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Introduction

American Horror: Genre and History

Is "American horror" a tautology? It's long been a commonplace of literary criticism to say that American writing was from the very beginning, as Leslie Fiedler put it in *Love and Death in American Novel* back in 1960, "almost essentially a gothic one" (125), one "nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic" (xxiv). (We will have more to say about the difference between "Gothic" and "horror" in a moment). In influential accounts like Fiedler's,[1] the Gothic mode established in eighteenth-century Europe migrated across the Atlantic to become an essential counternarrative to the purported triumph of enlightened republicanism and liberal pluralism represented by the American experiment. The two things overlap so often that some critics have even argued that "definitions of America and those of the gothic are . . . inseparable" (Faflak and Haslam, 2). American history is, after all, its own horror story, bloody and haunted: the conditions and legacies of Atlantic slavery, the long genocide of Indigenous peoples, white supremacy and racist murder, class struggle and conflict over immigration, imperial violence, fears of nonmale power and nonheterosexual desire, and so on. These have animated much American writing, but also film, art, theater, music, comic books, video games – the full range of cultural expressions and forms. To put it in its most familiar terms: on the other side of the American Dream was always the American Nightmare, and creators seized on Gothic language to make their critiques of the "exceptional" nation-state.

But if all American writing and culture has gothic horror in its DNA, then how can we isolate something we specifically recognize as "American horror"? Is horror a chromosome present in all culture that's aware of America's contradictions, or is it a specific genre complete with its own distinctive codes, clichés, and formulas?

The Cambridge Companion to American Horror suggests it is both. The essays gathered here share no consensus as to what horror actually is. They discuss texts that self-consciously align themselves to the horror genre, as well as texts that would not easily be found in a bookshop's horror section

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or a streaming services' horror movie subcategory. Yet they do share a fundamental belief that "American horror" – in all its historical and aesthetic variations – describes both a definable cultural object and a general tone or affect, a canon and also a visual and verbal language. And these essays share, too, a critical seriousness about horror's cultural place. Because while "Gothic" feels like a well-established category with a venerable critical tradition behind it (evidenced by the work of many of this companion's contributors and, for instance, the path already beaten by *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic* edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock), "horror" remains Gothic's embarrassing twin – sometimes synonymous, sometimes a subcategory, sometimes a different thing altogether. This is why we want to draw a pointed but by no means prescriptive distinction between those two keywords, "Gothic" and "horror," partly to think through how genres are invented families of ideas that disguise as much as they reveal, but also how the labels "Gothic" and "horror" have shaped the long history of criticism and popular reception of this field.

Indeed, the traditional denigration of horror turns, in part, on its apparent difference from the more respectable and somehow more "literary" notion of Gothic. This is, after all, what English novelist Ann Radcliffe established as long ago as 1826, in her frequently quoted essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry." Radcliffe's influential distinction between "horror" and "terror" is useful for us because it has tended to color and guide much of the critical work that has followed in its two-hundred-year wake. "Terror and horror," she says, "are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them." The critical industry around Gothic fiction has implicitly hung a lot on this (and similar) definitions, establishing a hierarchy of taste between the more distinguished pursuit of Gothic "terror" (as a version of Aristotelian catharsis) and the artless vulgarity of mere "horror" (as indicative of mindless shock). While the twentieth century saw Gothic establish itself as a respectable term for literary studies – evidenced by the galaxy of academic guides and handbooks available on the subject, not to mention numerous university courses and modules – horror continued to sound a note of subliterary thrills.

This elevation of Gothic's apparent sublimity over horror's crass literalism still adheres in much literary criticism today, even as horror has accrued ever more sophisticated attention.[2] Film studies have been quicker to embrace the term, and from at least Robin Wood's essays on the horror film in the 1970s there has been a rich literature of scholarly work (often geared to psychoanalytical approaches) that dares to take horror seriously: the influence of classic works such as Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) and

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Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and* Chain Saws (1992) – both now three decades old – have extended beyond academia into popular culture. In fact, horror's "annihilation of the faculties" that Radcliffe recoiled from in the 1820s partly explains its trajectory toward the critical reassessment recent years have brought. The antirationalist, affective thrust of that diagnosis is precisely what has drawn some of the more sophisticated accounts of horror's political and philosophical resonances. Moreover, this revaluation has been entangled with the ongoing reappropriation of horror by women, nonwhites, and nonheterosexuals as an appropriate mode for registering the historical violence and social death forced on them by a process of cultural othering.[3]

We don't want to overstate the point. Drawing firm differences between "Gothic" and "horror" as generic categories is a game fraught with problems and typically leads to some unconvincing policing of boundaries. Our first impulse is to admit fuzziness and acknowledge that genre categories are never so distinctive as to make works easily shoehorned into one classification rather than another. Indeed, these definitions often say more about the assumptions of the moment in which they are made than they do about the works contained within them. The authors of the essays in this collection use both terms, and often make no clear distinction between "Gothic" and "horror" texts.

