

THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFFREY ANDREW WEINSTOCK

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Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock is currently Professor of English at Central Michigan University, where he has been teaching a variety of courses on American literature and popular culture since 2001. He is a scholar of the Gothic with a vast academic production, in particular on supernatural fiction, film and television. His research interests span topics related to, among many, monsters, ghosts, vampires, and the female Gothic. He is also an associate editor for the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* and, besides a long list of published essays, he edited three collections of tales by H.P. Lovecraft and has published over 20 books, among which *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (2004), *The Vampire Film: Undead* (2012), and *The Monster Theory Reader* (2020). He was as well the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic* in 2018.

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Anna Marta Marini: This is our introductory interview and I'm thankful to have Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock for it. Your work evidently spans across different disciplines and subjects and yet, most of it to some extent revolves around the Gothic and the ways gothic texts tackle old and new anxieties. But how was your interest in the Gothic born and how has it developed? And why do you think it is worth exploring the Gothic from an academic standpoint?

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock: As far as my developing interest in the Gothic, it was an early predilection for ghost stories that I increasingly channeled into an academic pursuit. I place a lot of the blame on the doorstep of Disney. I was obsessed with the Disney's Haunted Mansion at Disneyworld, which I went to when I was around eight or nine years old. It was the ride I kept wanting to go back on again and again. At about the same time, there was a Sunday night weekly program called *The Wonderful World of Disney*, and I remember vividly a story about the ghost of a little Creole girl called *Child of Glass*. I remember to this day being mesmerized

by the story of a ghostly little girl who needed the help of a living boy to recover a lost satchel of diamonds to avoid being doomed for eternity.

Also, around the same time, I found in my elementary school library a collection of stories called *Alfred Hitchcock's Haunted Houseful*. It was a collection of ghost stories, and I checked it out so many times that I almost memorized those stories. Somewhat later, Toby Hooper's *Poltergeist* in 1983 then sealed the deal for me, because it was one of the first horror movies that I saw in the theater, and I remember being on the edge of my seat for that. From there, it was a gradual process of exploring the Gothic and horror stories. I recall the lurid covers done by artist Michael Whalen for the H.P. Lovecraft Del Rey editions, that you could see when they used to have bookstores in malls. I would stare at the covers until I actually started to read H.P. Lovecraft. From there, my interests developed further. I got into literary ghost stories, so Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen King at some point, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). So, it was a natural fit then in graduate school that the focus of my doctoral dissertation became ghost stories and the hauntedness—or the ghostly qualities—of language. The linchpin that I used was the idea of the dead letter, the letter from the living that goes astray but also the letter from the dead that reaches its destination. For that, I was looking at Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James, and it went all the way up to Tony Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

Out of the dissertation came my first monograph, which is a book called *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women*. In the process of researching for the doctoral dissertation, I discovered hundreds of ghost stories published by women in the 19th century in the American periodical press. It became clear to me that in many cases they were using the ghost strategically as a kind of metaphor for the displaced or disempowered situation of women in 19th century America—who were essentially the ghosts in the room, not seen, recognized, appreciated fully. The case that I make in that first book is there has been an unacknowledged feminist tradition of supernatural writing in American fiction. I was also working at that point on the *Spectral America* collection, which was an edited collection of essays, and I've graduated outwards from ghost stories, as you mentioned, to focusing on vampires, and then monsters in general. But I do think my first love remains the ghost story. I keep coming back to ghosts and ghost stories.

As for why I think the Gothic is worth exploring: it is to me this dense site of the cultural imaginary where very specific anxieties and desires come together: what we fear and what we hope for. Sometimes it wears its politics on its sleeve, other times you have to dig more deeply to excavate what's underlying there. But Gothic tales, I would argue, always tell us a lot about ourselves. In our present moment, there's definitely been a mainstreaming of speculative fiction in general and the Gothic in particular, and it's interesting to consider what kinds of cultural forces might be propelling its center stage.

