



THE GOTHIC IN COMICS AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA ROUND

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Anna Marta Marini: You've been focusing your research on children's literature, the Gothic, and comics. How were these interests born and how they developed through time? Why do you think they represent relevant topics for academic research?

Julia Round: I think a lot of my research in all those areas comes from a really personal place. And I'm going to start maybe with the gothic angle because I think that goes all the way back to my teenage years, where I was absolutely a goth... and I came to that through rock and industrial music. It all started with Alice Cooper. One of my favorite songs is "Billion Dollar Babies," where Alice duets with the singer Donovan—there's a really weird contrast in their two voices on this song. I also loved bands like Nine Inch Nails, who are very industrial but with a real high and low and melodic top layer in their in their music, creating a lot of variation, and for me that's the appeal of Gothic more generally. I think it draws together these

sorts of dichotomies and contradictions. It has got surface ideas of horror, but also hidden depths, things that are secret and obscured alongside quite explicit and confrontational horror. I like those sorts of contradictions. I also like the history of Gothic around those contradictions: as it developed from being named after barbarians into an elite, canonized literature. Another point of tension might be the way it plays with fear and attraction... even goth culture, which I think is on the one hand quite introspective and quite introverted but is also quite performative and confrontational. So Gothic exists on the borderline I think. And a lot of its archetypes do too. It's got all these symbols that are very rich to look through.

That's part of the appeal and the starting point for me, but my interest in the Gothic wasn't just because I was a surly teenager, it also came from a lot of the children's literature that I think was given to me. When I was growing up in the 1970s and early 1980s a lot of the classic children's literature that I read had these quite isolated protagonists, who might discover these strange new worlds or some fantasy land, often with some very gothic tropes. They even appear in work from unexpected writers like Enid Blyton, who is probably more known for adventure and mystery stories, but there are lots of old castles and isolated islands, peril, and people being trapped in these tales. Also writers like Roald Dahl, who are perhaps mainly known for their comedy, have this grotesque, anarchic, terrifying aspect. So, I studied children's literature as an undergraduate and I became really interested in the complexities behind it. I think it takes quite a lot of skill to distil something down into a short format that will entertain and keep the attention of young children. There's an economy of words and concepts there. You have to make things accessible—not necessarily simplify them, but make them accessible and understandable. And children's literature I suppose feeds into comics in a sense, although they're obviously not the same. But they do share some qualities, for example their use of illustration as something that's complementary to the words of the text, not just duplicating what's there, and that might often do something quite gothic: maybe obscuring the meaning of the words, or misleading us in some way, or offering something more.

My way into comics definitely came from children's literature as well as from my gothic teenage tastes. The first comics I read were DC Vertigo ones, given to me by my younger brother, and I was really attracted to Vertigo as it seemed to be a rewriting of things I was really interested in, like traditional fantasy and fairy tale and myth and stories along those lines. But there was also a lot of horror within the initial launch of Vertigo. For example, *Sandman* is remembered as this mythological epic, but the first two trade paperbacks have a very strong horror focus. They adapt a lot of British horror film images and have some pretty gnarly situations. Other titles like *The Invisibles* and *Hellblazer* have got magic and darkness. *Preacher* is an exercise in body horror amongst many other things. So, I think there's some interesting stuff going on there and for me it all starts to come together and interrelate to each other.



Figure 2 Advertisement for Sandman, 1988.

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What my work now tries to do is to use gothic critical theory to understand how stories are told in comics. I published a book about this back in 2014 that drew comparisons between the two things from different angles: looking at the histories of comics and Gothic and analyzing shared points and synergies, such as similarities in the cultures that have developed around them, or moments of censorship, or the way that gothic archetypes like vampires and zombies have developed in the comics medium. It also used gothic critical theory to look at formal comics theory, bringing in ideas like haunting and excess and decomposition, and using them to understand how storytelling works in comics, how it relies on echoes of previous images and pages, or a juxtaposition of different visual and verbal perspectives, and the role of the reader in de-composing and interpreting the panel content. My current research brings it all together even more: I'm looking at children's horror comics, particularly two British comics called *Misty* and *Spellbound* that were published in the 1970s. I was inspired by the work of other scholars, like Chris Murray, Mel Gibson, Maaheen Ahmed, Joan Ormrod, Roger Sabin, and Paul Gravett, and I've spoken to a lot of British comics creators. But the other thing that

motivated this research was a very personal childhood memory, which was the search for a story from a girls' horror comic that had literally haunted me for over 30 years. I was looking for a new project after my gothic book and I thought I could try and track down this story and dig into the horror of British girls' comics a little bit more. I'd like to share it here as it has some elements that speak to some of the other points I want to make about Gothic and comics and children's literature later on.



Figure 3 "Mirror... Mirror," *Misty* #37. Art by Isidre Monés, writer unknown. Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

It's a story about this girl who isn't very pretty and is picked on because of it. We can see her on the first page in that highlighted circular panel, hearing people talk about her and feeling pretty crappy because of it. But then she's given this magic mirror by a random old lady on the second page and told that it will make her beautiful if she just follows the instructions correctly. She does, and it works, and she becomes beautiful—but as she becomes more beautiful she becomes more mean and vain and nasty and then one day she breaks the mirror by

accident, and when she wakes up the next day her face is all warped and smashed like the mirror. The final image of her warped face really stuck in my mind, with the narration alongside it, which I remembered as “How would you like to wake up every day like this?” So that’s where my most recent research into British girls’ comics started—with a quest to track down this story that had haunted me for over thirty years, and I read a lot of old comics at the British Library—and I did eventually find it.

