Graphic Gothic: Reading the Comics Page

Hi everyone, and thanks for having me here today. I'm going to speak about the way Gothic tropes can extend comics theory and usefully help us analyse what's taking place on the page and understand the tensions and contradictions in the comics medium.

SLIDE: Gothic

I've always been struck by the contradictions in Gothic. It repels and horrifies us, but also fascinates and attracts. It's named after barbarians but was initially the domain of the literary elite. Gothic stories have been reviled and hated, but are now canonised and studied. Gothic culture and style are introspective and characterised by uncertainty, but also performative and confrontational. Its most famous archetypes and monsters blur boundaries, and critical models of Gothic also sustain contradiction. Punter draws attention to the different genres within it; Zlosnik and Horner stress Gothic's 'hybridity' and use of 'juxtaposition' (122); Hogle claims that Gothic is about confrontation between low and high culture; and Radcliffe defines Gothic as being composed of two opposing impulses towards terror and horror (with terror being the extension of your senses towards some hidden object of fear, and horror their retraction in face of outright nastiness).

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Comics are also about hybridity and tension (Hatfield 2005). They range from funny animal stories to the darkest graphic reads, and often contain awareness of both. They are serial and disposable, but also permanent and literary. Many are for adults, but perennially described as for children. Their fan culture and conventions are cohesive and welcoming, but also sometimes impenetrable and divided. Much of the language attached to comics by fans and scholars is also Gothic – 'bleeds' take place where panel borders run off the edge of the page; 'gutters' exist dividing each panel from the next; and the practice of collecting sealed comics is known as 'slabbing'. Even the critics name their theories in psychoanalytic ways – Charles Hatfield refers to 'tensions' and Scott McCloud speaks of 'closure', and 'blood in the gutters'.

My work as a whole draws on these competing ideas to explore the ways in which comics can be considered Gothic in historical, thematic, cultural, structural and formalist terms. Today I'm going to focus on the formalist side and look closely at the comics page using the ideas of haunting, excess, and the crypt. Basically, I want to suggest some ways in which we can combine existing comics theory with Gothic frameworks, and explore what this can bring to the analysis of the medium.

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There are a number of key comics critics that have informed my thinking and before I begin I'll run through their ideas very quickly.

McCloud – one of the earliest creators to try and articulate a theory of the medium.
Key elements of his theory:

- time as space (where despite being a single panel it is not a single moment and the space of the page conveys time passing)
- closure: the work the reader does between panels, where we must imagine events based on the surrounding shown images
- offering a classification of different panel types (based on the relationship between word and image), and different panel transitions (as shown here on the right, where the action can progress in a number of ways).

Hatfield – tensions on the page that create meaning, including word and image, sequence of events versus the surface of the page, the effect of series, and the reading as an experience.

Finally, Thierry Groensteen's system of comics approaches the page as a collection of interlocking visual elements. He looks at the layout of the page and the ways in which the elements within it interact. Within the page he also notes two processes called gridding, which is the way the page is broken up spatially, and braiding, which is any relationship between any panels that supplements the coherence of the work, such as a repeated motif or similar. These panel relationships are differing types of what he calls arthrology.

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If we bring these ideas together we can see that formalist comics criticism often draws attention to three things: the space of the page, the interplay between word and image (or other elements of the page), and the role of the reader.

My own work (2014) combines and builds on these critics to argue for a three-part critical model based around these ideas, but reimagined using the Gothic concepts of haunting, excess and the crypt. This model firstly considers the layout of the comics page, defining this as a haunted place where all moments co-exist and within which gothic motifs of doubling and mirroring are often used. The second part of my model considers the multiple combinations and subversions of perspective that are possible on the comics page as examples of gothic excess: for example the use of abstract style, or combining an extradiegetic/external narrative voice with an intradiegetic visual perspective (such as that of a story character). Finally, my model looks at the active role of the comics reader using

cryptomimetic theory: defining the gutter (between panels) as an encrypted space that can exist only retrospectively, in the reader's 'backward-looking thoughts' (in itself, a very Gothic concept – Davenport-Hines 1998: 385).

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Temporality in comics is not straightforward, and I look at it using the metaphor of haunting (as both a legacy and a promise). I argue that the layout and architecture of the comics page depicts time as a co-present and static structure that we move through and experience sequentially (an established and interesting philosophical view of our reality – or it is to me, anyway). Echoes of past and future are used to emphasize key moments or themes (the sort of thing that Groensteen calls braiding, when we return to repeated elements or motifs), and the architecture of the page layout uses deviation from a standard grid in pursuit of either ornamentation and/or function. **So whenever there is a change from a standard grid, this is being used to draw attention to something significant. Whenever there is a doubled or repeated layout, again this is significant. Panel borders – or their absence or obstruction – are also used to emphasise particular aspects of the story content.**

An interesting example of this is the use of false panel borders. For example, in the left-hand image from Hellblazer, John Constantine speaks with the King of the Vampires in what appears to be a four panel series but is in fact a single image overlaid with false panel borders. Constantine and the background remain static while the Vampire (who is the only one to speak for pages at a time) moves. In this story, Constantine is utterly beaten (drunk and living on the streets), completely down-and-out, and so this use of haunting reinforces content and meaning as the medium only grants him the status of a static background rather than an active character.