AMM: As you say, the Gothic is culturally charged and you have worked mostly on the American Gothic. What do you think characterizes it? What are its peculiarities that you find strictly related to the American context?

JAW: I should start by saying that I'm a little wary of speaking in generalities about the American Gothic. Sometimes, it's more productive to think in terms of regional character as well as different temporal moments. That said, in the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic*, I included a rudimentary Venn diagram showing four locations or emphases of the American Gothic: religion, geography, otherness, and rationality. For religion, I was making the case that it's hard to think about the American Gothic without going back to the Puritan roots of the American experience, and there is an intensely Gothic quality to Puritan writings of the 16th to 17th and the 18th centuries in which you have a stern and angry god, who causes things to happen in the world for inscrutable reasons.

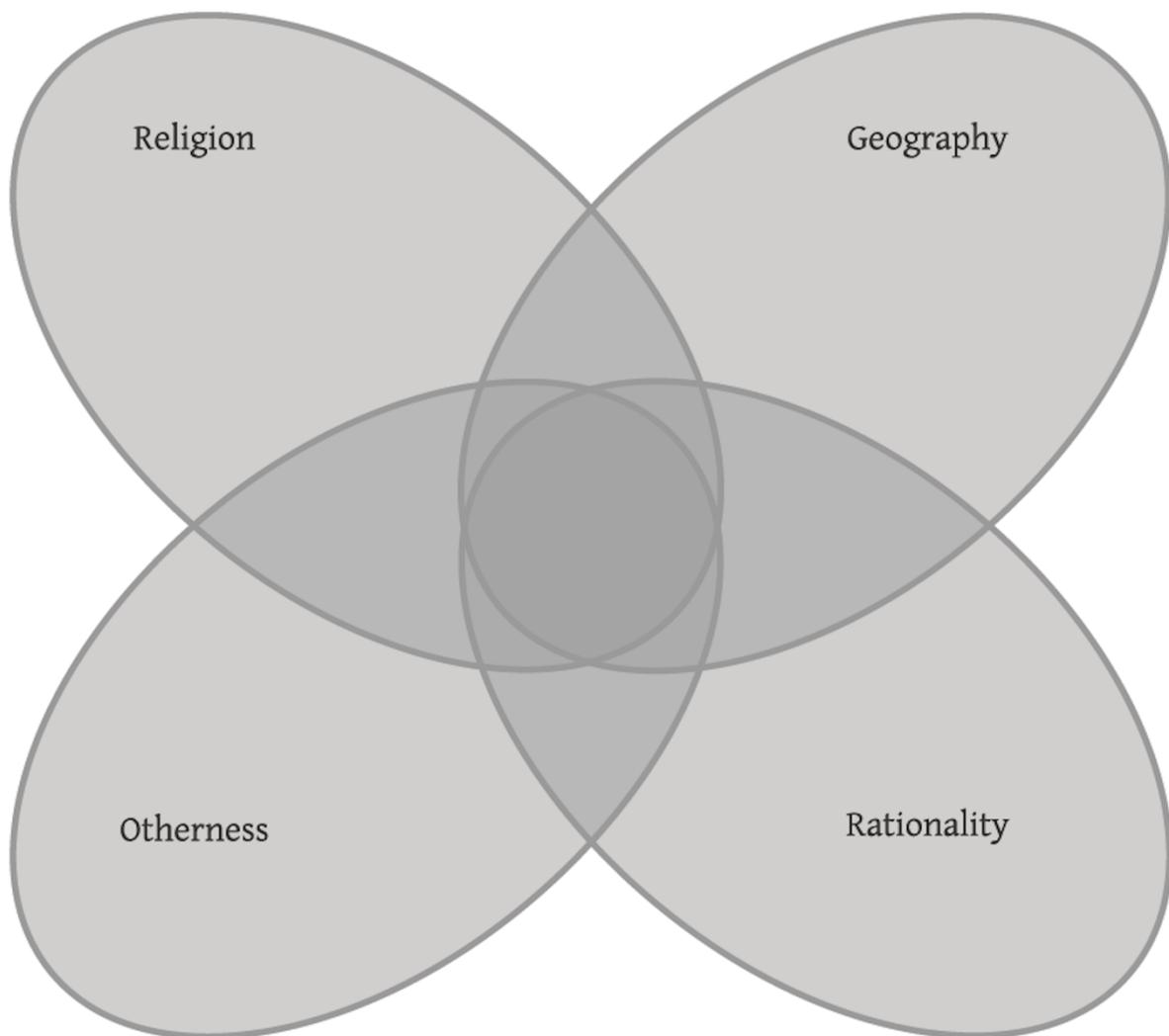


Figure 1 Themes of the American Gothic (Weinstock *Companion* 7).

I argue there the roots of the American Gothic can be traced back to this Puritan religious imaginary, which then dovetails quite closely with the role of the frontier in developing the American Gothic. You see that, in Puritan writings and into the 19th century, the wilderness is the place where one leaves behind civilization and encounters danger. So, when in Charles Brockden Brown—who is an American Gothic author who wrote at the very end of the 18th century and in the early part of the 19th century—or in James Fenimore Cooper it's about going off into the forest. In Herman Melville, it's about going out onto the ocean. It's always about leaving behind the domestic circle and going off on these adventures into some kind of uncharted territory. Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) falls into that category as well. You leave behind all the trappings of civilization and confront that dark side, the dangerous side of existence. This then segues quickly into the idea of the American Gothic as preoccupied with the encounter with the other, notably the Native American presence that resides within the wilderness or slavery and its legacy.

The fourth quadrant of that Venn diagram has to do with rationality—the concern that the Enlightenment principles upon which the United States of America was founded do not in fact hold true or consistently, that, in fact, human beings are not fundamentally rational or able to govern themselves, but instead are compelled or motivated by other forces. You see a lot of that in the movement from the 18th century to the 19th century, and authors like Poe and Charles Brockden Brown—who give us characters compelled by unconscious forces, madness that results in atrocious acts, or acting in ways which the characters are not consciously aware of. So, those are the four poles of the American Gothic. I might add now to the category of “rationality”—which I didn't do in the *Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic*—something about the rapaciousness of capitalist exploitation.