But let us venture a definition, some steps toward what "horror" might be and a reclaiming of sorts from Radcliffe's and critical history's sniffy dismissal. Any number of definitions of Gothic could be cited here as a counterpoint, but Fred Botting, one of the field's most distinguished critics, usefully summarizes it as a literature "depicting disturbances of sanity and security, from superstitious belief in ghosts and demons, displays of uncontrolled passion, violent emotion or flights of fancy to portrayals of perversion and obsession" (2). Similarly but even more pithily, Jeffrey Weinstock claims that "Gothic is a genre that focuses on the past and immoderate, ungovernable passions" (1). These are good places to start, especially because they open up a gap that, we suggest, horror fills. If, then, Gothic has tended to be associated with interior psychological states, uncanny forces, and – crucially – a Eurocentric history of aristocratic and religious residues and iconography, we suggest that horror points us to a more historically immediate and materially present form of experience. If Gothic's collision of strange environment and dress with psychological fugue and paranoia often tracks the persistence of the past, we see horror as the name of something more corporeal and modern-facing. If Gothic emphasizes the "terror" of anticipation, then horror highlights the moment of pain and shock. If Gothic treats the disturbed and the tense, then horror treats the

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slashed and the torn. If Gothic is the mind, then horror is the body. Fredric Jameson once aphoristically said that "History is what hurts"; we claim some of that same ground, and for us horror is the genre above all others that pushes beyond the hurt to the open wound. Horror is what *bleeds*.

To elaborate a bit further on these dimensions of American horror, it's worth distinguishing between two areas of focus that are prevalent throughout the essays in this book: these might be simply described as the *formal* and the *political*.

The Forms of American Horror

One of the abiding preoccupations of this book is horror's paraliterary status, that is, horror as a genre that has often occupied a marginal position within "high" culture and, as a result, the study of the humanities. This overlooked position has been integral to its taboo, even pornographic, thrills, of course. Uninvited (and so unincorporated) into polite scholarly discussion or art's institutions, horror was able to be an anteroom for those seeking out more countercultural communities and anarchic personal satisfactions. A genre with abject experience at its heart, it became an object of cultural abjection in itself. This nonrecognition within respectable culture's jurisdiction also went hand in hand with the disposability of its material transmission: from penny dreadfuls to four-color comics, from Grand Guignol to video nasties, horror's intellectual sidelining as *narrative form* was often bound up in the ephemeral nature of its *media forms*.

Indeed, some of horror's liveliest venues for innovation have come in the most maligned and dismissed forms of culture. The proliferating and collectively authored world of online "creepypasta," for instance, updates the folk traditions of urban legends and campfire storytelling through the dark recesses of message boards, blogs, and viral memes. Beginning in the 1990s, "creepypasta" is the collective name for scary or disturbing short stories, images, and video clips posted (often anonymously) to message boards and specialist sites. Here, fan fiction and professional productions have bled into one another, nowhere more so than in the development of the "Slender Man" mythos. Originally a series of doctored photographs released on message boards by "Victor Surge" (real name Eric Knudsen) in 2009, the ominous and faceless character of the Slender Man has circulated in both ambitious amateur productions – such as the YouTube–based series *Marble Hornets* – and found its Hollywood realization in *Slender Man* (dir. Sylvain White, 2018). In the world of creepypasta, the oral traditions of folklore and cautionary tales find themselves translated into and through the new digital networks of the internet. Authorial ownership and the assumed singularity

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of the work of art is replaced by an anonymous, evolving, ever-growing sense of communal worldmaking, cultural production happening primarily in the more unregulated territories of web-based creativity.[4]

Some of this unruly narrative energy stems from – and feeds back into – the hugely profitable video games industry. Popular horror games series such as Konami's *Silent Hill* and Capcom's *Resident Evil* (themselves evolutions of 1990s domestic and arcade video games like *Alone in the Dark* [1992] and *House of the Dead* [1996]) have taken literary and filmic horror conventions and advanced them into immersive digital experiences. Horror's generic toolbox is everywhere apparent in these games – zombies, monsters, dark and haunted houses – and while some might write them off as entirely commercialized products, in the best video games the ludic quality of game-playing meets literature and film's language of terror and becomes the site of some of horror's most innovative developments. From the mercurial and terrifying *P.T.* (the infamous *Silent Hill* teaser made by Hideo Kojima and Guillermo del Toro that takes place in a single corridor) to acclaimed independent productions such as Playdead's *Limbo* (2010) and Jon McKellan's *Stories Untold* (2017), video games can push horror's clichés and formulas into ever-richer and sometimes ever-evolving territory.

