Gothic and Comics: From *The Haunt of Fear* to a Haunted Medium

Julia Round

I think Gothic is a contradiction. It repels and horrifies us, while fascinating and attracting us. It is named after barbarians but was initially the domain of the literary elite. Gothic literature has been reviled, but is now canonised. Its culture and style are introspective, characterised by uncertainty and obscuration, but also performative and confrontational.

Gothic moves from inside to outside, as Fred Botting (1996) notes. Eighteenth-century Gothic texts located fear in the form of an outsider or mysterious external forces, while later Gothic works focus on internal causes and effects. No longer is the villain a foreign Count defeated by the teamwork of the Crew of Light. Instead today's vampires are hidden among us and reflect our concerns, from class and bigotry (*True Blood*), to the family and society (*Twilight*). Similarly, in the move from British to American Gothic, the ancient castle becomes the modern suburban home, and the external threat becomes our own insanity – which will still eat us alive, but from the inside.

Gothic's most famous archetypes and monsters blur boundaries. The vampire sits at the border of life and death; the werewolf is both human and animal; the witch is both woman and not-she; the ghost is both seen and unseen; and the zombie inverts the inside and outside by showing us its guts and innards alongside a blank, uncomprehending stare. Gothic stories give us too much: the *super*natural or the spectacle of gore. But they also tell us not enough: relying on the unexplained, the

mysterious, the dreamlike, and the obscured. Narrators are unreliable, but assure us of their truth. Stories are fictional, but their prefaces claim them to be found footage and fact.

Critical models of Gothic also sustain contradiction. Radcliffe (1826) claims Gothic is composed of two opposing impulses: the expansion of terror and the contraction of horror. In this chapter I will apply this distinction, considering the terror-Gothic that awakens our senses and draws us to obscured places, and the horror-Gothic that overwhelms our senses and disturbs our complacency with the shocking, grotesque or obscene. Punter (1980: 14) defines Gothic as a mode of writing that responds to social trauma, and so is different at different times, drawing attention to the different subgenres and varied types that exist. Zlosnik and Horner stress Gothic's 'hybridity' and 'juxtaposition of incongruous textual and surface effects' (122). Hogle describes Gothic as continually about confrontation between low and high, disrupting definitions and breaking down generic borders (2002: 9). Kristeva's abject is another example of this breakdown: 'the place where meaning collapses' (2) and 'I am at the border of my condition as a living being' (3). Abjection transgresses borders and confronts us with our own death – but despite this identity collapse, Kristeva's 'I' dominates her text (Shadrack 2018).

Comics are also about hybridity and tension (Hatfield 2005): ranging from funny animal stories to the darkest graphic reads, and often containing awareness of both (consider the pathos and politics of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, or R. Crumb's combination of neuroses and humour). They are both serial and ephemeral, and 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 deeply exclusive and divided. Comics fans are dynamic and imaginative creators and collaborators (cosplay, fanzines) but also some of the most extreme consumers and collectors (merchandise, 'slabbing'). The comics page combines the opposing signifiers of word and image and often exploits the tension between the two for ironic effect. Its spatial layout must be reimagined as a temporal sequence for the story to be understood. The reader becomes the author, adding events in the space between panels, and interpreting both literal and symbolic meanings from their contents. We are at once ourselves, but also not, as we are bombarded with different visual perspectives, addressed by different narrative voices, and privy to thought, speech, précis, sound, motion, and numerous other *emanata* and signifying devices.

These are some of the ideas I will draw on in this chapter, which will use a series of case studies to demonstrate that comics can be considered Gothic in historical, thematic, cultural, structural and formalist terms. Although the most obvious connection between comics and Gothic takes us to 1950s America and the horror comics scandal, this is just the beginning. Rather than look at a selection of horror comics and conclude that they have horror themes, this chapter will then explore the histories and reception of several different subgenres: children's comics, superhero comics and autobiographix. It will explore comics fandom's use of Gothic processes of duality and inversion. Finally, I will return to my examples from a formalist perspective, demonstrating that a haunted page, a revenant reader, and an aesthetic of Gothic excess underpin comics' narratology.

