

Introduction

Although it might seem that contemporary comics and the gothic tradition are completely unconnected, the two have a long and intertwined history. We might ask what an established literary genre like the Gothic could possibly have in common with brightly coloured picture books and funny animal stories. Surely the Gothic's Romantic influences and weighty, serious themes have little to do with superhero antics and slapstick comedy. But although comics have often been labelled as childish things, and the Gothic frequently characterised as 'spooky old stuff' this special issue demonstrates the insufficiency of both labels. It explores the ways that comics can be considered Gothic and how they can add to our understanding of Gothic today. We first set the scene by demonstrating significant connections between the two fields in historical, thematic, creative, stylistic, formalist, and cultural terms.

Historically speaking, Gothic and comics have crossed paths at many points. In Britain, some of the earliest mass-produced art appeared in the fifteenth century in the form of woodcuts, which often exploited famous execution scenes or other sensational events. These made the move into illustrated broadsides in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: cheaply printed sheets sold at executions which combined illustration and text about the crime. The 'penny dreadful' story papers that followed in the nineteenth century were also some of the earliest examples of serialised entertainment. As the name suggests, they told torrid tales of horror and violence, drawing on historical figures such as the highwayman Dick Turpin, or telling horror or supernatural stories, such as the infamous *Sweeney Todd* (1846-47) or *Varney the Vampire* (1845-47). In America, Gothic tropes coloured the dime novels and short story magazines that appeared in the nineteenth century and which paved the way for disposable pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* in the early twentieth century.ⁱ Comic books were also emerging from the pages of newspapers at this time, and the two forms would come together in the 1940s as the popularity of horror and crime comic books boomed. This was a global phenomenon, with postwar anti-comics campaigns taking place in at least twenty countries across four continents in the 1940s and 1950s.ⁱⁱ It led to the creation of the American Comics Code (1954) which restricted the subject matter of comic books for decades. So it can be said that historically horror and Gothic tropes have affected the comics medium both explicitly and implicitly; just as caricatured art and the interplay of text and image shaped some of the formative examples of Gothic storytelling from the British and American traditions.

Susanne – do we need to add more here from European perspective? I'm conscious it's very UK/US focused.

Horror and Gothic have always been thematic staples for the comics market. The earliest American horror comics were adaptations of classic tales: from 'The New Adventures of Frankenstein' (*Prize Comics* #7, 1940) to 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' (*Classic Comics* #12, 1943) and 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' (*Classic Comics* #13, 1943). These quickly gave way to anthology horror comics, of which *Eerie Comics* (Avon Publications, 1947) was the first,ⁱⁱⁱ followed by iconic publications such as EC Comics' *Tales from the Crypt* (1950-55). This drew on intertextual and cross-media connections with radio and television to bring in host figures such as the eponymous Crypt Keeper – a trend that would spread into many other horror and mystery comics from the 1960s onwards. These included Warren Publishing's Uncle Creepy (*Creepy*, 1964-83), Cousin Eerie (*Eerie*, 1966-83) and Vampirella (*Vampirella*, 1969-83); DC Comics' brothers Cain and Abel (*House of Mystery*, 1951-81; *House of Secrets* 1956-78), and Marvel's Headstone P. Gravely (*Tower of Shadows*, 1969-75) and Roderick 'Digger' Krupp (*Chamber of Darkness*, 1969-74).^{iv} When the Comics Code restrictions relaxed in later decades, popular genres such as the superhero took on new Gothic forms as

violence and vigilantism were foregrounded alongside fractured identities and isolation. The emotional and mental struggles of sustaining divided lives were explored (*Arkham Asylum*, 1989), alongside the complex relationships and blurred boundaries between heroes and villains (*The Killing Joke*, 1988). In this way, comics have added significant themes and subjects to the Gothic – whether as horror archetypes from iconic publications, or in the form of a cape-wearing dark crusader.

Although it has been associated with the literary elite and high-profile authors, Gothic's revivalist tendencies means that gothic stories frequently retell old or traditional tales – far removed from our understanding of the originality and genius of the Romantic authors. and reminiscent of early comics which have frequently adapted and reprinted existing work, or engaged in copyright battles. In creative terms, then, the two share more than a passing resemblance.