On the right there is a double page spread from the girls' comic *Misty*. This story is significant for its deviation from a standard grid arrangement. The black backgrounds, uncanny perspectives, acute and obtuse angles used for panel borders/frames, and overall asymmetrical composition all contribute to a sense of the wild and uncanny, suiting a story about a near-death on a stormy night.

As well as the dynamic and fragmented layout, four of the panel borders are also broken by either the character Mary's head and feet or her grandmother's head. This happens at key points of revelation in the story and the transgression of the panel borders is thus used to give these moments more impact. The fact that the only body parts to break these borders

are the head and feet might also be read as reinforcing the actions of remembering and walking, which are what the story is about.

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The next Gothic concepts I employ are those of artifice and excess, which abound on the comics page. This builds on Scott McCloud's comments about style, and **the four tensions that Hatfield identifies, which I argue are part of a much wider "aesthetic of excess" where conflicting information or imperatives structure the text. In comics, the reader is overwhelmed by being given a constantly moving perspective – one second we might have a long shot, distanced from the action; the next we are given the point of view of a character, maybe even a victim, or a monster. These uncanny disruptions of identity are constantly employed and constantly changing throughout the text.**

So for example, we can have doubling, where words reinforce or subvert the images. In the example on the left from *Preacher*, Tulip is talking about her part in an attempted assassination. While her narration claims she wasn't scared, the flashback dialogue contradicts this and is combined with an image of her standing nervously muttering "Oh, shit…" This type of visual or verbal doubling is a common trope of the gothic, as is apparent from some of its most famous texts, such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) Comics' use of visual/verbal doubling often multiplies meaning by addressing the reader on two levels at once.

The stylisation of both image and text is also a key narrative strategy of comics. It complicates realism and authenticity and signifies through connotation. Both characters and backgrounds can emote – as in this middle extract from Arkham Asylum where the Joker's hair is an indistinct green mist that follows him around, its indefinite and invasive nature symbolizing confusion and anarchy. His dialogue is also shown and used similarly – it is literally unconfined with no word balloons to contain it.

Another feature of this sort of excess is mobile perspective. Comics often move quickly between layers of story (such as the flashback panel in *Preacher*) or from one position to the next, as in the example on the right here. Within this page we move from a close-up of Tulip's face from an unassigned viewpoint (therefore extradiegetic, outside the story, and disembodied) straight into an embodied position: looking sidelong at Jesse through Tulip's eyes. 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 because 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 here is impressive. The memory is being told entirely from Jesse's point of view and therefore logically should only be viewed from his position or with the disembodied distance given by an extradiegetic stance. However his tale is conveyed from two different intradiegetic positions, as well as an extradiegetic one. So here an excess of 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.

So comics can contain an excess of style (color, line, other devices), an excess of perspective (embodied or disembodied), an excess of diegesis (such as story layers that are disguised or otherwise hidden), and a doubling of meaning (from the relationship between visual and verbal elements within a single performative signifier or panel).

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The final part of my model looks at the active reader (who performs what McCloud calls "closure") and what they bring to the comics text. I apply this concept to the use made of the gutter in comics. Rather than viewing the reader activity here simply synthesizing the information from two adjacent panels, I redefine the events of the gutter as more properly belonging to the Derridean crypt: a sealed space that is the "interior" of each panel. Rather than unshown events being present here, they are contained within the "crypt" or interior of each panel: secret and hidden, and thus can only be realized retrospectively.

The gutter or crypt is most frequently the site of temporal exclusion, then, as the narrative proceeds from one moment to the next, or makes a leap across diegetic time. For example, in this first example from *Preacher: Gone to Texas* the deaths of Jesse's congregation take place between panels: we proceed directly from a panel where his (unseen) congregation are speaking to one where they are already dead.

But the gutter can also be the site of spatial exclusion, for example of events too graphic to be shown on the page, as in the death of Robin shown here (bottom left). Here the moment

of impact does not take place between the scenes, but is spatially excluded by a series of impact effects. The same thing happens in this *Sandman* example where the blurred motion lines indicate that we are shown Judy putting out her own eyes. Here the gutter/crypt also becomes black, making a further connection with her lack of sight.

Other techniques are also used to involve the reader, such as direct address and of course interpretation of the shown content of the page. Through reading the page the reader thus brings into being the comics creator, who is not dead (as Roland Barthes would have us believe of the author), but undead.