British-American Comics History and Horror Comics

In America in the 1940s and 1950s there was a moral panic and public outcry against crime and horror comics, which at the time had a circulation in excess of sixty million copies per month (Crist 1948: 22) and dominated the newsstands. The 'ten cent terror[s]' were critiqued for their sensationalism, violence and sexualisation, amid claims that they were leading to increased delinquency and decreased literacy. Public protests, book burnings, and a series of articles and books by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham resulted in a Senate hearing at which the comics industry committed to self-censorship (the 1954 Comics Code). Comics without the Code seal of approval on their cover could not be sold in stores. Although revised and relaxed in later years, at its height the Code was draconian. It prevented publishers from including any 'lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations'; from using Gothic language in their titles (terror, horror) or featuring its archetypes in their stories (vampires, zombies, ghouls, werewolfism and so forth); and restricted all endings to 'good shall triumph over evil' (Comics Code Authority 1954).

Prior to the restrictions of the Code, EC's comics often featured established archetypes[1] such as vampires, ghouls and mummies (33%) alongside more secular fears such as mutilation and murder (25%), internment/resurrection (25%), and miscellaneous or unnamed antagonists (17%).[2] In an article connecting Victorian and modern horror fiction, Luckhurst (125) notes a 'biological obsession' with slime and ooze that runs through the work of Arthur Machen, H.G. Wells and William Hope Hodgson. Luckhurst suggests that this had a clear influence on the American 'weird tale', with the first story in the launch issue of *Weird Tales* magazine (1923) entitled

[1] See Round 2014 (Chapters 8 and 9) for a more detailed analysis of vampire and zombie archetypes in comics.
[2] These figures are taken from a brief survey of the first six issues of *The Haunt of Fear* (24 stories).

‘Ooze’ – and its content (a backwoods scientific experiment) finds a clear parallel in ‘The Thing in the Swamp’ discussed below. The abject physical qualities (Kristeva 1982) of a mucoid substance are clear, and Luckhurst also suggests that ooze is abject by existing at the very edges of the origins of life (see also Woodard 2012). I would also add that the nameless quality of the ‘Thing’ and the onomatopoeic qualities of ‘ooze’ add to this reading.

Like the earliest Gothic texts, the crime and horror comics went against the grain of social acceptability: telling stories that claimed ‘TRUE CRIME does not pay’ even as their typography and narrative structure implied firmly that it did. In titles such as *Corporate Crime, Crime Suspenstories*, and *Crime does not Pay* the word ‘crime’ always dominated, and in their stories the punishment was often relegated to a single final panel, focusing instead on the details and spectacle of the crime. By contrast, the horror comics were more moral, although this was often overlooked by their critics (Skal 1993). The typical story structure was that of a vindictive protagonist who meets a grisly end. This can be seen in the first few issues of *The Haunt of Fear* (1950-54), one of the most famous horror comics published by EC. Its first issue (1950) contains four comic strip stories and a prose story. The first strip is ‘The Wall’, a retelling of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’, in which protagonist and narrator Neal kills his nagging wife Clara. Here there is little obvious horror or violence – the death occurs off-panel, there is no blood, and Clara’s (unmarked) corpse features in only a few panels. The second story is ‘House of Horror’, about a haunted fraternity house into which three students vanish. Again, this is a story of suggestion – we never see what is inside the haunted house, only Wilton’s glassy stare at whatever has left him completely unhinged. This is followed by ‘The Mad

Magician', a tale about Boris, a magician who believes he can really cut people in half, and again this violence takes place unseen between panels (for example cutting from an image of a buzzing circular saw to a panel captioned 'Two weeks later'). Finally 'The Thing in the Swamp!', which almost entirely relegates the Thing (a kind of brown blob) to the memories of a past survivor. Our protagonists only encounter it in the final panel, where it remains unseen as they look directly at it, and us. This is interesting as it forces the reader to embody its position. 'Out of the Grave', the prose story, also gives the reader an uncanny experience from its opening focalisation, which places us alongside the position of the monster in an undead experience, as it begins: 'The Thing stirred slowly, the dirt against its mouth and body. It pushed upward, clawing…'

Thus, although they are described as horror, the comics in fact fall under Radcliffe's definition of the terror-Gothic. They obscure the object of fear and consistently place the reader in an uncanny narrative position, forcing us to imagine and seek out the fearful events. Further, the stories represent both sides of the paradox recognised by Wisker, where horror's 'constant destabilising influence' sits alongside a 'tendency for resolution' (38). They often obscure outright horror and avoid conclusions and closure, but the punishment of antagonists provides an air of final resolution. In addition, many of these horror comics had a particular feature, a host character, which accentuates the sense of resolution.