AMM: Gothic modes have been used in cross genre popular culture products. They have become ubiquitous, sometimes just as little hints but, still, they are there. Thinking of the production of pop culture in recent years—let's say from the turn of the century up to the present—what do you think has been the relationship between the Gothic and popular culture? Can you trace these elements you described in popular culture products?

JAW: I would say that, from the late 18th and early 19th century up through the present, the Gothic has always been very firmly entrenched within the sphere of the popular. From penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers to the horror pulp magazines of the 1930s and the 1940s, up to the present with horror games and podcasts, novels, films, fan fiction, creepypasta, and so forth. The Gothic has been aligned more fully with popular culture than elite or high culture.

I think there are a number of reasons for that. Some of it has to do with the sensationalistic aspect of the Gothic, its transgressions of decorum, its eliciting of a bodily response. All of this is antithetical to conventional notions of good taste and elite culture. I think the bodily nature of the Gothic here is particularly important. Linda Williams has written that there are three categories of literature, or of media, that fall into the category of body genre: horror,

melodrama, and pornography. And it isn't just a coincidence that all three of those are ones that traditional academic appraisal has kept at arm's length. Anything that targets the body has been seen as less worthy of analysis than those that seem to be more intensely cerebral.

I would also add that I think there has been a populist orientation to the Gothic from its beginnings, which disdains a corrupt aristocracy and a debased self-serving clergy. It's there in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Anne Radcliffe's predatory aristocrats. It's there in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), when Brown questions his faith and the goodness of the people of his town. You see it really clearly in something like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) in which a woman is being controlled by her husband, who is simultaneously her doctor. She's doubly disempowered and the gothic mode is used as a way to express the fact that no one is listening to her, no one is hearing her. This voice of critique travels all the way up to something like Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017), which calls into question the idea that the United States is some kind of post-racial society, making clear that it is anything but.