These are just two brief examples of cultural fields that have, traditionally, been given short shrift in academic commentary. But the variety of forms in which horror seems both popular and vibrantly productive speaks to the more general point about its exclusion from the venues of cultural sanctification. To put it another way, for some critics the trashiness of horror's messages is mirrored in the trashiness of its mediums. Positioned in this way – as doubly antithetical to art's role in the transmission of social capital – horror's lurid spectacles and formulas could take their apparently rightful place on the bottom rung of literary and film culture's hierarchies of prestige.

Some of horror's other fundamental characteristics further explain its exclusion from conventional cultural histories. One is its resistance to institutionalized protocols of interpretation; or, to put it more simply, horror's challenge to the seminar room's most basic question: What does it mean? Horror, on the one hand, often seems ripe for straightforward and "obvious" allegorical decoding, in ways that leave little else to say and little opportunity for a bravura display of interpretive nuance. As Jerrold E. Hogle notes, varieties of psychoanalytic, Marxist, and feminist readings still dominate Gothic (and horror) criticism, and these approaches are themselves often dismissed as lacking sufficient complexity.[5] On the other hand, it's a genre that can seem to refuse to yield any explanations at all: after all, Edgar Allan Poe opens one of his most enduring short stories, "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), with the claim that "*Es lässt sich nicht lesen*" – "It will not

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permit itself to be read." It's a teasing assertion of inscrutability that runs throughout American horror, from the inexplicable gathering out in the woods in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) to the enigmatic village ritual at the heart of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948) to the confounding architecture of the Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). We see everywhere in horror a sustained confrontation with events, experiences, and forms of affect that just cannot be rationalized, cannot be explicated other than purely as what they are – pain, suffering, violence, fear; the stuff not of objective detachment and contemplation but of raw and immediate experience.

If this is what horror gives us, then it's perhaps no surprise that some of its key theorists render their object in these same elusive ways. When Julia Kristeva, in her essay *Powers of Horror* (1982), explains her concept of "abjection" (one of the central terms in horror's critical lexicon), she admits that "the twisted braid of affects and thoughts" that abjection elicits does not actually have, "properly speaking, a definable object" – it is, she says, "a 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing" (1–2). To put it in the aphoristic words of Gertrude Stein: There is no there there. And this is what Eugene Thacker, in *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011), seizes on in his account of horror and our "unthinkable" world: that horror is "a privileged site in which [the] paradoxical thought of the unthinkable takes place" (2). As critics of horror – or just as readers and watchers – we might not be able to escape the notion that part of horror's fundamental effect is the simultaneous invitation *and* refusal of our desire to interpret.

One challenge in thinking about how we interpret horror's "meanings" is that some horror tales do, in fact, consciously invite allegorical ways of reading (George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] as critique of mindless consumerism, for instance). Consequently, readers of horror need a mechanism that *allows but does not require* the allegorical impulse to be applied, and – because of that paraliterary status – need a mechanism that does not seek to defend genre fiction through the usual categories that we've tended to invoke when venerating so-called high culture. So, we suggest a model of the valences of cultural production and consumption that can allow horror to move, as it were, outside the weight of these interpretive shackles.[6] To explain, let's separate these into three distinct approaches.

1. One aspect of many texts is that they approach a social or personal problem *thematically*. It's clear that some issue matters, but this is treated descriptively and often more at the symptomatic level of emotional concern. The thematic approach knows that something is in the air, but

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does not have much more to say about it other than to notice and highlight its presence.