What’s striking to me is that I remembered that whole page layout and last bit of narration almost word perfect for over thirty years. And that’s led me to think a lot about the importance of investigating the literature of childhood and particularly the overlooked and more horrifying aspects of that. When we look at children’s literature more generally, as I said, we often find isolated protagonists, children who have been separated from their parents, or might be disbelieved by the authorities in the stories. There are often strange and uncanny worlds—they might be secret worlds, they might just be fantasies, or they might be completely new lands. And there’s this perhaps idea of danger and excitement that’s combined with a clear moral lesson. I think we see all these things in Gothic literature as well as in children’s literature.

Scholarly work on Gothic and on children seems to fall into two main types: either examining the presence of children in gothic writing or exploring the presence of Gothic in writing for children. In terms of the first, Lucie Armitt (2017) has done some interesting work that focuses particularly on the gothic girl child and how this figure appears in literature over the last 150 years and is surprisingly unchanged. She conceptualizes the gothic girl child as a quite liminal figure on their way towards womanhood. She points out that their journey is often quite problematized or made difficult and sometimes made quite explicit and confrontational, particularly in more modern versions like the writing of Daphne du Maurier or Angela Carter or Stephen King, which might focus on menstruation, attraction, and the difficulties of maturing, combined with some very gendered and quite creepy gothic metaphors such as mirrors, toys, dolls, blood and so on. Other critics such as Monica Georgieva (2013) also discuss the depiction of the gothic child and how models of abandonment are integrated into this figure. There is a drive towards foundlings and orphans and again isolated children, so what’s interesting to me is that through Gothic motifs childhood becomes characterized as a very dangerous and uncanny and liminal state: it’s quite literally a threshold which seems quite key to gothic writing. Armitt also points to this as she discusses the Victorian belief that pre-pubescent girls were particularly close to the spirit world and possessed these creepy and telepathic clairvoyant powers. So suddenly all these evil children who pop up in Gothic literature make a lot more sense.

The other strand of scholarship on Gothic and children looks at gothic themes in writing for children and focuses on the way that these two things developed alongside each other and the shared themes that they have, such as moral lessons and identity exploration. Dale Townshend (2008) surveys the historical relationship between Gothic and children’s literature and

argues that the two are very much intertwined because nurses and carers habitually told folktales and this led to the creation of children's literature as we know it. Later scholarship (Smith 2008) has also argued for the usefulness of gothic children's literature, saying that teenagers can identify with outsider figures and with the monstrosity that Gothic offers, so we have many sympathetic monster stories and perhaps a trend for these sorts of non-standard archetypes that's appearing in more recent teen Gothic. So I think gothic children's literature often expresses these fears of growing up and these fears about the world around us.

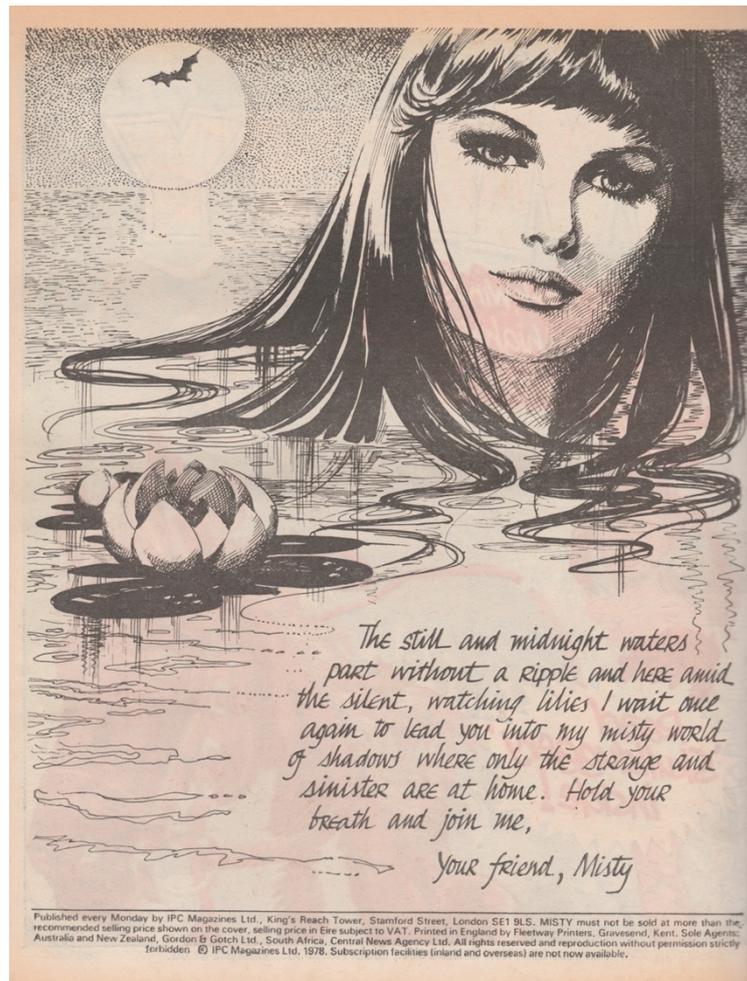


Figure 4 Inside cover of *Misty* #18. Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

