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A Decade of Dreams and Nightmares: Popular Gothic in the 1980s

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This special issue of *Gothic Studies* is concerned with the Gothic significance and legacy of the 1980s, a decade that remains a site of contemporary fascination in the twenty-first century. While many disparage the decade as a period of soulless commercialism, avid consumerism, and a distinct period in time that fashion forgot, the 1980s introduced new modes of communication, new commercial appreciation for Gothic and horror texts, and is now, in the twenty-first century, suffused with nostalgic appropriation and returns. The seeds of discontent in our contentious and fractured present were largely sown in the 1980s, making it an important, if divisive, (and richly Gothic) period. We find ourselves haunted by the 1980s in this volume. Cultural decades such as the 1980s are malleable periods of time by virtue of their socio-cultural shifts and legacies; as opposed to strict chronometry, cultural decades, like Hobsbawm's 'short twentieth century' in his seminal study, *Age of Extremes*, can be long, short, turbulent, excessive, give rise to clusters of activity, or become revisited sites and periods that continue to draw scholarly fascination, much like the *fin-de-siècle*.¹ Their strict beginnings and endings may be contested in scholarly circles, but the cultural artefacts, ideas, anxieties, and styles of the decade or period under examination can be readily identified. The 1980s is a cultural decade and functions as a site of creation and cultural upheaval in the texts and crises considered herein, and, as a nexus point in the growing adoption and consolidation of neoliberal policies in the accumulation of global capital. Since its inception, the Gothic erupts at times of crisis to articulate that which is deemed utterly repressed and unspeakable: in the 1980s, we locate the seeds of the upsurge in contemporary Gothic expressions and anxieties, particularly in still unfolding twenty-first-century socio-cultural upheavals about racial and class inequalities. This informs a shared unease and growing recognition that the legacy of the 1980s is mirrored *and* amplified in the Gothic present—including ideological and border wars, the resurgence of nationalism, economic precarity, and climate change—and renders the prospect of a meaningful future asunder without intervention.

The 1980s is also a rich site for scholarly consideration and is succinctly described by critic David Sirota as a period rife with contradictions and curiosities.² These shifts demonstrate the nature of the period's darker edges, with socio-political, cultural, and artistic expressions enabling a Gothic counter-narrative that openly challenges the dismissal of the period and its artefacts. The decade bore witness to seismic socio-political shifts in the advent of the Conservative Thatcher Government in the United Kingdom in 1979, and the near-coeval inception of Reaganism in early 1981 in the United States. The Cold War raged on, with the US boycotting the Moscow Summer Olympics in 1980, and the Soviets, in turn, boycotting the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Following the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island in March 1979, the rising terror of nuclear catastrophes was palpable, in circulating pamphlets ('Protect and Survive'), onscreen horrors (*Threads* [1984], *The Day After* [1983]), and NATO's Able Archer exercise (1983), only to be partially realised in the fallout and disinformation following the Chernobyl disaster in April 1986. By the end of the decade, under Mikhail Gorbachev's reform policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, the gradual erosion of centralised Soviet power ultimately led, in a quick chain of events, to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and the formal dissolution of the U.S.S.R in December 1991.

The 1980s introduced a new digital landscape, with the inception of the mobile phone, the personal computer, the advancement of video games, and the burgeoning terrain of the World Wide Web, marking the beginning of the end of an analogue, and closed-off, world. The period was soundtracked by the music of New Romantics, Synthpop, Post-Punk and Hard Rock, advancing the synergistic marketing of music videos through MTV, and saw the introduction of the Parental Advisory sticker following Congressional hearings on the explicit content of pop music lyrics and album art in 1985. It is the era of deregulation in US television (1986), giving rise to Fox News, increased cable TV televangelism and ‘infotainment’ programming, alongside the boom in the domestic ownership of the home video recorder, and with it the advancement of VHS culture. The decade’s distinctive screen aesthetics exuberantly celebrated surface gloss and accumulation, while elsewhere it savagely critiqued its socio-political grotesquery through the rise of horror culture and its box-office popularity. It also marked a significant advancement in the field of Gothic Studies in academia with the publication of David Punter’s *The Literature of Terror*, proving to be a foundational text within the discipline.³ Gothic and horror culture produced a variety of icons with significant Gothic purchase in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century entertainment, including Wes Craven, Clive Barker, Tim Burton, David Cronenberg, Nick Cave, The Sisters of Mercy, Elvira, and Winona Ryder. The 1980s was also marked out as a golden age of the body horror film, the reigning decade of the Satanic Panic crisis, amplified by increasingly explicit displays of gore, nudity, and violence, which, due to its rental availability, triggered the UK’s Video Nasty crisis and led to the 1984 Video Recordings Act in the UK. Violent body horrors made celebrities out of SFX artists Tom Savini, Rob Bottin, and Rick Baker (among others), artists who cut their teeth in dazzling 1970s and early 1980s horror films and found themselves newly celebrated stars in their own right by the mid-1980s.