2. Other works come at the problem *analytically*, diagnosing it and turning it into something that requires an explanation that may help inform or educate the reader. Here is often where allegorical impulses come into play, as one (but not the only) means of analysis. Works that seem more analytical are ones that are often celebrated and canonized by academic readers, who largely see themselves as special readers due to their training and expertise in critical analysis. Generic writing is often devalued precisely because of the claim that it is not analytic enough, but this is often because (academic) criticism has devoted more time and labor to forging terms and keywords to capture analytic functions, and less on the other two listed here.
3. A third approach is when texts act *transformatively* to create a new social collective after the shared experience of reading or viewing. Examples of this process include fan communities that bond around a text's imagined world and characters, often without the actual plot or conclusion being the center of concern. This process includes practices like fan fiction, cosplay (dressing up as particular characters), and performative subcultures such as Goth or Steampunk. If generic works are considered as lacking analytic nuance, they often combine the thematic and transformative in ways that other works do less frequently.

While it may be initially compelling to see these three approaches or "valences" as forming a numerical hierarchy – where the majority of works only operate as thematic, with fewer as analytic, and only a handful as fully transformative – that would be mistaken on two accounts. First, almost no text operates in just one way; texts tend to flit through aspects of all three to greater or lesser degrees. It is almost impossible to conceive of a text that entirely lacks some analytical effort, for example, or that doesn't generate at least some social connection with others.

Second, the notion of a linear trajectory has been the cause of one long-standing difficulty in appreciating horror. The academic study of culture often tends to select and celebrate cultural productions that seem mainly analytical, since this is the ground on which the university's teachers and students are rewarded. Yet the power of "genre fiction" often comes through combining the thematic with the transformative – hence the prevalence and passion of genre fan communities, zines, forums, conventions, and so on. Academia's prejudice in favor of the analytical has been the source of much difficulty in discussing horror: unlike the analytical valence that has a large body of critical terms used to evaluate it, the thematic and the transformative

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(or the thematic-transformative) do not have an established set of keywords and procedures to discuss and consider them. In this way, then, the effort to look beyond allegory can be a productive search for new approaches to perceiving what makes horror more (or less!) effective.

The Politics of American Horror

Having suggested that American horror can be characterized as paraliterary narratives that require a different way of reading, we make a further and related claim: American horror's focus on the body in distress registers the faults and tensions of Western centrist liberalism.[7] While we emphasize, therefore, that "horror" is worth distinguishing from "Gothic" even as the two share much of the same ground, so too is the Americanness of our horror both distinct to a set of national conditions and yet not, finally, separate from the wider world of historical and political conditions in which the United States first took – and continues to take – shape. Part of this stems from the tumultuous conditions in which American modernity began: the widespread revolutions and rebellions of the late eighteenth century include the settler-colonial American Revolution (1765–83), the Indigenous and mestizo rebellions associated with Túpac Amaru II in the Peruvian Andes (1780–82), the French Revolution (1789–99), the Black slave uprising in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), the onset of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1788–92), and conflict in Ireland (1798). The American Revolutionary flashpoint was therefore part of a broader global moment of political crisis, and this registered in all kinds of horrific tales and stories across the world. The German playwright Friedrich Maximilian Klinger's play *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) (1776), set amid the American Revolution, for instance, gave the name to an ensuing dramatic movement of antirationalist and highly emotive plays, and which in turn fed into the rise of the German *Schauerroman* (shudder-novel) that would strongly inspire both English and American Gothic writing.

Three political ideologies emerged from this moment to respond to the inevitability of constant social transformation and the new ideal of democratic rule. These ideologies were conservatism, socialism, and centrist liberalism. Conservatives emphasized the need to retain the role and sanctity of traditional formations of social "order," especially those involving the family, religious institutions, and nostalgic images of the past. Socialists favored a radical transformation against all conservative ideals and sought instead to establish a broader right to rule by social groups, especially of the laboring and lower classes. Liberals sought a position in between conservativism and socialism, and they argued that the move to nonelite rule could be

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managed "carefully, prudently, and above all gradually" (Wallerstein, 147). The mechanism for this moderation would be government by individuals chosen for their talent and merit, a bureaucratic management that would incrementally extend suffrage to women, nonwhites, and workers and would grant access to higher education as the mechanism that trains the individual with the social "virtue" felt necessary to handle institutional power.

Yet the more "equality" loomed as a realized social reality, the more obstacles – juridical, political, economic, and cultural – were created to prevent its actual realization. As Immanuel Wallerstein puts it, the idea of the "citizen" served to crystallize

> a long list of binary distinctions that then came to form the cultural underpinnings of the capitalist world-economy . . .: bourgeois and proletarian, man and woman, adult and minor, breadwinner and housewife, majority and minority, White and Black, European and non-European, educated and ignorant, skilled and unskilled, specialist and amateur, scientist and layman, high culture and low culture, heterosexual and homosexual, normal and abnormal, able-bodied and disabled, and of course the ur-category which all of these others imply – civilized and barbarian. (146)

If centrist liberalism paradoxically proclaimed the universality of equality while also setting up a series of binary divisions that would limit the participation in and achievement of this equality, then we can see how tales of embodied horror emerged to explore the tensions of this false promise and the fear of revenge for the denial of this ideal. If horror often lingers on the body turned inside out, it is because centrist liberalism sees the body as the container of natural human rights, even as it assumes that the individual is to be seen as a disembodied citizen. Horror's embodied violence works to make explicit the presence of exclusions based on embodied features.