It's interesting to think about how children's gothic and horror handles and mitigates these fears. For example, American horror comics like *Tales from the Crypt* are best remembered for having a host character who welcomes young readers to the issue, addresses them directly, and provides a sort of comedic buffer between the horrifying events. We also see this in *Misty* where we have the character inviting us to enter the comic on the inside cover, literally speaking to us through this letter at the start of every issue. She frames entering the comic very

much as a journey to join her somewhere else. There are lots of references to the body and the physical properties of horror and terror: things are breath-taking and spine-tingling. We're often told "look behind you" or "take my hand" so there's a real physicality pervading this experience of Gothic for younger readers. This physical focus also appears in the stories, which can be read as metaphors for puberty.



Figure 5 "The Cult of the Cat," *Misty* #7. Art by Jaume Rumeu, written by Bill Harrington. Misty™ Re-bellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

In this example, "The Cult of the Cat," we meet schoolgirl Nicola Scott, who has the destiny of being the chosen one of the cat goddess. It's a story that cuts between Egypt and England, as the Cult of the Cat in Egypt dispatch a messenger to go and awaken Nicola, which seems to basically involve following her around and creeping her out quite a lot. Their messenger places a cat ring on Nicola's finger while she sleeps that Nicola can't remove and then Nicola starts to develop what she feels are cat-like traits... a fear of water and great agility and so on. Basically she becomes terrified she's turning into a cat and she has nightmares about this, and it's really a story of increasing tension and fear as Nicola worries about what's described as this 'slow frightening cycle of change' that is happening to her. There are two things that strike me about that in terms of how Gothic is framed for children and young adults. The first is that we can absolutely read Nicola as this persecuted and pursued gothic heroine. She's got these special qualities, she only slowly realizes her true identity, and she's in flight, being chased by seeming antagonists, throughout almost all of the tale. But the idea of this slow, frightening cycle of change can also be read as a really clear metaphor for puberty, with a loss of control over your own body repeated over and over again. Here where Nicola is pleading "leave me

alone and keep out of my head,” she’s really scared by the changes she sees in her body. She examines it in the morning and finds that “everything’s changing.”

This parallel between puberty and supernatural changes is something that I think underpins a lot of children’s Gothic and it’s used to destabilize identity. It led me towards theorizing my concept of “Gothic for Girls.” This is basically a story that develops some of the things we see in fairy tale, but that explores and enacts identity. It problematizes who we think we are through the figure of an isolated protagonist, whose world is invaded by magic in some way alongside more mundane youthful concerns, whether about friendship or bullying or fitting in or whatever else. I think this story template confronts readers with this idea of something unknown or Other and it is very gothic because it drives them simultaneously through fear (as we saw in Nicola where she’s scared of what’s happening), but also through attraction (like Nicola’s secret destiny). Lots of the stories I’ve analyzed suggest that either self-control or self-acceptance are what is needed to escape and gain some positive end to the narrative (in Nicola’s case she accepts her destiny and sends her ‘secret spirit self’ to Egypt to help the Cult)—but that doesn’t always happen because sometimes those qualities are lacking. So in all these stories, childhood—and particularly girlhood—is acknowledged and constructed as this very uncanny, very fearful uncertain moment and experience.

AMM: You were talking about physicality and how these girls were represented. Do you think the comics as a medium and its formal possibilities can serve gothic narratives in a peculiar way, compared to just verbal text? How is the uncanny built in graphic narratives?

JR: What I really want to do with my work was to go beyond horror comics and not just say “Hey look, there are horror archetypes in these horror comics.” Instead, I try to explore how comics storytelling itself, across multiple genres, can be considered gothic. To do that I draw on a lot of existing work by formalist comics scholars. These include comics creators like Scott McCloud, who was one of the first to try and articulate a theory of how comics work. He writes about how they use time as space on the page, and about closure, the work that the reader does between panels, where we’ve got to imagine events based on what’s on either side. He also classifies lots of different panel types based on how word and image relate between them, noting that these can be quite complementary and supportive, or they can be really contradictory. Charles Hatfield is another scholar whose work I’ve built on. He talks about tensions that underpin comics storytelling, things that create meaning such as the tension between word and image within a single panel, that might contradict each other or might support each other; or the tension between a sequence of events as opposed to the image we might get when we look at the surface of the page as a whole; the effect of seeing images in series rather than seeing them on their own and isolated, how that might change their meaning and offer a doubling of meaning in some way; and the experience of reading as opposed to the half narrative or the material book that we have in front of us. Finally, Thierry Groensteen is the third critic whose work I draw on. He approaches the comics page as this collection

