

# Pages, Screens, Technology: Helen McClory's *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break*'s Haunting Narrative

Maddalena Carfora

## Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on some characteristics of contemporary Anglophone Gothic literature as they are involved in cultural, social, and technological issues. Drawing on Lars Elleström's theoretical framework, this contribution examines Helen McClory's short story *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* (2015), highlighting the ways in which the represented intermedial relationship between literature and screen technology can generate feelings of threat and fright that are deeply connected to a relevant contemporary issue, namely femicide.

## Keywords

Gothic mode, Contemporary literature, Screen, Affect, Femicide.

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I'm fine. Where are you – really – and with me there's a lot, two – [...] Now I get that this is all past tense. Because of you and other things, I'm going to stop calling you you now. There are so many of yous. It's too confusing.

Helen McClory, *Bitterhall*

## **Gothic mode, media technology and contemporary literature**

Can we be utterly terrified by our thoughts to the point of them becoming almost real? That can be a possibility in the shadowy settings of Gothic. Imbued with paranoia, blood and eeriness, Gothic stories have always dealt with terror, sometimes intertwined with horror features as well. The distinction between horror and terror made by the Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe<sup>1</sup> has always been open to further exploration during the centuries

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<sup>1</sup> «Terror and horror 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» (Radcliffe 1826: 149). Fred Botting in his introduction of *Gothic* (1999) denotes both differences and interplays between their powers to engage the reader. In fact, he describes them as oscillating energies, mutually tied, that may pertain external or internal realities: «If terror leads to an imaginative expansion of one's sense of self, horror describes the movement of contraction and recoil. Like the dilation of the pupil in moments of excitement and fear, terror marks the uplifting thrill where horror distinguishes a contraction at the

and this applies more than ever in contemporary frameworks. Our fluid and digitised times may generate multiple 'augmented' creatures, blurring the edges between reality and imagination.

As a matter of fact, literature and technology have always been intersected<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, technological development had a significant impact on the way we relate to literary products, not only affecting the creative process, but also influencing the distribution and the fruition of literary storytelling<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, literature functions as a space in which technology has been represented and discussed variously. In fact, technology generally serves as a literary metaphor of change and innovation, but also as an allegory of the concern about the ways in which its use can affect everyday life, as well as the possibility of limiting the personal freedom and privacy of people.

Immersed as we are in today's manifold media culture, a condition that Bolter (2019) defines as «plenitude», when it comes to technology, we tend to be more concerned by sophisticated digital and AI technologies that we know very little about, taking for granted that literature is a medium that actually came into being because of the very elaborate use of communication and language technologies:

Technology is not only limited to cell phones, super computers, biotechnology, satellites or the dark web. Speech and language are also basic communication technologies that connect people and lead to other technological artefacts: quills, pencils, pens, paper, typewriters,

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imminence and unavailability of the threat. Terror expels after horror glimpses invasion, reconstituting the boundaries that horror has seen dissolve. The movement between terror and horror is part of a dynamic whose poles chart the extent and different directions of Gothic projects. These poles, always inextricably linked, involve the externalisation or internalisation of objects of fear and anxiety» (Botting 1999: 6-7).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on literature as technology see Hammond 2023.

<sup>3</sup> See Hayles 2007. The scholar considers contemporary literature to be "computational". With 'literature' Hayles refers not only to the object-book or its digitized version (e-book), but also to the various stages and professional figures that concern the entire process of literary production, ranging from the authors themselves, publishing houses, readers and booksellers, to designers, programmers and beyond: «players, teachers, copyright laws and other legal formations, Web sites and other electronic dissemination mechanisms, and the technologies that enable and instantiate all of the above, is permeated at every level by computation» (Hayles 2007: 122).

fibre-optics, email. Augmented with these technologies, and connected in communication with people in other times and places, we enhance connectivity but we also open out to that which is foreign, unfamiliar and potentially threatening. (Edwards 2015: 15)

Nevertheless, the most frightening thing about technology is not much linked to its field of application or the way it works, but rather to what it puts us in relation with, the triggers for the sense of fear, «the meaning associated with them» (Mordini 2007: 544).

Given that «technology has operated a general expansion and intensification of consciousness consistent with the gothic sensibility» (Bayern-Berenbaum 1982: 14), it is not difficult to imagine how the evolution of the gothic mode<sup>4</sup> intersects with the technical innovation brought about by the digital revolution of the early 2000s, that influenced the rise of the media landscape we know today: social media, virtual and augmented reality, AI, vocal assistants, analytical tools that, with their ghostly (im)materiality monitoring us, know our latest searches, recommending what to buy, what to read, what places to visit, as if they were a friend on the

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<sup>4</sup> When I refer to “gothic mode”, I draw on Remo Ceserani’s notion of “modo letterario”. Ceserani, drawing on Frye’s critical theory, elaborates a classification of literary modes, stating that the term “mode” indicates a rhetorical-formal strategy that relies on thematic aggregations that may vary depending on the contexts in which the imaginative forms emerge (Ceserani 1999: 555). Since, different modes may combine in a text we understand the Gothic mode as manifold and metamorphic, «as a mode that exceeds genre and categories [...] incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing» (Botting 1996: 14). In the last few decades, several scholars have been questioning how to define contemporary Gothic mode, namely, what are its peculiarities in current times and its evolution over the centuries. In this regard, technological innovation plays an important role in the cultural evolution of this concept by sharpening its liminal qualities as a «polysemantic marker» (Wester - Reyes 2019: 2). Moreover, Angela Carter’s conception of gothic mode relies on the understanding of a kind of fiction that can make a difference through the paradoxical use of its verbal structures, meanings and images, in the way it «takes full cognizance of its status as non-being—that is, a fiction that remains aware that it is of its own nature, which is a different nature than human, tactile immediacy. I really do believe that a fiction absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality (that is, not a logbook of events) can help to transform reality itself» (Carter 1975: 133).

other side of the phone, but instead dwelling in the steamy spaces of the World Wide Web.