So, I would respond to the question by just suggesting that the Gothic has always been closely aligned with popular culture, because all of its emphases are antithetical to conventional notions of good taste and decorum and elite culture and so on. It's Fred Botting who refers to the Gothic as being the literature of transgression. It is an interesting question as to whether most Gothic narratives end up as being conservative retrenchments of the status quo or whether there's something actually radical about them. Because what happens in most Gothic narratives is that you have the messy middle part, in which things get thrown into disarray, but in most cases everything is conveniently put back in place at the end. I tend to think of the ending as a kind of alibi that allows us to enjoy the messy middle part.

AMM: Speaking of popular culture, you worked on a book that was published in October 2021, *Pop Culture for Beginners*. It is meant to be, and I quote: "an introductory textbook for undergraduate course adoption, introducing students to the history of the study of popular culture, outlining various theoretical approaches." Besides writing about it, you have been teaching courses on both the Gothic and popular culture. According to you, what are the challenges and benefits of teaching and learning about these topics?

JAW: Thank you for mentioning the book, it's my second foray into doing a textbook. I start it with what I call the "pop culture paradox": the idea that our popular culture pursuits are at the same time incredibly important to us, but also meaningless. I'm fascinated with the tendency to disavow the importance or the complexity or the meaningfulness of things that we actually love—which is the kind of resistance that I typically see when I start to teach a popular culture course.

I think there are a lot of reasons for this knee-jerk dismissal of the value and the complexity of the things that we do for enjoyment. Part of it clusters around the ideas of labor and utility. We tend to associate value with things that are difficult, the harder something is to

master the more its mastery seems to matter. You can think of James Joyce versus Harry Potter, or Joyce versus Stephen King. Joyce is slow going while Rowling or King read quickly, and our tendency is to equate work with value and to dismiss as less meaningful or important the thing that lots of people can access and enjoy. However, you could reasonably turn that on its head. Which one is more valuable or important: the book that's been read by millions, or the book that you need a semester-long college class to appreciate?

I also think there's a tendency to mistake the familiar for the simple. Because something is familiar to us, because we have frameworks in place to make sense of it, we don't even realize we're engaged in a process of interpretation. Thus, we think that there isn't much there to interpret. The irony at the core of the book is that there seems to be an inverse correlation between enjoyment and perception of value. The more we enjoy it, the less it seems like work, the less important or meaningful we perceive it as being.

What I do with the textbook then is to ask students to bracket off those value judgments, and to consider how meaning is created and conveyed in different media. The framework that I privilege for the book is therefore a semiotic approach to popular culture. We look at different forms of popular culture as rule-governed systems of communication. We start by asking "okay, so what is this thing?" and how is it constructed, what kinds of associations attach itself to it, and where we end up is always with the question of ideology: how does this object or practice reinforce or challenge particular understandings of the world?

The classroom itself is a great space literally to explore those issues. Consider how the conventional classroom is oriented: you have these little desks where students have to sit, the instructor has the privilege of moving about and standing up. It's usually a relatively sterile space without much decoration to it, all of which is intended to convey particular understandings about what education is and how it takes place. And the traditional model is that students sit passively while the instructor unscrews their head and pours in knowledge, and shakes them up and asks them to regurgitate it. There's a whole world view that we can extrapolate from just the classroom space itself!

Back to the Gothic. Inasmuch as I consider the Gothic to fall under the umbrella of popular culture, we can employ the same approach. I would say we can start by saying "okay, so what is this thing?" and what does it say, how does it say it, what cultural work does it do in terms of reinforcing or undermining established understandings of the world. And ultimately, is this a progressive challenge to conventional wisdom? Is it a conservative reaffirmation of existing power structures? This goes back to what we were talking about a minute ago—usually the status quo ante is restored at the end of the Gothic work. This is particularly true of monster movies. The monster is this eruption of chaos that needs to be dealt with and then we watch as the protagonists try to figure out "okay, what is this thing? How do we address it?" and, typically, at the end, the threat is resolved and things more or less go back to normal. Of course, we know now, in the era of the franchise, that the monster is never totally gone. It

will always be back in the sequel. But, for a moment, things have returned to the way that they were, which may well be the alibi that lets us enjoy the mayhem of the middle.