The second issue of *The Haunt of Fear* introduces the title's host, the Old Witch, one of the three 'Ghoulunatics' who hosted the EC horror anthologies, alongside the Crypt Keeper (*Tales from the Crypt:* 1950-55), and the Vault-Keeper (*The Vault of*

Horror: 1950-55). Although they were visually horrifying figures, their primary purpose was to provide some humour and create some distance from the stories' horrifying events, typically by using terrible puns. For example in #5 The Old Witch wraps up 'A Biting Finish' (in which murderer Bruno bleeds to death after being bitten by an ancient corpse) as follows:

> Hee, hee! And that's my tale, dear readers! And a ***tasty morsel*** if I say so myself! A story you could sink your ***teeth*** into! I hope the ***sharp*** climax didn't shock you! Especially the ***biting irony*** of it! Bob certainly got his last ***lick***, didn't he! You said a ***mouthful***!

Zlosnik and Horner argue in a more general discussion that 'the comic [comedy] within the Gothic offers a position of detachment and scepticism towards such cultural nostalgia, foregrounding a self-reflexivity and dialectical impulse intrinsic to the modern subject' (122). They claim that Gothic humour 'engage[s] critically with aspects of their contemporary world' (124) but also offers 'a measure of detachment from scenes of pain and suffering' (125). EC's stories do exactly this, as shrill wives, jealous partners and henpecked husbands finally crack, but we are kept at a safe distance by our host figures, who bring the dark events into modern slang and trivialise them, giving us exactly this scepticism and reflexive, dialectical impulse by addressing us directly.

Although the Ghoulunatics are the most famous, the host character is a staple of the horror genre in anthology comics. In the 1960s Warren Publishing created Uncle Creepy and Cousin Eerie as hosts of *Creepy* (1964-83) and *Eerie* (1966-83) respectively, alongside Vampirella who hosted *Vampirella* (1969-83, 1991-present) between 1969 and 1970. DC Comics also created brothers Cain (1968) and Abel (1969) as hosts of their *House of Mystery* (1951-83, 1986-87 and 2008-present) and

House of Secrets (1956-78, 1996-99) anthologies. British children's comics are another genre that often flirted with horror themes and used a host figure. *Misty* (a mystery comic for girls, published by IPC 1978-80) had the vampy Misty herself as our fictional editor and sometime narrator. Her introductions to each issue (see Figure 1 below) are drenched in Gothic imagery (bats, moon, ruins, nature) and also use a very Gothic lexis (focusing on tropes of the journey and the body) to situate the comic 'elsewhere', in a place to which the reader is invited to travel.[3]

Figure 1: Inside front cover from *Misty* #18. Art by Shirley Bellwood, lettering by Jack Cunningham, writer unknown but likely editor Malcolm Shaw.

However, in general British children's comics used the host figure for one distinct section in their titles: the horror/strange stories. The pipe-smoking Storyteller first appeared in *School Friend* (1950-65), narrating 'The Strangest Stories Ever Told', and later hosting the 'Strange Stories' section in *Tammy* (1971-84) and then appearing in *Jinty* (renamed as Uncle Pete). *Diana* (DC Thomson, 1963-76) had the Dracula-esque 'Man in Black', and *Spellbound* (DC Thomson, 1976-78) included the Victorian-looking Damian Darke, who read from a dusty book and sported a raven on his shoulder. *Judy* (1960-91, then merging with *Mandy* to create *M&J*) had 'She of the Shadows', a veiled lady, later replaced by 'Skeleton Corner', hosted by a skeleton named Bones. Gypsy Rose hosted 'Gypsy Rose's Tales of Mystery and Magic' in *Jinty* (1977-1982).

[3] My thanks to Paul Fisher Davies for this data and analysis.

The host figure has a Gothic function as it problematizes boundaries and borders (see Round 2014 and Round 2018 for further discussion) and creates layered stories: a structure used by other Gothic novels. For example *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1818) contains multiple embedded narratives, in *Dracula* (Stoker 1897) all of our encounters with the vampire himself are framed through the eyes of the other protagonists, and Arthur Machen's stories use a 'Chinese box' style embedded structure. The host's voice problematizes narrative authenticity in a similar way by adding frames of doubt and distance to the stories – even when these frames are then collapsed, as at the conclusion of *Frankenstein* where the characters all meet in the Arctic and their narrative layers merge. Many of the comics hosts perform transgressive actions and are able to step in and out of the storyworlds that they introduce, collapsing these layers.