Stylistically, Gothic has also long been identified as containing a dual sense of play and fear, apparent from its early parodies and the ghoulish humour of the later American Gothic, to more recent examples of children's Gothic and what Catherine Spooner has named the 'whimsical macabre'. Comics' emphasis on caricature and exaggeration, and tendencies towards playful and subversive content can be viewed similarly.

In formal terms, comic books are as transgressive in nature as the Gothic. The comics medium traverses the boundaries of sign systems because of its composition of images and words. Comics are uncanny and liminal: visual narratives and sequentiality can make the obvious seem strange. Time and space merge into one as temporal sequences spread out in front of the reader on the spatial site. Pages carry a sense of haunting, as images and icons are echoed and repeated: panel composition might be used to reference a previous scene, or recurring symbols might be used to suggest deeper meaning. Reader and character identities are destabilized as voices and perspectives become fragmented and multiple: comics characters can easily and seamlessly switch between being narrators or actors in their story, address readers directly, or absorb us into their perceptual perspective. The narratives themselves are partial and obscure: we may be given the limited perspective of a single character, or addressed by an omniscient and external narrator, and the lines between inner worlds and the diegesis are frequently blurred and mobile.

Culturally speaking, perceptions and fan responses to comics and gothic also share strong links. The comics medium has been consistently discredited as harmful or trivial with no intellectual credibility.

So, from their shared roots in penny dreadfuls and pulp publishing, to their modern incarnations as wildly popular cult franchises, the comics medium and the Gothic mode therefore seem to be a perfect match. But despite these numerous links and points of synergy, critical work bringing Gothic and comics together is still very limited. When scholarship considers the connections between fear and comic books, it is often with a focus on the distinctive topic of horror, rather than Gothic.

*****Define the diffs between horror and gothic for purposes of this collection***

Terry Wandtke's work (*The Dark Night Returns: The Contemporary Resurgence of Crime Comics*, 2015; *The Comic Scare Returns: The Contemporary Resurge of Horror Comics*, 2018) has explored the historical genres of crime and horror comics, putting these in dialogue with contemporary equivalents and suggesting that key ideologies behind the Comics Code

debates of the 1950s can be recognised in some of today's high-profile ongoing comics series.

Most recently, *Critical Approaches to Horror and Comic Books: Red Ink in the Gutter* edited by John Darowski and Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns, (2023) brings together a series of nearly twenty case studies to explore the horror genre in comics through close reading and interdisciplinary analysis.

[**expand this para with brief summary of key works on horror and comics and what they have suggested] Additionally, these groundworks mostly utilize a historical approach, explaining the timeline or phases of editions and publishers.^{vi}

Although scholars have taken an interest in the relationship between horror and comics, only a few titles deal explicitly and exclusively with the Gothic and its specific conditions and questions.

**the relationship between horror and Gothic

**published work on horror and comics and its main outcomes

Scholarship that connects Gothic and comics often takes a short form. Since the beginning of the 21st century the comics medium has begun to appear in academic encyclopedias and guides on the Gothic.^{vii} Only a few monographs exist that explore the Gothic credentials of comic books (and vice versa) - of these, Maaheen Ahmed's *Monstrous Imaginaries: The Legacy of Romanticism in Comics* (2019) and Nick Katsiadis' *Romanticism in Comics: Faith, Myth and Mood* (2022) both use literary Romanticism as a lens to analyse high profile series of (mostly) American comics. Julia Round's *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics* (2019) tightens the focus even more by considering a single British girls' comic book series from the 1970s. A limited number of edited collections are devoted to the Gothic comic, but these too often take a tight critical angle, for example by focusing on a particular theme, creator, or archetype. Nonetheless, some enlightening case studies on special topics, tropes or artists have been published. For example, Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Cody's edited collection *Monstrous Women in Comics* (2020) builds on key work in this field and draws on the work of Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed: exploring the way in which intersectional identity issues inform the coding of women as monstrous, and covering comics published in many countries. Matthew Green's edited collection *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* (2016) brings in a multitude of Gothic critical perspectives, but keeps its focus on the work of this single creator. As such, the tight focus of such analyses can prevent them addressing the full bandwidth of comics and Gothic.

Defining the Gothic – *Hogle? Others? What are its main qualities?*

Considering the Gothic as a response to social trauma...

***Punter, Groom?*

Qiana Whitted's *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest* (2019) closely analyses EC Comics' 1950s output, including their understudied 'preachies', which engage explicitly and aggressively with civil rights and other social issues and inequalities.