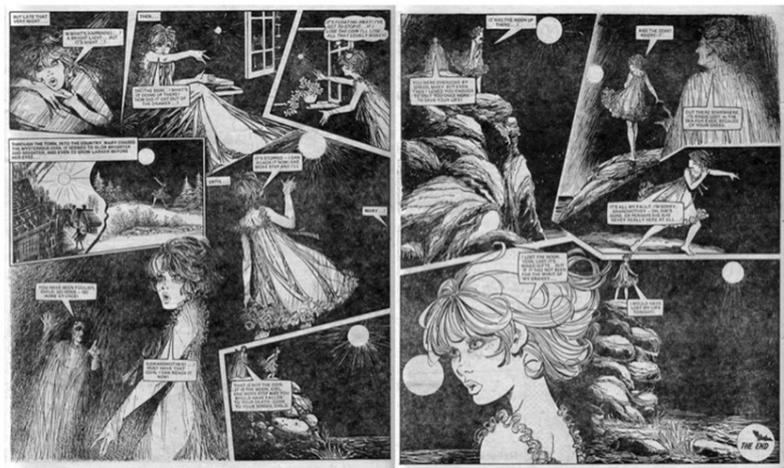
of interlocking elements and says that on the page all these different visual things interact with two main processes: one is gridding—how the page is broken up spatially—and the second one is braiding—which is the relationship between any panels that is supplementary in terms of meaning. So if we bring those ideas together, I think we can see that formalist comics criticism often talks about three things: the space of the page, the interplay between word and image or other things on the page, and what the reader is doing.

What I wanted to do in my first book was combine all this and build on it, and argue for a critical model of understanding comics based around these three ideas, but reimagined using gothic notions—the concepts of haunting and of excess and of the crypt. I talk about the layout of the comics page as a haunted place where moments coexist, and within which we often see gothic processes of doubling and mirroring. We often see symmetrical page layouts and things that are duplicated or repeated. The second part of my model explores some of the different combinations and subversions of perspective that are possible and describes this as a gothic excess. So, we might have a very abstract art style that adds layers of meaning to a depiction, or we might combine a disinterested extradiegetic narrative voice with the first-person visual point of view of a character. These things are at odds with each other, so by putting them together we are creating an excess of meaning. Then finally the active role of the comics reader, who must enter this encrypted space between the panels and define what’s happening there... which is something that can only take place historically, once you’ve moved past that panel on to the next one, so it only exists in the reader’s memory, or in “backward looking thoughts” (Davenport-Hines C3) which of course is very gothic.

Haunted Places



Temporal disruption



Angular deviation and broken borders

Figure 6 On the left: extract from *Hellblazer: Tainted Love* (Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, 1998).

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On the right: “Catch the Moon if you Can,” *Misty* #95 (art by Jose Ariza, writer unknown, 1979).

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This means that when I'm analyzing comics I'm thinking about temporality on the page as this co-present and static structure that we (as readers) only move through and experience sequentially, and I'm considering things like how the echoes of past and future are used to emphasize key moments or themes. So, things like false panel borders like in this example on the left from *Hellblazer* are quite interesting. Here, they might emphasize how one of these characters (who doesn't move during the sequence) is completely static and downtrodden. Or on the right we've got this double page spread from *Misty*, which deviates radically from the idea of a standard grid that might underpin the page, so the visuals contribute to the wild and uncanny mood, for example as extreme angles are used, panel borders are broken and so on.

Excess, Embodiment and Artifice

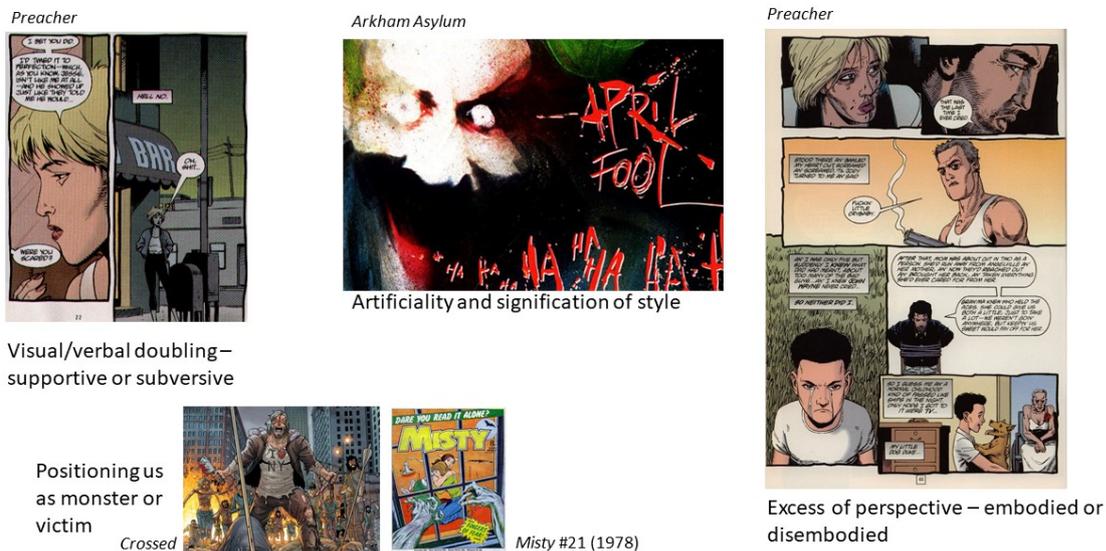


Figure 7 Extracts from *Preacher: Gone to Texas* and *Preacher: Until the End of the World* (Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon).
Preacher™ DC Comics Ltd; copyright © DC Comics Ltd, all rights re-served.
 Extracts from *Arkham Asylum* (Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, 1988).
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 Cover of *Misty* #21. *Misty*™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