Gypsy Rose is a particularly active participant in her stories; but even those hosts whose role is allegedly separate often meddle in the stories' events. Cain and Abel are great examples of this. In many ways they look back to the EC horror comics of the 1950s as they use the same-style puns and humour, such as 'Tomb it may concern' (*House of Mystery* #255) and 'Pay attention Little Fiends' (*House of Secrets* #107), which echoes the 'Boils and Ghouls' ('boys and girls') addressed by the EC hosts. In the *House of…* anthologies there are numerous instances where the host interjects for a single panel ('The Secret of the Egyptian Cat', Kanigher and Wightson 1970) or meddles in the story events, for example by helping victims escape in 'The Mask of the Red Fox' (Kanigher and Toth 1970), or sending ghosts back to the grave in 'Voice from the Dead' (Howard and Anon. 1970). The host's

framing voice shifts form (moving from dialogue to narration to paratext) and can address the reader directly, for example asking ‘You don’t believe in ghosts, do you?’ (Anon. and Howard 1970: 1). It blurs the lines between the text and paratext by sometimes including elaborately drawn story titles within dialogue. The host can also break the boundaries between layers of story, as in Figure 2 below where Cain appears in the storyworld and is attacked by a character (panels 3-5). The hosts’ mobility is thus Gothic in the extreme as they problematize authenticity and transgress the boundaries of fiction (see Round 2014 for a full discussion).

Figure 2: Final page of ‘The Gardener of Eden’. *The House of Mystery* #192. Written by John Albano, art by Jim Aparo. Used under fair use guidelines.

The mobility of the comics medium also gives many options for creating terror and horror in the stories themselves. It can place the reader in a perceptual position that limits and obscures our point of view, which creates the terror-Gothic, for example as we slowly lose our sight in ‘Colorama’ (Powell 1953). Other stories, such as ‘Tasty Morsel’ (Gaines, Feldstein and Davis 1951: 7) stress that ‘This tale is actually about to happen to you’ and address us directly in narration: ‘The last thing you see… before everything fades… is the innkeeper… and his meat cleaver…’ Further, a comic can obscure the source of fear either spatially or temporally. Gory acts can be placed outside the drawn panel contents, as seen in ‘The Wall’, where the killing blow takes place beyond the limits of the panel, or in other examples such as ‘The Man Who Never Smiled’ where the victim is dragged out of the final panel (Wolverton 1953: 3). Alternatively, the violence can be placed in a temporal gap, as in ‘The Mad Magician’ or many other examples such as ‘Bargain with a Worm’,

where the last we see of Jim is his warning 'Don't compel me any closer! Don't!', before the next panel cuts to the aftermath (Anon. 1951: 7). These strategies force the reader's imagination to provide the unseen details, creating the terror-Gothic. At the other extreme, the medium also has the potential to horrify and can show us grotesque monsters, decomposing bodies, and acid-scarred faces, as in 'The Man From the Grave' (*The Haunt of Fear* #4). These shocking images confront us with the horror-Gothic, as the Old Witch acknowledges: 'Look for yourself, dear reader… *if you dare!*' (Fox and Wood 1950: 4). Japanese horror comics in particular are often characterised by an obsession with body horror, for example the work of Junji Ito, where bodies are transformed, for example, into slug-like creatures or boneless spirals (*Uzumaki*), into furniture ('The Human Chair') or sewn to others ('Army of One').

Superheroes, Identity and Inversion

We might expect Gothic strategies and archetypes to dominate in the horror genre, but what of the other sub-genres of comics? Ahmed (2018) claims that the medium is well suited to depictions of hybrid creatures, mutations and metamorphoses, extending Jan Baetens' thoughts on the dominance of human-animal transitions in comics. The superheroic or impossible body is one example of this: an impossible form made possible by the comics medium, where uncanny physiques or monstrous appearances are easily rendered. David Kunzle (cited in Ahmed 2018) notes that playing with the bodily form emerges in comics in the late nineteenth century, and Scott Bukatman argues that its exploitation can be read as a feature of the 'plasmatic energy' (Bukatman 2012: 18) of comics. Just as Frankenstein's creature incarnates

Gothic intertextuality (Otto 2013), comics' diversity and continuity is incarnated in its abnormal characters.