AMM: Do you think this dismissive approach could have something to do with how academia—perhaps the academic status quo or the academic notion that the epistemic authority needs to focus on “serious stuff,” topics that are deemed “respectable” and thus more worthy of research?

JAW: The range of responses is really interesting. I do think there’s a tendency to make a division between things that are fun and things that matter or are important, and the popular culture activities that they pursue tend to fall on the side of fun—so students dismiss them as not being as meaningful as the things that they have to work hard in order to master or to achieve. I try to point out that some of the reasons that the pop culture pursuits seem simple is that—because they’re so well versed in it and understand how it functions—they don’t consider themselves as engaged in a process of interpretation.

There’s also the strange sense that to interpret something is to dispel its magic—that if we look at it too carefully and consider how it works, it won’t function in the same way for them as an escape or a form of enjoyment. In some cases when you start to look at the politics of the thing that may well be the case. You look at the gender politics of a particular horror film in the way that sex equals death in the slasher films of the 1980s, and they start to see that there are these messages there. It’s true in some cases that if you look closely, you may see something you don’t like! So, the concern that looking too closely may spoil something has some merit, although remaining willfully blind to the pernicious politics of something is problematic. I also try to point out to them that if you truly esteem something, then scrutinizing it carefully is an active homage. If you value the thing enough to consider how it works, you’re demonstrating that you really do have affection for this thing. This is often the way I think we, as academics, tend to function, right? We focus our scholarship often on things that we enjoy. This is Henry Jenkins’s idea of the “aca” academic or acafan, who takes as the focus of their research things that they enjoy in general.

Some students do also resist what they presume to be “over reading” or over-interpretation of something. There’s a comic or meme that circulates in which someone is interpreting the blue color of the drapes in the room in a book as reflecting the melancholy of the protagonist, and the author says “no, they’re just blue curtains.” But unconscious elements can find their way in. There’s also the inherent ambiguity of language itself, which is always subject to multiple—and sometimes competing—interpretations. Authorial intent does not necessarily control the interpretation that a reader arrives at. I tell my students that if you can support the interpretation that you’re making by showing moments in the text, there’s nothing to say it’s wrong—even if the author should say “no, I just meant the drapes to be blue.”

AMM: I know that in 2016 you published a book, *Goth Music: From Sound to Subculture*, co-authored with musicologist Isabella van Elferen. Goth music and its scene have been a long-lasting part of your life and you've been dj'ing goth music for 20 years. Can you tell us something about the goth subculture itself and your own experience with it?

JAW: I have had a long affiliation with goth music—and alternative music in general—going back to new wave music of the 1980s, which is really what I grew up with. That was my moment, so it was a kind of slippery slope for me from bands like Depeche Mode and Gary Newman and New Order, to bands like The Mission UK and Siouxsie & the Banshees, and Bauhaus on the one hand, and then bands like Ministry and Skinny Puppy and Front 242 on the other.

I had the privilege in college in the late 1980s and early 1990s of working in the first music store in Philadelphia that was dedicated entirely to compact discs, which were still quite new at the time. It was on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania and was definitely a great place to work, very relaxed, and we would play whatever we wanted when we were working in the store, so we had the opportunity to explore various different bands or styles that weren't necessarily getting play on the radio.

I made the jump to actually dj'ing in graduate school, in Washington DC, and I've held a number of club residencies as a dj. There was a goth industrial fetish event in DC called Bound, and I became a resident dj for it around 1996. When I moved to Hartford in 1999, my wife and I ran a goth night there ourselves, while I also had a DJ residency for an event in New York City called Contempt. It took place in in the most goth industrial space that you could possibly imagine: a permanently moored, rusting hulk of a boat in the Chelsea Piers area of New York that had been converted into a club space, and you were kind of in the bowels of this rusting boat... it was crazy!