I also talk about excess and embodiment, the idea that we have these contradictory moments going on where conflicting information is being given to the reader. I think in comics this can be overwhelming. We're given this constantly moving perspective: one second we might have this long distance shot and then the next we're given an intradiegetic character point of view. Things like the interplay between word and image totally contribute to that, so for example on the left here Tulip in *Preacher* is talking about an event from her past, but what she says completely contradicts what we're being shown. Then we have stylized image and text like this example from *Arkham Asylum*, or places where the reader is given a mobile perspective.

For example, in this page from *Preacher* on the right, we move through multiple different shots, but within a scene that is taking place within a single character’s memory.

We can also be positioned in various embodied moments in the text whether as a monster or a victim, as in these other two examples here, and so I think the work of the reader doesn’t just take place between panels. It also happens when we interpret what’s going on within panels as well, and when identifying moments that might be obscured spatially as well as temporally. So, what my model tries to suggest really is that there are lots of techniques available to the comics creator to convey their story and they might not use all of them, but they will use some of them, and I think when and how they use these techniques is significant to the story being told. Considering what is used and where it happens helps us understand how the story achieves its affect which I think is a gothic process.



Haunting (page):

- Size, position and depth all used to emphasise the image of the bed
- Branches form fake panel borders in tier 1
- Thought bubbles lead the eye

Excess (style):

- Giddy angles in central panel
- Disembodied perspective assigned to reader
- Typography used to emphasise amazement
- Bed as a ‘nameless thing’, indicating its uncanny potential

Revenant (reader):

- Eye motif recalls comics history
- Not much to do except watch helplessly!

Figure 8 “The Game,” *House of Mystery* #178 (Neal Adams, 1969).

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I’ve got a few different examples that show how this might work when we bring it all together, such as this page from “The Game” by Neal Adams, which was published in *House of Mystery*. It reveals the ways in which Adams uses the comics medium to create atmosphere and stress the central motifs of the story. The layout of the page emphasizes the image of the bed as central location, and the conjurer of the uncanny content that happens in this story, as it appears at the center of the page, breaking the panel borders above it. Then it appears again at the bottom right, where it’s shaded to catch our eye, and here its size emphasizes it. There are other haunted spaces on this page—for example, the first panel running across the top tier has fake panel borders: the branches of a tree are used to create this illusion of multiple different

panels that a character is moving through, but actually it's just him replicated in the same picture of the tree. Sharp angles are also used to create a sense of mirroring in the interior of the house: the floor is sloping off towards us, the panel borders are angled and bizarre, we're given a disembodied perspective where we seem to be floating somewhere in space looking at these images, and language is also used to emphasize the uncanny nature of the page. The bed again is introduced with our protagonist Jamie's statement "Empty! No walls... Nothing except for... *that!*," so it becomes a nameless thing with this uncanny potential.



Figure 9 Extracts from "A Good News Story!," *Care Bears* #19 (1986). Copyright © Marvel UK Ltd, all rights reserved.

So I'm suggesting that if we approach the comics page with these sorts of ideas in mind, we find that every page uses one or more ideas to enhance its message. And it doesn't just happen in horror comics, it happens in lovely fluffy comics too. This is a completely different example, from the *Care Bears* comic—an American children's franchise which was published here in England by Marvel UK. The gothic potential of comic storytelling is being used to reinforce the direct address of the message to the audience. It's a story about Eleanor, who has to write a news report for a homework assignment, and discovers there's good news all around her. This is a clear moral. But every time it's directly reinforced to us (by Share Bear, who has appeared to help her), there is something uncanny happening with the layout. So we have an unbordered panel appearing on that first page, on the second page the fourth panel offers a similar message and is partially unbordered, and again in the very last panel of the story where Share Bear breaks the fourth wall to directly address the reader, and his arms break the

panel borders. The key story moments where the moral is made explicit are the only point where all these methods are combined and the only instances where we get unbordered panels. I think these narrative features disrupt reader identity as they undermine the borders of what we might think of as the story world. So, by using gothic concepts to analyze comics, I think we can see how story content is enhanced by the medium and it emphasizes story elements in uncanny ways. It defamiliarizes by deviating from standard panel borders and a standard grid. It disrupts reader identity by undermining the storyworld borders. It provides hauntings and echoes of meaning. It quite literally makes the familiar strange to us.

AMM: Do you think that in these comics aimed at children and young adults there are some gothic archetypes peculiar to them, that make them different from those aimed at adult readers?