It is possible to read both the physicality and psychology of the superhero archetype as Gothic. Within this genre, both male and female characters are often drawn with impossible dimensions, such as bulging chests, ridiculously narrow waists or in impossible poses.[4] But the superhero has Gothic qualities that go beyond a monstrous body. I have argued in early work (Round 2005) that the superhero literalises the 'Other within': a figure of fragmented identity that is only held together through processes of exclusion. Neither the superhero nor the alter ego is the 'real' identity: Clark Kent is a disguise that Superman wears, but his love for Lois is an integral part of both characters. The two halves have opposing qualities and only together can they create the whole character: the traumatised Bruce Wayne is an essential part of the obsessive Batman, and the brash Spiderman is the freed version of the timid Peter Parker.

Just as they are opposed to themselves, they are also opposed to their villains. Lex Luthor is human capitalism incarnate, against Superman's alien altruist. Joker is a force of chaos against Batman's obsession. Lieshout (2013) in fact proposes a metaphorical reading of these characters along with their supervillains as parts of the psyche: reading the triumvirate of Joker, Bruce Wayne and Batman as the id, ego and superego respectively. Such a reading fits well with conceptions of the Gothic monster as suggested by Shildrick. She points towards our ambivalent responses to

[4] These types of monstrosity are parodied by websites such as The Hawkeye Initiative, where readers redraw impossible female poses using this Avengers character.

the monster and refers to history, philosophy and critical theory to argue that our desire to exclude the monstrous is motivated by the dream (and impossibility) of an invulnerable self. We project our notions of the monstrous onto the Other and thus try to exclude it from discourses of normality.

Comics superheroes (and villains) enact this process. Rather than reading them as 'modern day folktales' (Morrison 2011; Reynolds 1992; Brooker 2001) it is productive to approach the characters as instances of response to social trauma (as Punter defines the Gothic). Their fluidity of form (constantly changing identities, wearing masks and costumes) can perhaps speak to gender performativity and identity politics that gained traction in the twentieth century. Within their heroic tales norms are frequently inverted: the vigilante superhero is both criminal and punisher; famous and unknown; and the traumatic origin story ends in great hope and power.

Swamp Thing is a good example of this. Ahmed (2018) draws attention to the ways in which this character intersects with the Frankenstein mythos at various points, for example as characters compare him to the creature (Moore *et al., Swamp Thing* Volume 4: 176.) She further notes the dominance of dreams and shadows in the stories; drawing parallels with Romantic art and reading the character's arc as a quest for personal growth that draws on the sublime space of The Green (the psychological plane of shared plant consciousness). Ahmed concludes that while the comic book's iconography aligns Swamp Thing with the human (he is shown in a position resembling a human foetus and also in the Vitruvian man iconic pose), the text stresses to us that he is a plant (for example through Woodrue's narrative). Like other established Gothic archetypes, the character thus blurs boundaries, and the comic as a

whole brings the monster into the role of protagonist and inverts our assumptions about humanity.

Swamp Thing crosses genres and titles, appearing in comics such as *Hellblazer* and *Sandman* and often interacting with various other superhero characters such as Batman (also in *Black Orchid*). Within the superhero genre, Batman is particularly Gothic due to his iconography, murderous origin story, and obsessive personality. Carver (2011: 2) describes him as Superman's 'dark twin' and 'shadow', and Monnet (2012) draws attention to the paradoxes that structure his character: he is a lone vigilante but works with the police; a cerebral detective and muscular behemoth; ultra-masculine but haunted by sexual controversy; and a character that continually oscillates between light and dark versions. For example, *Arkham Asylum* (Morrison and McKean 1989) is a dark and dreamlike story in which Batman enters Arkham Asylum to do battle with the Joker. The events can also be read as a journey into his own subconscious, doubled against the story of the history of the Asylum and its founder, Amadeus Arkham. Morrison claims that *Arkham Asylum*'s villains all represent different aspects of Batman's troubled psyche (2004) and Singer explores this in detail, naming them 'personifications of Batman's own fears and desires' (2006: 278). Inversion is thus common in these comics and I have discussed elsewhere other titles such as *Batman: The Killing Joke* (Moore and Bolland 1988) that invert madness and sanity and draw attention to this through puns and wordplay (Round 2005).