In contrast with the period’s staggering popular culture and the exporting of Reaganite aspirations (or their ridicule) onscreen, it is also the decade of abject decline and darkness for many others: the continued public defunding of social housing in the US, leading to a pronounced acceleration of inner-city decline; the Brixton, Toxteth, and Moss Side riots (among other areas) in the UK, which erupted due to a legacy of racial tensions and deprivation in black communities riven with disadvantage. The advent of the AIDS crisis and the response to the HIV epidemic ignited further discrimination toward LGBTQ+ communities, and the delayed political responses to help those in most need. Multiple international monetary fiscal crises detrimentally indebted developing countries, triggering IMF interventions. The ‘biblical famine’ in Ethiopia in 1984 provoked outrage and calls for action, and mobilised charitable responses in the west (with Band Aid, Live Aid [July 1985] and numerous global relief efforts). The ongoing boycotting of apartheid South Africa (in sports, exported produce, and culture) gained momentum on the international stage and in the United Nations, contributing to growing domestic and international pressures, which eventually led to the freeing of Nelson Mandela (released after 27 years of imprisonment in February 1990) and the formal repeal of apartheid legislation in South Africa in 1991.

The decade is also marked out for its aspirational greed and its horrors: note the rapacious growth of Wall Street conglomerates and swollen stock portfolios – the monstrous fiscal appetites of (Oliver Stone’s fictional yuppie) Gordon Gekko and his (insider-trader) real-life counterpart Ivan Boesky, both of whom openly declared that ‘greed was good’ and advocated that the privileged should ‘pursue wealth’ without shame, often through the exploitation of others.⁴ The decade advanced the proliferation of credit cards and platinum

cards, and with it came the explosion of significant personal debt. In the US, the ‘War on Drugs’, the cocaine wars and the crack epidemic saw an increase in incarceration rates under mandatory minimum sentencing, a congressional law passed in 1986 that disproportionately affected black and minority people. The 1980s is also the decade of rampantly wanting more in response to 1970s ‘stagflation’, increased poverty, government cuts, and global energy crises. In an attempt to shuck off the legacies of its preceding decade, the 1980s often stands accused of rewriting or eliding over the immediate past to feed its present fantasies at the expense of a meaningful future.

Like all cultural decades, the 1980s can be summated at a distance through its many powerful tensions and cultural artefacts, and is often analysed by cultural historians through its significant watershed moments: in chronometric terms, it started with the Iran hostage crisis, the popularity of the Rubik’s Cube, the eruption of Mount St. Helens, the launch of CNN, the capture of John Wayne Gacy, and the death of John Lennon (all 1980); and ended in 1989 with the protests in Tiananmen Square, the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution, the Exxon Valdez spill, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the peaking of the Nikkei index (which soon crashed in December 1990, leading to Japan’s ‘Lost Decade’), the overthrowing of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania, and Francis Fukuyama’s query that we had, perhaps, reached ‘The End of History?’⁵ It must be noted that the articles in this special issue look beyond this brief summation to locate some of the decade’s enduring gothic horrors, cultural and temporal blockages, and dark legacies. This issue examines a selection of texts that actively engage with 1980s anxieties, aesthetics, and socio-political concerns, or restage the 1980s as a revisited transtemporal site of disruption in the twenty-first century that continues to inform our world. This special issue is one of the few sustained studies on the decade in terms of its Gothic excesses, as distinct from its profound importance and heritage in the evolution and advancement of horror cinema, literature, and culture; the articles herein interrogate the resonance and legacy of the decade in broad terms, ranging from literary, cinematic, radio, television, and stage productions, while also examining the socio-cultural roots at the heart of the decade’s disruptions and terrors.

In Harvey O’Brien’s article, ‘Creation Myth: the imagining of the Gothic imagination in the Diodati Triptych: *Gothic* (1986), *Haunted Summer* (1988), and *Remando al viento* (1988)’, O’Brien examines the cinematic reimagining of the summer of darkness at the Villa Diodati in 1816 through the lens of Gothic creation in contrast with the popular culture of death that dominated the slasher’s success. Though wildly different in tone and effect, all three films represent a distinct form of Gothic origins onscreen, differing from a nostalgic or reductive deployment of its tropes in other genre films, and in so doing, these texts raise questions about 1980s cinema and culture more broadly. O’Brien also foregrounds the prominence of Mary Shelley and her status as an enduring literary voice as the protagonist in the three films under examination.

Jeanette D’Arcy examines invisibility and spectrality in the stage adaptation of Susan Hill’s 1983 novel, *The Woman in Black* in her article, “‘We can believe he does not see her, nor know she’s there’: Erasure and *The Woman in Black*’. Virtually unchanged since its debut in London’s West End in 1989, the spectral Woman at the centre of the play has been read as a feminist depiction of a female ghost who defies patriarchal control. D’Arcy’s article argues that such readings are mitigated by the material performance and marketing strategies necessary for the creation of a commercially successful Gothic horror production. While mirroring the culturally conservative horrors on women’s rights in the 1980s as found in Hill’s

1983 novel, the play's depiction of its uncontained ghost utilises other strategies that elide or erase the actor at the heart of each Gothic performance.