JR: I think there's a perception that Gothic is all about archetypes and these certainly dominate in particular subgenres, including those for children or YA audiences. Catherine Spooner argues that postmillennial culture holds monsters as "virtually synonymous with Gothic" (Spooners 121), whereas in early gothic texts, monsters were "virtually unknown." And people who have written about British children's Gothic like *Misty* have certainly talked about "all the ghosts, zombies and eerie beings that haunted its pages." ("Jinty, Tammy, Misty and the Golden Age of Girls' Comics" in *Guardian*, August 18, 2012). One of the advantages of looking at comics that had a relatively short run (*Misty* ran for around two years with 101 weekly issues) is that I've been able to quantify their content and crunch numbers quickly. For example, gothic archetypes like witches and ghosts appear in less than 40% of *Misty* stories, and they appear even less in *Spellbound*. This is a lot less than some later British horror comics like *Scream*, which was for a slightly older and mixed gender audience... or indeed the American pre-Code horror comics, which used archetypes like zombies and skeletons an awful lot. For example, archetypes appear in 50% of the comic strip stories of the first five issues of EC Comics' *The Haunt of Fear*.



Figure 10 On the left: “Was it Just... a Game?” *Misty* #14 (art by Carlos Guirado).

On the right: “What’s on the Other Side?” *Misty* #26 (art by José Canovas).

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Of the gothic archetypes that do appear in *Misty*, the most common is the witch, followed by ghosts and vampires. Critics like Anna Smith have commented that sympathetic monsters and outsider figures often appear in YA Gothic literature, and I think that happened quite a lot in this comic. For example, although the witches in *Misty* can be evil antagonists, they’re most often given some justification, or they’re shown as victims in some way. So in “Was it Just... a Game?” on the left here our protagonist Nina is bullied at school and called a witch, but gets her revenge on the bullies as the series of accidents happen to them on a school trip... and the final big reveal is that she’s the witch and she’s caused these with her voodoo doll-type processes. But we also get witches as antagonist figures for example, in “What’s on the Other Side?” where an evil witch travels from medieval times to possess Peggy, who’s watching television when she shouldn’t be. She traps Peggy on the other side of the television screen and takes her place and we can see Peggy screaming frantically, until her mom turns the television off. Again, this destabilizes identity through all these doubles and dolls, or seeing yourself on the other side of the mirror or inside the TV. These motifs are used quite a lot alongside the ghost figure as well. We quite often see characters walking through mirrors to join other dead figures, or characters who become aware that they themselves are already ghosts.

'Moonchild'

"I said we should look at all the kinds of female adults' fiction that were around at the time, and do girls' comics versions of that"

(Pat Mills, 2011)



Figure 11 *Misty* #12 and #13 (Pat Mills and John Armstrong).

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I think there's a distinction between these stories for younger readers and the more adult ones, and actually when it comes to *Misty* I can see that directly because a lot of its serial story content or some of it was directly adapted from adult stories. Pat Mills's story, "Moonchild," which appears from the first issue, is a fairly direct adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie*. In it we have a protagonist called Rosemary Black— who's a witchy character. She discovers telekinetic powers after a practical joke is played on her, and she's consistently bullied by a girl called Norma and her gang. Unlike *Carrie*—which ends with a bloody and dramatic prom night—it ends with a birthday party for Rosemary in which they give her mean gifts and spray her with paint and a disgusting cake. Then it goes full *Carrie*, as you can see in this middle image here, as Rosemary rises up. It's enhanced by the perspective used—the reader is put alongside the bullies here cowering away from her. In the story, the building catches fire but everyone escapes and Rosemary's powers ultimately vanish after the death of her also witchy grandmother, and she gets to go and live with her best friend. I'd like to draw attention to how Mills' rewriting directly reworks the story into more juvenile forms: it has a witch archetype in it but it removes all the sex and death and blood that we might find in an adult equivalent of that story. The gore vanishes, there isn't any bucket of blood at prom night, although there is pain. But I think resonances remain: we've got Norma's gang deciding to throw a party for Rosemary and chanting "Shame! Shame!" rather than "Plug it up!", so we've still got this animalistic bullying and mob mentality that's so striking in *Carrie*. We also keep the tragedy, although 'Moonchild' sacrifices the outsider rather than the protagonist, so Rosemary's grandmother dies trying to save her and this enables her to move on... but we've still

got this tragic overtone at the end, as Rosemary says she's got what she wanted, but at a terrible price. This also happens in other *Misty* serials that have been adapted from adult stories or exploit more adult gothic archetypes. So I think the content of these Gothic for Girls stories does speak to common ideas and archetypes that underpin the female Gothic, particularly when it comes to things like witches and ghosts (and women have often been described as a spectral presence in Gothic), but it's always modified for the relative world size of young readers, and couched in ways that are acceptable for pre-teen audiences.

Open Q&A session

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: I think you've touched upon this issue but with this broader topic of the Gothic we always tend to be a bit comparative because of the 18th century beginnings of the genre. Can you use it to sketch a bit about the differences between British comics and American gothic comics?