So, if horror's object of consideration is the limits of liberalism we can understand why it appears globally while also having specific characteristics for each nation.[8] We can also explain why it may proliferate at certain historical moments, while always being somewhere present throughout the centuries-old duration of liberal authority. In this sense, American horror belongs to a wider family of horror across the world while also revolving around its own distinct compass points – Atlantic slavery and its residues; Native American dispossession and genocide; violent conflict (both rural and urban) over class, immigration, and rights; and matters of gender, sexuality, and ability. These distinctions, as we said earlier, have been central to the encounter between the American liberal dream and its umbilical twin, the American nightmare.

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Stemming from this complex of historical, conceptual, and political questions, we can arrive in our own present moment and the new "golden age" of American horror. Against that long history of critical dismissal, horror is undoubtedly having an extraordinary renaissance in both popular culture and critical scholarship. The essays in this book therefore look back to the classic markers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature and culture, but also survey the new landscapes of horror production. And here, in the evolutions of American horror both formal and political, we can end with a note of optimism for horror's future. One of the most salient aspects of this recent resurgence has been the transformation of horror's assumed creators and audience, from (young) white heterosexual men to a genre that is just as likely to be created by and for women, trans, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, and nonheterosexuals. If a truism about Gothic was that it revolved around fearful reactions to the presence of the "Other," then contemporary horror often turns the tables and indicts modern liberalism's mainstream norms as the real monster. Rather than horror simply being a topic of historical consideration, doomed to various repetitions or reiterations of what already exists, it can also be an uncompromising and visceral reimagining of the present – a present that is terrifying, but also ready for change. *The Cambridge Companion to American Horror* is haunted by the past, but also, we hope, provides a guide to the new horizons coming into our collective view.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Charles L. Crow, *American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009); and Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (Continuum, 2004).
2. Kevin Corstorphine has even argued that it "can occur independently of the Gothic mode" (2) altogether.
3. "Social death" is used here to mean the exclusion of subjects from the liberal rights of self-representation, exemplified in the right to vote (suffrage), own property, make contracts, bring police charges, and testify in a court of law.
4. For more on creepypasta, see the collection of essays edited by Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill, *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet* (Utah State University Press, 2018).
5. Jerrold E. Hogle, "The Gothic-Theory Conversation: An Introduction," in *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle and Robert Miles (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 1–30.
6. For a more detailed development of these ideas, see Stephen Shapiro, "The Cultural Fix: Capital, Genre, and the Times of American Studies," in *The Fictions of American Capitalism: Working Fictions and the Economic Novel*, ed. Vincent Dussol and Jacques-Henri Coste (Palgrave, 2020), 89–108.

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7. Here we draw on Immanuel Wallerstein's argument for developments within the capitalist world-system's secular trend, or long duration, from the late eighteenth century to the period loosely from 1966 to 1970 as a corrective to Ronald Paulson's influential account of the "bloody upheavals of the French Revolution" as propelling "the popularity of Gothic fiction in the 1790s and well into the nineteenth century" (536 *ELH*, later published as *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (Yale University Press, 1983)). Paulson felt that "widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France" found "a kind of sublimation or catharsis in tales of darkness, confusion, blood, and horror" (536). In particular, Paulson highlights the role of the crowd as "the central phenomenon of the Revolution. The crowd, with the related terms 'natural sovereignty' and 'General Will' ... was among the most ambiguous concepts to arise from the Revolution" (540). While Paulson's description captures some of what we consider as horror's constituent elements, it remains overly fixed on the singular event of the Revolution, rather than its long cultural influence.
8. For accounts of national identity and horror and gothic traditions outside the United States, see Jonathan Rigby's *English Gothic* (Signum Books, 2015); Xavier Aldana Reyes's *Spanish Gothic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); *Italian Horror Cinema*, edited by Stefano Baschiera and Russ Hunter (Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Colette Balmain's *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Rebecca Duncan's *South African Gothic* (University of Wales Press, 2018); and Adam Lowenstein's *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

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