Autobiographix, Trauma and Selfhood

In this way, even the action-driven superhero genre has developed a tendency towards introspection and confessional narratives. This has been echoed in other subgenres of comics, such as the autobiographical, which has recently gained great popularity. Landmark comics such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-91) or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) interrogate the position of the self-narrative within the family or society. Schneider offers a Gothic reading of *Fun Home* that draws attention to its structural and formal complexities that construct a 'fragmented rather than a coherent self' (354). Freedman (2009: 130) describes this comic as a special type of *Bildungsroman*, in which 'the origin story of the self that Bechdel narrates is also the origin story of this book'. While *Fun Home* is mainly driven by its verbal narrative (fed by double meanings, alliteration and references to classic narratives), it is its use of the comics medium that creates a Gothic air of ambivalence and obscuration. The muted colour scheme adds an air of ambiguity and muted emotion. This enhances Bechdel's interrogation of the boundaries between reality and fiction as she redraws dozens of family photographs, letters, diary entries and legal documents (Chute 2006; Schneider 2010).

Many autobiographix explore the place of the individual within society and thus touch upon Gothic themes of isolation and alienation. In this sense they are similar to Botting's (1996: 98) recognition of 'heroes in the Gothic mould: gloomy, isolated and sovereign, they are wanderers, outcasts and rebels condemned to roam the borders of social worlds'. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2008) uses the comics medium and Satrapi's idiosyncratic artistic style to explore the violence and politics of Iran after the 1979 revolution through a child's eyes. Her cartoony black and white drawings allow for horrific torture ('In the end he was cut to pieces' [52]) to be expressed using

doll-like figures. At other points in the book the art conveys the anonymity and pressure for conformity that young Marji experiences, for example the opening ‘class photo’ of her schoolfriends all wearing the identical veil, in which Marji is ‘sitting on the far left so you don’t see me’ (3). This panel in which she does not appear is juxtaposed with her opening self-portrait panel: suggesting that she is both the same as her other classmates (through her identical pose and clothing) but also different (through her narrative voice and exclusion).

Other autobiographix such as *Marzi* (Sowa and Savoia 2011) also deal with themes of self-discovery, disenfranchisement and alienation. Growing up in communist Poland, Marzi’s story opens by focusing on the lack she experiences (food, money) and her disconnect from family and national customs (killing a carp to eat at Christmas). Her narration is in the first person and present tense, which brings her feelings alive (‘But what’s going on? I’m right here! This can’t be happening!’ [18]), while simultaneously evaluating and reframing the emotions (‘I am one big tear. If I fell into a puddle, you wouldn’t see me anymore. If it rained, I’d disappear. My tears form the path of my invisible existence…’ [19]). The images switch between literal and metaphorical and often echo earlier scenes (an example of Groensteen’s ‘braiding’, the repeated and supplemental use of an image or symbol), for example when Marzi later explains she feels like ‘A fish in a field of strawberries’ (168). Her narrative explores the tension between the personal and the political, drawing attention to this dichotomy, for example describing herself as ‘a needle in a haystack’ (193). She also reframes the political disputes and strikes in childish terms: ‘Precz z jajecznica! Down with scrambled eggs!’ (193).

Whitlock and Poletti (2008: ix) note that ‘contemporary autobiographical comics generally include a narrative of trauma and crisis’ combined with an ironic turn that aids their irreverent confrontation of political and social issues. Other examples such as Una’s *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) and Nicola Streeten’s *Billy, Me and You* (2011) support this conclusion. On the one hand they are deeply personal memoirs of traumatic life experiences (rape and sexual abuse; the death of a two-year-old child), while simultaneously these events become a lens to explore wider events and institutions (the Yorkshire Ripper case; the police force; expectations of motherhood; funeral customs) and reflect on social and critical issues (feminism; misogyny; superstition; self-judgement). The art in both books is simple, black and white, and deeply personal. Streeten’s book is intercut with photographs; Una’s contains occasional photorealistic pencil drawings of trees and scenery and repeated images of balloons and trees. These comics all use their medium to enhance their message.

Comics Culture

The relationship between medium and message, and the cultures surrounding comics are both in themselves inherently Gothic, as this article will close by exploring. Critics such as Hogle argue that academic challenges to ‘high/low culture distinctions, have brought the Gothic forward as a major cultural force’ (2006: 31). In a similar vein, Christopher Pizzino (2016) draws attention to the status struggles that have dogged the comics medium since its inception. He points out that the simplistic *Bildungsroman* narrative of comics having now ‘grown up’ is undermined by the stasis of its repetition in thirty years’ worth of newspaper articles (and counting). He

argues that the signs of this status struggle can be read on the comics page and names this an example of 'autoclasm' or self-breaking, a split energy.