Printing Terror: American Horror Comics as Cold War Commentary and Critique (Goodrum and Smith, 2021) focuses on the relationship between American comics and the historical trauma of WW2, focusing on the wartime period and the subsequent 1970s horror comics

revival and arguing against the dominant perception of horror comics as subversive, as these reinforce the gendered and racialised other.

Subversion and transgression – countercultural, breaking boundaries

Gothic – about tensions and paradoxes

Link to formal comics theory via Hatfield art of tensions

s by Julia Round (*Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach*, 2014) and Christian W. Schneider (*Framing Fear: The Gothic Mode in Graphic Literature*; 2014) there has been no significant publication widely available that examines what the Gothic brings to the storytelling capabilities of the comics medium and in a broader spectrum.

This special issue addresses this gap by bringing together a collection of papers that explore the thematic, structural and cultural presence of Gothic within comics.

[Content summaries (in currently suggested order)]

- (1) Stuart Lindsay – Dark Horse Comics’ Aliens Line (JR)
- (2) Mary Beth Tegan and Matthew Costello – A Woman is Being Side-Kicked (SS)
- (3) Matt Green – Gothic and Graphic Medicine (SS)
- (4) Tosha R. Taylor – Yuki Kaori’s Angel Sanctuary (JR)
- (5) Catherine Spooner – Vehlmann and Kerascoët’s Satania (JR)

[We begin with Stuart Lindsay’s exploration of the formal and narrative strategies used to develop the Xenomorph horror across the *Aliens* line of titles, which analyses how the transgressive body of the creature has been carried over effectively into its representation on the comics page and identifies the ways in which the Aliens titles subvert pre-existing notions of the types of horror and science fiction plots conventionally associated with the transmedia franchise.

Costello and Tegan explore the abject and transhuman qualities introduced into the superhero genre in the 1970s, alongside the marginalization of the female body. The authors argue that these comics use complex page layouts and intricate artwork to create affective narratives and offer a critical encounter with an emergent postmodern sensibility: raising questions about the suppression of women’s subjectivities in the Gothic superhero genre, the gendered limits of its critical interventions, and the unfulfilled wishes of its mostly male readership.

The potential of Gothic to inform everyday representations is next picked up in ‘Graphic Gothic Medicine’. Here Matt Green explores the Gothic potential of the Graphic Medicine genre, drawing attention to the intersections of Gothic and medicine relating to both form and content, particularly relating to trauma, mental illness, and the ill body.

We turn next to gender, as Tosha Taylor analyses how the shōjo manga *Angel Sanctuary* exploits Gothic elements of doubling, mirroring, and masking within characterizations and plot points, and the ways in which gender and monstrosity inform the treatment of these themes. This paper has the potential to overturn perceptions of the shōjo genre, which is often characterized by the “magical girl” and female-focalized romance, whereas *Angel Sanctuary* blends fantasy and horror to create an exploration of trauma through Gothic archetypes.

In conclusion, Catherine Spooner explores the ways in which *Satania* (2016) uses and extends the 'whimsical macabre' aesthetic to interrogate and complicate the maturational narrative associated with children's and young adult literature. Spooner suggests that this comic has an affinity with the work of William Blake, as it offers an 'openness to the Other' that creates a radical new way of experiencing horror – one that preserves and accepts the monster's alterity, finding in it a source of joy and pleasure – and concluding that the intersection of cuteness and horror found in contemporary Gothic comics is thus an aesthetic in its own right, with its roots in Romantic renegotiations of childhood as well as in the Gothic.]

Shared themes and what this means for the gothic

- Not just topics but comics themselves; the tension between image and text; between narrative and vision - tension between mind and body
- Healing and freeing - mediating texts (green, spooner, Taylor) - reader involvement in interpreting etc; non-linear construction
- Where this could be taken next (but linked to what is there at present; not just 'sorry we couldn't cover everything')

Shared themes

Abjection

- green

Mental health, psychological trauma

- green, Lindsay, Tegan, Taylor

Healing

- spooner

The body

- green, Lindsay, Taylor

Dreams

- Lindsay, tegan

Humour

- Lindsay, spooner

Nostalgia, the past

- green, Lindsay, spooner

Gender

- tegan, taylor