Around this time I was teaching as a visiting assistant professor at the University of Connecticut, which has its own community radio station. I began to do a radio show called Dark Nation Radio because I was looking for an opportunity to play tracks beyond what would be acceptable for dance floor play—and there's lots of material that's not suitable for the dance floor! When we relocated to Michigan in 2001, I continued the radio show on the Central Michigan University student station and then migrated it online. Currently, I do Dark Nation Radio—now in its 22nd year—live once a week on Sundays and then make shows available on my mixcloud page (mixcloud.com/cypheractive).

So, I've had a long association with goth and industrial music. Where the Goth Music book is concerned, Isabella van Elferen and I used to attend the same conference annually—the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts in Florida—and we naturally began talking about our shared affection for goth music. One of the interesting things that we focused on was how goth has a very distinct aesthetic, but in terms of the music it's a very broad umbrella that accommodates a range of different musical styles, from down tempo mopey music to much harsher electronic material. If you attend a goth event, you're likely to hear everything from Bauhaus or The Sisters of Mercy or Christian Death to something like the

electronic music that's associated with Front 242 or even something that's much more abrasive like Combichrist for example, with distorted vocals and a very harsh sound. What we were trying to investigate with the book was how it is that goth music functions as an umbrella category, bringing together different subgenres that are quite distinct. How can one event accommodate all of these different styles? We wanted to go beyond thinking about goth as merely an aesthetic—or, where music is concerned, just focusing on or privileging lyrics—and to focus instead on the qualities of the music itself, which is where it was really helpful to be working with the musicologist!

One of the things that I quickly discovered starting to think about music is that there's a very specialized vocabulary for the conversation about music, which at that point I lacked, so I had to educate myself about how you actually talk about the distinctive qualities of timbre for example, or duration, and so on. Our approach in the book was to bring in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of the chronotope—time spaces that literature constructs that give the characteristic flavor to different types of novels—and we were trying to use that as a way to think about different time spaces, if you will, for the types of music that get played at goth clubs. The kinds of narratives of the heroic past or the future that are developed through a combination of the qualities of the sound and through lyrical content. It was a departure for me in terms of the research I had done before, but it remained close to my heart because this was music I was so familiar with and it was quite enjoyable to go in that direction.

It's just as we were saying: when you get to analyze in detail and examine something that you really love or something that you really enjoy, it should be an enjoyable process. It doesn't spoil it. In my case, I got to know the music and the culture that is related to it even better.

Open Q&A session

Laura Álvarez Trigo: My question traces back to your very first answer, when you mentioned that your interest in the Gothic began with watching Disney movies. How do you think the Gothic is present in children's fiction? And I'm thinking specifically about cartoons and television shows, how is it—if it is—different from the way the Gothic manifests in fiction that's directed to adults? Do you think there's been an evolution in the way that the Gothic is present in children's products, from several decades ago to how it is now in mainstream cartoons? I am thinking specifically about shows such as *Gravity Falls* and *Over the Garden Wall*, which are two shows that I really like and both of them are wonderful.

JAW: Actually, my first thought while you were asking the question had to do with fairy tales and the fact that if you were to read Grimm's fairy tales—or fairy tales from the 18th and the 19th century—they're far more violent and much darker than the more sanitized version of fairy tales that children receive today. This seems to me to suggest a significant change in the way that we think about childhood, and the necessity of protecting children from darker messages or imagery. On the one hand, I think it's interesting to consider those shifts and forms

of representation from the 19th century to the 21st, in the way that fairy tales have been altered so that they're far less disturbing than something like *Struwwelpeter* for example.