The cultures that surround Gothic and comics are also mobilised by division and ultimately rest on a tension between group/individual that is sustained by the industries and commodities themselves. The study of subcultures has reached a point whereby 'any "intrinsically" subversive quality [to subcultures] [is] exposed as an illusion' (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003: 5) and analysis is instead situated with respect to political, cultural and economic factors. Scholars have similarly moved from approaching fandom as a guerrilla activity to considering it as 'a common mode of cultural consumption' (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007: 7).[5]

Many critics view Goth style as enacting a tension: between authentic and inauthentic (Botting 2007) or surface and depth (Spooner 2004). Goths perform identity through surface appearance and fetishized commodities: incorporating both creativity (DIY skill, imagination and daring) and purchase power (access and ability to afford high-end items, materials or particular brands). The Goth appearance is strongly coded but privileges individuality over almost everything else. It may seem uniform from the outside, but contains multiple internal divisions and styles, from cybergothic to Romantic. Similarly, the musical themes of introspection and isolation sit alongside a tightly knit social scene and community. Goth culture enacts these tensions, and exists in a reciprocal relationship with its own media and artefacts.

[5] This conceptual shift is apparent in the titles of Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) and *Convergence Culture* (2006).

Comics culture is similarly stereotyped (the ‘fanboy’ as an overweight middle-aged collector; the ‘fangirl’ who carries an emotional crush on her heroes) but this is contradicted by ‘geek chic’ which has been gathering momentum over the past decades. Within comics culture, fans are keen to define themselves by specific tastes and titles, and the commodity (the comic book itself or other collectible) supports this. Geraghty (2014) argues that the fan convention space has become dominated by collectibles rather than comics, but critics such as Grey *et al.* (2007) point out that a broader definition of ‘text’ allows multiple aspects of comics to be viewed as valid texts that are the subject of fan’s attentions.

Critics (Spooner 2004; Hodkinson 2007) argue against the use of textual analysis to define cultural practice and so my previous work (Round 2014) has used surveys and ethnographic research to compare Goth and comics fandom practices. Fan practices have changed; cosplay is gaining traction and performs some of the tensions seen in Goth clothing, as it asserts individuality (the homemade nature of the costume, the pose and performance to accompany it, adaptations and subversions such as re-gendering) whilst still adopting an industry-controlled image. The conventions themselves also enact this Hegelian dialectic, as on the one hand prices and queues rise and attendees grovel for freebies, but on the other hand the industry goes to greater lengths to court their approval every year. So it can be argued that both Goth and comics fandom enact a series of similar tensions. Fans present outwardly as a collaborative group, while remaining split internally in defence of particular titles or types of knowledge. Creators and properties are lauded but at the same time opinion is expressed virulently. Images and properties are strictly licensed but cosplay and

fanfiction thrive, and both exist in a fetishized relationship with their own media and artefacts.

Haunting, Excess and Revenant Readers

The final section of this chapter will now explore the Gothic properties of the comics medium itself. The language attached to comics by fans and scholars is itself 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 – Hatfield refers to 'tensions' and McCloud speaks of 'closure', and 'blood in the gutters'. Formalist critics like these often draw attention to three things: the space of the page, the role of the reader, and the interplay between word and image (see for example Eisner 1985; McCloud 1993; Hatfield 2005; Peeters 2007; Groensteen 2007). Thierry Groensteen's landmark analysis of *The System of Comics* argues for the page as the smallest signifying unit, within which the narrative is constructed from the interplay between various elements. McCloud's (1993) concept of closure stresses the work of the reader in filling in the events in the 'gutter', the gap between panels. Hatfield's (2005) critical model focuses on the tensions produced by contrasts between word/image, surface/sequence, single/series, and reading/object.

My own work (2014) synthesises and builds on these critics to argue for a three-part critical model based around the Gothic concepts of haunting, the crypt, and excess. This model firstly considers the space and layout of the comics page, defining this as a haunted place where all moments co-exist and where motifs of doubling and

mirroring often appear. The second part of my model looks more closely 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' (Davenport-Hines 1998: 385). Finally, my model considers the multiple combinations and subversions of perspective on the comics page as examples of Gothic excess: for example the use of an extradiegetic/external narrative voice combined with an intradiegetic visual perspective (such as that of a story character).