Leslie McMurtry's exploration of Gothic radio in 'Sounds Like Murder: Early '80s Gothic on North American Radio' also places Gothic performance at its centre. As part of Canada's radio drama revival series coasting on a wave of national nostalgia for radio storytelling, *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* (1974-82) was the most popular and prolific. During the same period, McMurtry argues, the Canadian government, recognising an emergent national identity crisis concerning its southern neighbour, invested heavily in original programming on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). McMurtry examines the rich and popular landscape of Gothic radio in episodes of *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* and *Nightfall* (1980-3), examining wilderness narratives, Gothic doubles, and Canadian explorations of national character and masculinity in crisis during the 1980s in selected episodes.

In 'Better the Devil you Know: The Myth of Harm and the Satanic Panic', Sarah Cleary examines the Satanic Panic that gripped early 1980s America. In peeling back this destructive narrative that promulgated 'the myth of harm', Cleary reveals that the Satanic Panic led to demands for censorship and police action in the name of protecting children from the rhizomatic rise and terror of Satanic influence within popular culture. Cleary examines the real-world damage and law cases (McMartin Pre-School Trial, among others), the explosive memoir *Michelle Remembers* (1980) and Geraldo Rivera's 'Devil Worship - Exposing Satan's Underground' prime time television special in 1988, all of which directly contributed to its sustained cultural purchase. The Satanic panic was a unique period in American life that witnessed a confluence of conservative politics, evangelical ascendancy, rampant consumerism and the birth of infotainment, with frightening results.

In "'Everyone Has Monsters Within": Neoliberal Release of Monstrous Desire in Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* (1985) and *From Beyond* (1986)', James Morgart examines the neoliberal horrors of attraction that operate within the cinema of directors including Stuart Gordon, Tobe Hooper, Larry Cohen, David Cronenberg and John Carpenter. Focusing on Stuart Gordon's bleak films alongside his 1980s contemporaries (such as David Cronenberg and Clive Barker), Morgart argues that while the Gothic enables us to articulate the horrors of the period through ideas, films, and images that we may otherwise refuse to directly address, Gordon films directly situate the bleak political disturbances of the period as utterly inescapable — the widespread promotion of orgiastic consumption and the process of accumulating capital under the transformative horrors of neoliberalism, privileging individual desires over society as a whole, are transformed into legible horrors in Gordon's films wherein its horrific consequences are realised too late.

Also examining the horrors of neoliberalism in the 1980s, Sorcha Ní Fhlainn concludes this special issue with an article on *Stranger Things* and the emergence of 1980s 'retro-texts' that return to the 1980s onscreen as a textual landscape within their diegesis in the twenty-first century. Her article, 'A Rift between Worlds: The Retro-1980s and the neoliberal Upside Down in *Stranger Things*', examines 'reflexive nostalgia' to interrogate the dark neoliberal cost of the Reaganite 1980s. Manifesting as a 'shadow world' through which its invisibility dictates its pervasiveness, The Upside Down in *Stranger Things* gives form to Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' of the market and draws on Gothic signifiers to underscore the draining of the future to fuel the fantasy of the Reagan 1980s. Retro-texts look back to a period to diachronically articulate the concerns and pre-occupations of the present, and Ní Fhlainn argues that the horrors of a neoliberal future as presented in both *Stranger Things* and Cline's/Spielberg's

Ready Player One call out for social collective action to cure the toxic wastelands in our neoliberal present.

This special issue is about opening up the cultural terrain of the ‘long 1980s’ as I term it but does not fully address the decade’s myriad fissures and horrors, or its positive advancements. The issue is neither exhaustive nor completist. Instead, the scholars featured aim to interrogate some of the decade’s enduring textures, popular culture entertainments, and transmedia Gothic expressions, to examine *some* of its prominent socio-political legacies as a diachronic site of fascination, ghostly returns, and powerful influence in contemporary Gothic Studies. We welcome you to re-enter the dark 1980s — a paradoxical decade of dreams and nightmares.

Notes

¹ Eric Hobsbawm. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*. London: Abacus, 1994.

² David Sirota, *Back to our Future*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2011. p. xviii

³ See Scott Brewster, ‘Gothic Criticism in the Twentieth Century: Who is This That is Coming?’ in Sorcha Ní Fhlainn and Bernice M. Murphy (eds.), *Twentieth-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). pp. 64-80 (69-70).

⁴ Wall Street mogul Ivan Boesky, as commencement speaker for the School of Business Administration at the University of California, Berkeley, advocated that the graduates should actively ‘pursue wealth’ without shame, giving rise to one of the lasting mantras of the decade, which, in turn, was co-opted by Oliver Stone for his script for *Wall Street* (dir. by Oliver Stone, 1987). See also Bob Greene, ‘A \$100 Million Idea: Use Greed For Good’, *Chicago Tribune*, 15 December 1986, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-12-15-8604030634-story.html>, Accessed 02 January 2022.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’ *The National Interest*. No. 16, Summer 1989, pp. 3-18.