JR: I've looked so closely at things like DC Vertigo in the past I should have really great detailed answers for this, but it does give me pause because there's so much nuance in different genres and different publishing formats. So I'm very wary of making claims that all American comics are in one particular way and the same with British comics. I actually found some really unexpected similarities between the British comics industry and the American one when I analyzed *Misty*. The British comics industry had tons of titles and was dominant for at least three decades in this country, but what I hadn't realized was we had our own big two publishers—DC Thomson and IPC/Fleetway—and it was the back and forth between these two that really pushed the stories to new heights. I think this is something that happened in American comics as well and that there are a lot of hidden industry similarities there. I mean DC Vertigo are obviously famous for headhunting British talent, in a process that a lot of people have called the "Brit Invasion," where writers in particular were taken from the stable of *2000 AD* and other UK comics to breathe "new life" into American superheroes in the late 1980s. Although I've written on this in the past, I now find it a bit problematic because it describes the relationship as quite a one-way process... there's no account of the American influences in British comics, which totally exist. For example, Chris Murray has done a lot of work on the British superhero, and a good thing for me to do here might be to flag up the work of younger scholars that I know of also working on this relationship. For example, Kelly Kanayama researches transatlantic narratives and cultural exchange and the processes of back and forth between these two industries, looking at the work of people like John Wagner and Garth Ennis and Grant Morrison. She says that the give and take between the British and American industries demonstrate a paradoxical but ongoing fascination with both the energy but also the inauthenticity of the American superhero, and American pop culture. She conceptualizes this relationship as a two-way street and she uses quite gothic concepts, like hauntology and simulacra, to analyze how the superhero's being depicted. Olivia Hicks also researches and compares the teen superheroine between British and American comics,

focusing on key case studies and challenging the idea of the superheroine as something innately American, and instead exploring how these characters feed into each other. She argues that the supergirl figure in both instances is an unstable construction of whiteness and imperialism, stardom, the limitations of gender and liminal threshold age, and also queerness. So the supergirls threatens patriarchy, even as she upholds it. And again there's something quite gothic about that dialectic to me.

But to say something a bit more precise based on horror and the things that I've looked at, I think both countries have felt the resonances of the Comics Code very strongly in terms of how they've handled things like horror since the 1950s, and again lots of scholars have studied the global impact of the Code. Certainly the impact of the Code came across in the texts I looked at. For example, *Misty* was never really labelled as a horror comic... it was branded as a mystery story paper and I think that was quite telling, as it was drawing on a more acceptable idea of Gothic for young girls: looking back to the more traditional literary Gothic rather than contemporary horror. The story titles in comics like *Misty* and *Spellbound* have a very low usage of gothic language, instead most just make vague allusion to a mysterious item or are a pun or joke on the story content. There isn't much language of horror or fear, unlike the classic American horror comics. Perhaps because of this, they never attracted much controversy despite having some fairly shocking content and a lot of death.

I think there are other shared elements between British and American comics when it comes to horror. Most obviously I think the use of a host character. I've talked about *Misty* herself already but she's just one in a long line of characters in British girls' comics who were mostly attached to the scary story section of the comic, where they introduce weekly one-off spooky stories. So we get figures like Damian Darke in *Spellbound*, or the Storyteller in *June and School Friend*. They serve a similar function to EC Comics' horror hosts, and to Cain and Abel from DC's 1970s mystery comics, or Uncle Creepy and Cousin Eerie from the Warren Comics. So, there's a common framing function that I think is due to the gothic content of both these titles. These host characters are there to set up a mood or an atmosphere (as *Misty* does in her comic), and to safely frame and defuse the horrifying events (for example to frame them more humorously and acceptably). They tell us how to read the stories, as Timothy Jones comments in his book *The Gothic and the Carnivalesque*. So I think there's interesting work to be done here on the reciprocal influences across cultures and media when it comes to horror hosts, that I'd like to do more on.

MFJ: In the origins of the Gothic there was an emphasis on the lack of existence in physical terms of this horror, it was all suggestions, it was all in the character's minds. I was wondering how this non-physical horror is created in comics?

JR: McCloud talks about unseen and hidden horror as integral to the way comics tell stories. For him, a great deal of story content takes place between the panels. He calls this closure, and says these hidden events are something the reader must take responsibility for inventing and visualizing. So, he has the example of a character chasing someone with an axe and then the

next panel is just a scream, and he says between those two panels is where the real violence and the death has happened... and you have done that as the reader, that's been put onto you. I agree, but I think we can take it further, as one thing we see quite a lot of in comics is the use of perspective to obscure things. So, we might be given the perspective of a victim, characters might loom over us threateningly. Being given that viewpoint disrupts our identity and makes us imagine and embody the horror—even if it is physical horror.

Another comics technique that can be used to express non-physical horror is the reaction shot, so—coming back to *Misty* again—I found that most of the *Misty* covers relied on suggestion, by using Ann Radcliffe's version of terror rather than horror. Radcliffe famously separates terror and horror, claiming that “terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (1826, 5). Terror is something threatening, obscured, and unknown, while horror is confrontational, shocking, grotesque, and obscene. I argue that the *Misty* covers mostly rely on terror because what they show is a fearful reaction, obscuring the actual source of the fear. This might include someone screaming or recoiling or gasping or otherwise looking scared. Some of the covers also included horrifying images, like skeletons, grotesque witches, giant insects etc. So, I think that I think comics have this potential to convey that dichotomy of terror and horror that Radcliffe set up so well. They can give us a horrifying reveal with the turn of a page. But they can also leave a lot unsaid in the way and force us to ‘awaken the faculties’ and extend our senses by looking closely at panels to decode what's going on. We might be forced to think quite deeply about what might have happened between two panels. All this absolutely fits with Radcliffe's definition of terror as the unseen thing that makes our senses reach out for it. I think comics have the potential to do both and I think like most good gothic and horror texts it's never exclusively one or the other. It's like a pendulum swinging between the two: firstly the build-up of terror, then the reveal of horror. And I think comics have some very useful strategies for doing that.