On the other hand, with your reference points—*Gravity Falls* and *Over the Garden Wall*—we need to think carefully about audience, because one of the evolutions in the production of animation is the attempt to broaden the audience to include both adult and children. So, I think both of them—and particularly *Over the Garden Wall*—are attempting to walk a kind of fine line where the story is not too scary for children but at the same time is appealing for adults. The films of Pixar are even a better example of that, where you can find nods and winks towards the adults who are viewing at the same time that the narrative can be consumed by children—who don't get all the allusions or the reference points.

Beyond this, the big shift that I see in cartoons—I have two boys who are ages six and ten, so we do a lot of cartoon watching—and what has been so amazing to me is the emphasis on diversity and inclusion in children's media that from my perspective seems astounding and wonderful, while from my kids' perspective is just normal. It's part of a kind of general inversion of Gothic narratives where the traditional monster isn't the monster: those who pursue the monster are the monster. Those who demonize difference are the true monsters. So, I would say that there's an inversion of conventional ideas of monstrosity, where looking different or being different is not a marker of monstrosity; it's those who insult or demean those who look or act differently. Do you know *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*? It's about getting rid of "mutants" so that the world goes back to the way that it once was. In terms of the Gothic, the storyline has been turned on its head, where it's no longer about the eruption of strangeness or monstrosity that needs to be tamped down. Instead, it's about appreciating difference, and those who attempt to constrain people to specific courses are, in fact, the true monsters of children's narrative.

Sofía Martincorena: In 2016 you co-edited a volume, *Return to Twin Peaks*, where you sort of assess *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) as gothic due to its weird, uncanny, defamiliarized presentation of matter and objects. Thinking of the film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), do you think that it somehow intensifies this gothic system that we find in the TV show? Or does it feed on the country's fears drawing on other genres, like slasher or thriller?

JAW: *Twin Peaks* is something that's near and dear to my heart, so I appreciate the question very much! That said, I'm trying to remember the specific details of the film, which I haven't seen in a long time. What I mainly have is in my brain—and I think this is from the film—is just the incredibly horrific vision in the train car, right? My tendency is to consider the film in the way you put it: as a kind of intensification of the series. I don't see it veering into the slasher category particularly. In keeping with David Lynch's work in general, there's a kind of absurdist element that he interweaves throughout that sometimes is there to evoke humor, but often is just to raise questions or to ask us to think more deeply. My answer therefore is that I see it as just being *Twin Peaks* but more so.

Did you see *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017)? It's an 18-hour movie experience of *Twin Peaks* in which he really refuses to gratify the viewer, who is the fan of *Twin Peaks*, for almost the entire thing. All of us are waiting for Kyle MacLachlan's Agent Cooper to return in *The Return*. We don't get that until near the very end and then everything is called into question. He pulls the rug out from beneath your feet when Cooper says, "what year is this?" and then we get the scream again that was Sheryl Lee's scream from the original *Twin Peaks* and then it ends. But back to the movie: it feels more bleak, more violent, more horrible in every possible way—and many people rejected it when it came out. I think it was even booed at Cannes and so, yeah, to me it feels as you say: more of *Twin Peaks*, an intensification of *Twin Peaks*.

I would note in relation to our earlier discussion that *Twin Peaks* offers an example the role of the frontier in the American Gothic. The woods are haunted. And, in place of Puritanism is a kind of displaced religiosity, with the white lodge and the black lodge, and the spirit world that seems to coexist with the material world and occasionally interact with it in various ways—which to me is a hallmark of the Gothic. What the Gothic insists is that the world of our senses—that we can see, feel, and touch—is only a small part of some larger experience of reality, that includes these other kinds of powers and forces in the universe.

Trang Dang: My question touches on your mention of how kind of the Gothic portrays something that is beyond us, and portrays the unconscious, the madness, and the horrors, the monsters that we don't know about. That reminds me of the genre of the new weird as well, or just the weird in general. Do you think that the Gothic—and by extension the new weird or the weird in general—is a better way of portraying accurately the ecological reality in which we live today? More accurately than the realist fiction, for example.