I suggest that if we use this holistic approach to evaluate comics pages, we will find that every page employs one or more of these three tropes (haunting, crypt, excess) to enhance its message. For example, returning to Figure 2, we can use this to explore the central panel, which is the transgressive moment where Cain enters the storyworld. This is demonstrated by its haunted form: such as the partially absent panel borders, which are also broken by the roof of the house and also Cain's feet, using depth to emphasise the character's mobility. The final panel reiterates this effect as the scalpel cuts through its top border, reinforcing the blade's function. The symmetrical layout of the page is also disrupted by the central panel, which overlaps with the top tier, giving an uneven feel to the page. The reader is assigned a constantly moving disembodied perspective throughout this sequence, creating an uncanny feeling which is further complicated as we are then directly addressed in the text of the final two panels.

However, it is not only horror comics that create uncanny points of view and transgressive layouts and broken borders. All 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 to conclude 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.

In 'A good news story!' (*Care Bears* #19, 15th February 1986) Eleanor has to write a news story for a homework assignment. 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 medium is used to reinforce the direct address of the message to the reader. For example, in the third panel of Figure 3 below, the homily 'There's lots of things happening if you open your eyes' is the only unbordered panel on the page. This disrupts the page's architecture (the underlying grid with traditional borders) and literally lifts it from the page. On the following page 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 final story panel (Figure 4) again reinforces this use of the medium, as Share Bear breaks the fourth wall, but this time explicitly. Here again there are no borders and in addition a further transgression as his arm breaks the border of the previous panel.

Figure 3: ‘A good news story!’ from *Care Bears* #19. Writer and artist unknown. Used under fair use guidelines.

Figure 4: Final two panels from ‘A good news story!’ from *Care Bears* #19. Writer and artist unknown. Used under fair use guidelines.

In these examples there are, of course, other points where the fourth wall could be said to be broken or where an uncanny disembodied perspective is used. However, 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 literally lifts the message from the page, disrupting notions of reader identity and transgressing the borders of the storyworld.

While it might be argued that these techniques are formally transgressive rather than inherently Gothic, Botting (1996) has written of Gothic's characteristic formal ‘transgression’ and ‘excess’ (Botting, 1996), and comics’ particular methods of breaking boundaries seem to speak to the Gothic mode. Wolfreys argues that Gothic ‘presents us with narratives […] in imminent threat or crisis. […] Something other arriving in or from the externalised space of the subject’s material existence promises to invade the space.’ (98) Although he is speaking of content (stories in which the characters feel themselves to be in imminent danger), he extends this reasoning to the formal qualities of narrative too, saying that ‘At a formal level the narrative drive presents the threat to space and identity, ontology or being as the arrival of that which disrupts the temporal coherence of the narrative.’ (98) In these comics pages identity is indeed threatened and made uncanny through the formal disruptions of perspective

that the comics medium allows. Share Bear addresses the reader directly more than once, bringing us into the text. The space of the story is under constant threat by the breaking of panel boundaries. These devices also produce a temporal circularity that is emphasised by the story content: Share Bear introduces himself with the claim 'I'm in the news!' and also closes by echoing this. These threats to identity, space and temporality seem extremely Gothic. Wolfreys continues that 'to transgress is to appeal to a Gothic sensibility' and so in its many transgressions, haunted layout, and excessive style, the comics page contains 'the signs of a Gothic phenomenology disturbing to, and disruptive […] of any realist mode of representation.' (98)

Conclusion

The Care Bears are a far cry from where this article began. However, rather than conduct a self-fulfilling search for horror themes within comics of the horror genre I have tried instead to show how the comics medium itself can be considered Gothic in historic, thematic, cultural, structural and formalist terms. Whether they are mainstream superheroes or independent autobiographix, comics characters are transgressive figures of divided identity that expose hidden truths about our world. Their stories' narrative structures often disturb the boundaries of fiction through embedded tales and the disruptive potential of host characters. Their surrounding culture and associated practices enact a series of tensions that can be read as Gothic dualities. Finally, applying Gothic tropes to the medium itself reveals the uncanny ways in which it emphasises significant story elements by disrupting notions of reader identity and providing hauntings and echoes of meaning.