Anna Marta Marini: I was thinking, now that you were talking about the turning of the page and such, that color is also used sometimes to stress some specific feelings...

JR: That's true. I think color is a big part of artistic style, and obviously we've got all the usual connotations of certain colors but also the textures. So I'm interested in how people have chosen to colour their comics as well as what colors they have chosen. There's some beautiful, purely pencilled comics where things can become much more pastel and ethereal... I'm thinking again about things like Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series. Lots of different artists worked on it, and some of the final few issues (#70-73) were done just in pencil by Michael Zulli, before moving to a direct inked-only issue from Jon J. Muth and then ending with the final issue from Charles Vess. Other artists on that series like Mark Hempel used very digital very blocky style and colors (*The Kindly Ones*). So as well as color palette, I think we should be looking at the

print process and also the artistic process the artist has chosen—whether heavy hatching or lightly shading or something completely different, as I think that can really change things.

AMM: I think—at least in some comics that I’ve been working on—quite often there’s for example green palettes usually when something eerie or evil or something bad is going to happen... or red is used when you as a reader need to be shocked...

JR: Yes, that’s a really good point. I think we build up this library of signification of different colors in our head and maybe it’s specific to single comics... but maybe there’s stuff to take out that applies to more than one title and trends that happen at certain times as well.

NN: I do love physical printed comics and especially graphic novels with beautiful bindings, but I’m interested in digital comics and the future of publishing and I do think—although it might not be happening at the moment—as creatives experiment more there’s lots of opportunity with embedded multimedia potential. I’m thinking of game-like elements and embedded video, and I appreciate there’s not a lot of it happening at the moment but this is what I’m looking out for. I’m just thinking with the Gothic I could imagine there being some... just even thinking with music, you mentioned music at the start, even having background playlists that you could have with digital editions. Or imagine if you were a writer, maybe you’ll play this while you’re writing the comic you could then share with your readers and they could open the same playlist and listen to the same tracks. What future do you think there might be for digital and the Gothic and comics?

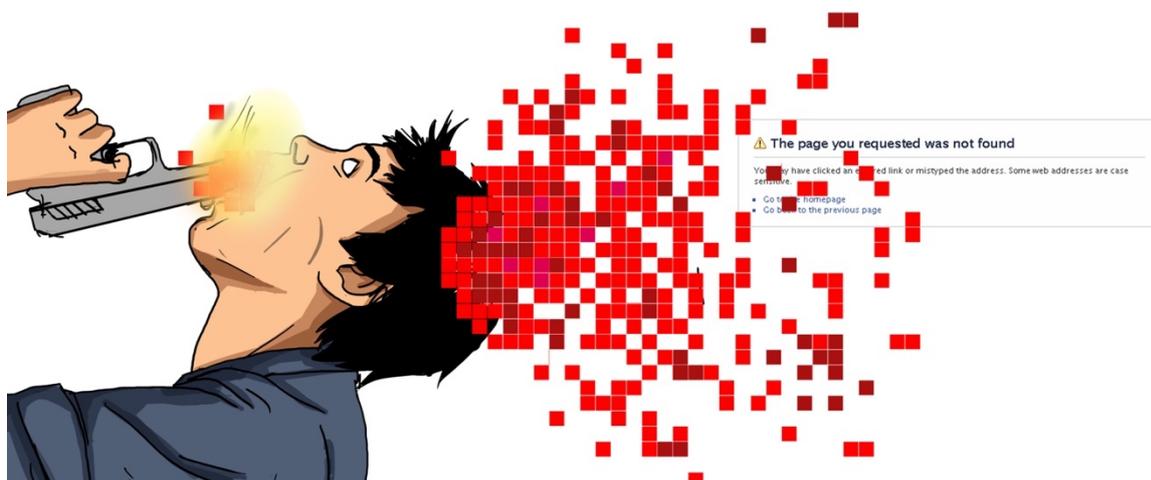


Figure 12 *Kill Screen* (Mike Garley and Josh Sherwell), 2014.

JR: I love the fact we’ve come back to music! I totally agree there’s a lot of potential to be had there... I love the idea of comics as a communal space that involves so many readers, and so the possibilities for things like playlists and so on are very exciting. Not just ones created by the authors but ones that were created by people in the processes of reading as well—

enhancing collaborative reading aspects. I also think there's lots of potential for Gothic to mess up our minds digitally, right from virtual reality to the overload of different information. Even just speaking aesthetically, there are some interesting print comics that play with the idea of pixelation and what happens when that breaks down. And there's so much good work being done in web comics that have adopted some of these collaborative conventions and give even more power to the reader than comics do generally—for example by using a “choose your own adventure” approach. We could enter a whole debate of “are these still comics?” and some people might want to claim that these types of interactive narratives are doing something else. But to be honest I'm happier with an inclusive definition of comics, that includes motion and sound and anything else that people want to throw in. That sort of absorption of other genres and media also seems very gothic to me!

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