, panel 6 returns us to the hypodiegetic level but with an extradiegetic perspective (i.e. unassigned and disembodied).

The mobility and inconstancy here is impressive. The story is told entirely from Jesse's point of view and therefore logically can only be viewed from his position or with the disembodied distance given by an extradiegetic stance. However his tale is conveyed visually from two different intradiegetic positions, as well as an extradiegetic one. These are used for affect, as we first inhabit Jesse's powerless position (indicated by the low-down angle which forces us to experience Jody's abuse); before the very next panel places us in Jody's position and we experience the full force of the child Jesse's angry glare. Mobility is used for affect: it immerses the reader in the scene by granting us the perspectives of all involved characters and giving us closer understanding of the other participants than we would otherwise have. The contradiction apparent in these mobile juxtapositions leads me to suggest that embodiment is the key factor here and that the viewpoint of the comics reader may be either embodied or disembodied.

SLIDE: Diegesis

In this way, leaps between embodied and disembodied points of view and between diegetic layers disrupt the idea of a coherent diegesis. Stories, anecdotes, flashbacks and so forth

(Genette's hypodiegetic level) are embedded within the tale and story levels are easily moved between.

Classic gothic texts such as *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Dracula* (1897) feature embedded stories, multiple points of view and a range of voices. Earlier books such as *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) or *The Saragossa Manuscript* (1804) also rely upon layered narratives and embedded stories, hidden cryptically within an overarching narrative. Comics' use of single issues and trade paperbacks typically allow for wider story arcs that encompass the plots of single issues and their mobility of voice and view provides for a plethora of narrative voices and perspectives, both visual and verbal.

Neil Gaiman's *Worlds' End*, the eighth *Sandman* trade paperback, makes use of this sort of gothic structuring and in so doing stretches the potential of comic-book language. This example is taken from the story "Cerements", a tale told by Petrfax, within which Master Hermas's tells a story, about his old teacher, Mistress Veltis, and the stories she told to him and another apprentice one stormy night. This transition is effected by the use of inset panels, emphasizing the point that the dialogic immediacy is part of the tale currently being narrated, and is sustained by the combination of narrative and dialogue it uses (figure 7). Depth (in both the literal sense, and the diegetic sense, as we plunge deeper into the embedded story) therefore also requires consideration as part of the excess of the comics page.

Thierry Groensteen and Charles Hatfield both discuss the tension between individual panel, series and sequence. This is a tension relying upon depth, on two ways of interpreting the panel contents. Groensteen argues that "the inset translated a relationship of the type *meanwhile*, when the traditional intericonic void is generally equivalent to a *then*" (89). Depth is used to indicate that these elements of the story take place "at the same time" or should be merged. In this instance the narrated tale gives way to dialogic immediacy: we plunge into the story, accessing this narrative level directly. We work our way into the story, experiencing it in a more immediate manner (via direct dialogue): a change in depth signals that we are going deeper into the story.

Also hidden levels – for example Charlene Mooney’s story of her life, which ironically begins “I don’t *have* a goddamn story” (#56 1994: 5). Similarly, there is a discovery in the final two pages of the *Worlds’ End* collection, that what we are reading is in fact Brant’s telling of his story to a barmaid. The effect of introducing this new status of Brant’s only after the tale is over is to create another story level within the trade paperback. Although at the beginning of *Worlds’ End* the narrative is obviously his, it is swiftly discarded in favor of dialogic immediacy when Brant first arrives at the inn. Discovering that his narrative is still ongoing and that he is, in fact, telling this story to another character reveals the overall structure of the *Worlds’ End* trade paperback as identical to that of its individual tales. This deduction is only made possible by the trade paperback form, currently rising to dominance in British-American comics (Round 2010) and so contemporary comics have become yet more gothic in format and excess.

In this way the medium of comics and its dominant formats draw attention to narrative possibilities that, to date, have been best illustrated by the experimentations and extratextual motifs of gothic literature.

SLIDE: Conclusion

Comic-book art is postmodern and gothic in the extreme as it denies notions of realism and the notion of the original via its overt status as a reproduction. I therefore suggest that pathological excess and gothic performativity are apparent in the multiple and mobile perspectives present within comics. In addition, the gaze assigned to the reader carries ideological implications in terms of its affect. The literal pictorial view assigned by the panel (which can be an intradiegetic/embodyed character view) is frequently juxtaposed against contrasting elements such as an extradiegetic or disembodied narrative voice, or constant shifts in perspective. Comics contain an excess of style (color, line, emanata), an excess of perspective (embodyed or disembodied), an excess of diegesis (that is frequently disguised or otherwise hidden), and a doubling of meaning (achieved by the relationship between visual and verbal elements within a single performative signifier): creating a gothic affect that problematizes notions of authenticity, reality and identity.

[Misty's early issues include alternate realities ("The Sentinels" (begins issue #1, 1978), in which a girl is transported to a parallel dimension where the Nazis won the war and Britain is occupied); enchanted items (a box of paints in "Paint it Black" (begins issue #1), a mirror in "Day of the Dragon" (begins issue #10, 1978), a ring in "Moodstone" (#1)); and magic powers ("Moonchild" (begins issue #1) which shares many qualities with Stephen King's Carrie, 1974). Faustian bargains are made ("The Love and the Laughter", #10) or wishes granted ("The Dummy", #4, 1978), often with horrifying consequences that are narrowly avoided – or not, if the protagonist deserves it! For example, Zoe successfully banishes school bullies to the pages of a horror comic in "A Picture of Horror" (#57, 1979) while in the same issue jealous Anna's attempt to use a gypsy curse on her sister backfires and she becomes its recipient in "Two Left Feet".]

EC stories contained "evocative art" and editor Al Feldstein encouraged artists to develop their own individual styles: artists such as Graham Ingels, Jack Davis, Joe Orlando and Jack Kamen all worked extensively on these comics.

[also pointing out that many of the leading boys' comics writers during the 1970s (such as Alan Grant, John Wagner, Pat Mills) began with girls' comics.]