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What my model tries to suggest is that there are a lot of techniques available to the comics creator to convey their story. They might not use all of them, but they will use some. And the points at which they use these techniques are significant to the story being told. So looking at what strategies are used and where they appear will help us understand how the story achieves its affect.

To wrap up I'd like to offer two quite different examples that show how this might work. Firstly this page from 'The Game' by Neal Adams, which reveals the ways in which Adams uses the gothic potential of the comics medium to create atmosphere and subtly indicate the central motifs of his story. The page architecture indicates that the bed that will be the central location and conjurer of the story's uncanny content. It appears at the centre of the page and transgresses the panel borders above it. Its wooden post appears again at the bottom right of the page (a place of significance), where it is shaded so it catches the light and gleams, and again cuts across all three of the panel borders shown on this page. It is bigger than Jamie's head in this instance and so size, position and depth are all used to draw attention to it.

There are other haunted spaces on the page, such as its first panel, which shows Jamie out in the valley during a torrential storm. The branches of a tree are used to create fake panel borders but in fact this is a single panel in which Jamie is repeated four times in an example of haunting. Our perspective zooms in on his face during the course of these first three "panels", which emphasises his fear and panic through repetition. The thought bubbles are actually only assigned to one of these images (their tails tie them all to the final picture of Jamie) but are used to direct our eye across these four different iterations of the character.

Perspective and excess are also used to create a feeling of unease, as in the central panel which uses giddying angles to create a sense of mirroring in the interior of the house; the

floor slopes off towards us on a disconcerting plane and there are no interior walls. This makes the central image of the bed (supported by the strong vertical lines of its poles and the definite right-angles of its frame) even more effective. Perspective remains disembodied, which fits with the tone of the story – we are helplessly watching Jamie transgress one of horror's oldest tropes (entering the "old" house he has been told to stay away from). Typography is used to emphasise his amazement ("WOWEE!") as is language (the bed is introduced with his statement "Empty! No walls... Nothing except for... that!"). The bed thus becomes a nameless thing, further indicating its uncanny potential. The final panel has Jamie's face in extreme closeup, with emphasis on the eyes, perhaps encouraging the knowing reader to recall the centrality of the eye motif to pre-Code horror comics – we wonder what Jamie will see in the bed, and how it might damage him. Other than this the reader is not invited to do much here except watch – haunting and excess are instead the primary strategies used by Adams on this page to create and sustain a sense of uncanny helplessness.

So I suggest that if we approach the comics page with these three ideas in mind, we will find that every comics page employs one or more of these techniques to enhance its message. My point is that it is not only horror comics that use uncanny points of view and transgressive layouts and broken borders to shock and disturb the reader. Even the nicest, most amusing comics, use strategies that can be considered Gothic because they disrupt reader identity, place us in awkward or paradoxical positions, and rely on echoes of past pages and other scenes to convey their message.

So by way of conclusion, I'd like to go beyond horror to demonstrate that the medium is inherently Gothic by looking closely at the most unlikely example I could think of: the *Care Bears* comic.

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This story shows how Eleanor discovers good news all around her when she has to write a news story for a homework assignment. At first she doesn't think anything happens in her village, but then Share Bear appears and shows her all the good deeds happening in her neighbourhood. While the story's moral is clear from its content, the Gothic potential of the comics medium is used to subtly reinforce the direct address of the message to the audience. For example, in this image the homily 'There's lots of things happening if you open your eyes' is the only unbordered panel to appear on this page. The lack of borders disrupts the page's architecture (the underlying grid with traditional borders) and literally lifts the panel off the page.

On the following pages the fourth panel offers a similar message: 'See what I mean? Wouldn't it be good if we all shared just a little of our time to help others?' Again, this panel lacks borders in its lower half. In addition it assigns the reader an uncanny disembodied perspective: we are placed in an elevated position, meaning that Share Bear looks directly at us as well as Eleanor as he speaks. The very last panel of the story again reinforces this use of the medium, as here Share Bear breaks the fourth wall again, but this time explicitly, directly addressing the reader (saying 'I thought I'd share the good news with you!'). Here again there are no borders and in addition a further transgression as his arm breaks the border of the previous panel showing Eleanor's news story.

Although there are other points in this story of direct address or uncanny perspectives, the key story moments where the moral is made overt are the only points where the methods are combined and the only instances of unbordered panels. Combining all three effects at these points disrupts notions of reader identity and transgresses the borders of the storyworld: literally lifting the message from the page.

SLIDE: Conclusion
So by using Gothic concepts to analyse the page we can see how the story content is enhanced by the medium. **Applying Gothic tropes to comics reveals the uncanny ways in which the medium emphasises significant story elements by disrupting notions of reader identity and providing hauntings and echoes of meaning.**