JAW: I think your supposition is a good one. I'm inclined to think that part of the mainstreaming of Gothic today, as well as the new weird, is a response to the challenges of our contemporary moment. The weird famously is associated with Lovecraft, who is problematic in a lot of ways, but who developed the notion of cosmic dread or what he calls "indifferentism," cosmic indifferentism, in which he depicts a vision of the universe in which human beings are not the center. And we're not even close to the center; we're somewhere on the periphery in this vision of the universe. We're not special; there are powers and forces that exist in the universe that outstrip our capacity to contend with and even to understand them, and we're always in a precarious position of being effaced. In some of Lovecraft's fiction, he even presents the idea that all civilizations naturally rise and fall; human beings will be displaced by something after us. We find ourselves in a situation in the 21st century confronting things like climate change—things Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects—that are so extended in scale and scope that it becomes very difficult for us to comprehend them, much less to grapple with them. So that notion of the weird, of human beings as being very tiny when compared with the sort of the spans of deep time, interstellar distance, and so on, seems to be finding its

expression. Our situation—climate change and pandemics and nuclear weapons and so on—finds its corollary in weird fiction, which has a gothic edge to it, I would say.

The difference between the new weird and the conventional Gothic is in the religious roots of the American Gothic: a stern and angry god who can cause things to happen for reasons that human beings can't figure out necessarily, but nevertheless is singling us out. In the new weird, we don't matter enough to even be singled out. There's a kind of self-aggrandizement that comes with thinking that you matter enough for god to actually kill your cow, or something like that. But where the new weird is concerned, it's just human beings existing in a mechanical universe of cold, impersonal forces, without anybody really caring about us too much or who would even mourn us if we weren't here. I think part of what we're confronting is a decentering of humanist pretensions that we really matter. We like to think that we do, and we spend all this time creating great works of architecture and art, and discussing them, but I think weird fiction at its heart asks "how much does any of that really matter?"

Mónica Fernández Jiménez: My question is about the fact that the Gothic is not always transgressive, but at times it is reaffirming the status quo. As a scholar of the Gothic, do you make any difference between aesthetics and politics when categorizing certain works as gothic? How do you feel about the classic debate around aesthetics versus politics, concerning the Gothic?

JAW: That is a wonderful question actually. My colleague Xavier Aldana Reyes's book on Gothic cinema makes the case that it's all about aesthetics—that in fact the fundamental criterion that you use to designate something as gothic is the way it looks—and I think that it's not a bad argument to make, that "we know Gothic when we see it." One of the interesting things that I've been thinking about myself is what I've been calling "prestige Gothic," gothic programs with very high production values that seek to engage our attention with ravishingly beautiful images of horrific things. Shows like *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016) come to mind, or *Hannibal* (2013–2015), that are just gorgeous to look at. And then you step back and realize what you're looking at.

There's often a kind of gorgeous grotesquery to the contemporary Gothic. Where narrative is concerned, I take the broadest possible approach to thinking about the Gothic. I define it as tales of transgression tending towards tragedy, which encompasses a lot. It's hard to pigeonhole the politics of the Gothic in any specific way because it depends upon narrative situation. In many cases, the Gothic ultimately is conservative in reaffirming the status quo at the end, by expunging whatever the threat is that intervenes in the middle, but not always, so it may well be that the defining criterion of the contemporary Gothic is how it looks, more so than any specific political orientation.

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- Hannibal*. Developed by Bryan Fuller, NBC, 2013–2015.
- Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*. Created by Radford Sechrist and developed by Bill Wolkoff, DreamWorks Animation Television, 2020.
- Over the Garden Wall*. Created by Patrick McHale, Cartoon Network, 2014.
- Penny Dreadful*. Created by John Logan, Showtime and Sky, 2014–2016.
- Twin Peaks*. Created by Mark Frost and David Lynch, ABC, 1990–1991.
- Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. Created by Mark Frost and David Lynch, CYBI Pictures, 1992.
- Twin Peaks: The Return*. Created by Mark Frost and David Lynch, Showtime, 2017.