So, the question that follows is: what are we afraid of nowadays and how does Gothic frame it? In the introduction of *The Gothic in the Twenty-First Century* (2019), Wester and Reyes point out that in contemporary Gothic stories there is a «preference for, and revisions of, monsters such as zombies and serial killers» (2019: 6). When compared to the ominous figures of the classical Gothic, modern narratives provide us with characters that share more realistic, rather than supernatural, traits. They are more like human beings than ghosts and vampires, stressing a specific characteristic of these contemporary versions, namely, that a great importance is given to «the messages in their stories» (*ibid.*: 7).

Taking these considerations into account, this paper tries to shed light on the complex relationship that occur between the so-called Gothic mode, technology and literature in contemporary times by investigating Helen McClory's *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* short story from *On the Edges of Vision* collection (2015). The aim of this investigation relies on exploring the way in which intermedial relations in literary works, such as 'media representation' of screens, can lead to uncanny depiction of realities that actually mirror some of today's fears deriving from 'contemporary monsters', from a female perspective.

## Screens and corpses: representing the eerie

Established that, as Wester and Reyes argue in relation to contemporary gothic, «the mode has moved forward to embrace a number of new horrific scenarios more pertinent to the reality of contemporary audiences» (2019: 5), Helen McClory's literary fiction fits precisely into the constant oscillation of our times: pages and screens, analog and digital, reality and imagination; as well as uncertainty, transience, and precariousness.

Gothic has become a wider term to designate non-realistic modes of writing and now encompasses horror, certain strands of science fiction and speculative fiction, especially the weird tradition, magical realism, the supernatural more widely (even fairy tales) and all generic hybrids that contain elements traditionally associated with the Gothic [...] (2019: 1)

McClory's *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* opens with a scene that readers must 'watch' as they read, 'broadcasted' from a tv screen that actually

operates as a threshold between what is happening during the event of the narrated short-story and what has already happened before it: a dead protagonist emerges from a lake, naked, as she frees herself from the plastic she is constrained by. Her limbs might be broken. She is no longer used to have her eyes open:

She peels back the plastic and gets out of the water, a little clumsy with her limbs not moving right and her blue-black blood slowshot through them. She hasn't opened her eyes yet; they've been closed that long she has to pry the lids apart with thick fingers, prop them open a while, practice her blinks. Though her sight is keen, and if there were anyone here, they'd see eyes of a glorious brightness, clear like something raised on fish and chilled glacial water. (McClory 2015: 1)

Although this short-story is very brief<sup>5</sup> its diegesis takes place on multiple levels (see Genette 1976). The narrator is omniscient and as the narrative unfolds, the protagonist of the story gets "closer" to the reader. The moment after the description of the first 'scene', the screen became a gateway to the back level of the story, indeed, the protagonist jumps out the TV screen to everyday reality, in a room with no people but with signs of a lived-in house, looking for some clothes around:

She climbs out of the TV and into an unoccupied room furnished with a battered tartan sofa covered in pillows and a TV table sprawled with sweet wrappers and old bills. She leaves the room for the hall, for the bathroom and the towels for her body and her hair. She should probably take a shower to rinse clean of scum from the lake, but you can have enough contact with water, you know? In the little bedroom she finds a drawer of plaid shirts and another with sweats. She gets into the clothes and, if she can't really feel warm, she at least feels something new, more going on than *body* and dead and *girl*. (McClory: 1)

As if to feel 'alive' again, a part of the world of the living, something that her murderer actually took away from her, she eats and drinks, perceiving the *affordances* of her body, she got dressed and smoked a cigarette: «The dead girl makes herself a coffee in the wood-panelled kitchenette and stirs in four teaspoons of sugar, plus cream, and it's the best thing she's

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<sup>5</sup> Its lenght is about two pages.

ever tasted and she licks the foil of the cream pot before folding it back in place» (McClory: 1). At some point, while relaxing on the sofa, she glances back at the television and acknowledges something familiar. She draws on her memories, realizing she has already experienced those moments: the screen is broadcasting some details about her murder and someone is looking for her. Like in a recurring story that cannot be escaped, she soon finishes her coffee and comes back to the other side, jumping into the screen. Her body is about to be found:

What's on the TV? Two detectives in a car, two men, eloquently snarling at each other. [...] Not long now. There's the sugarcane field. There's the alley. She gets out of the clothes. Always naked. She flicks her hair back from her eyes. Takes a drag and holds her breath, which she can hold forever. She mashes the butt into the table. Back into the TV. Here's nothing but a desolate space, green or stony. She picks her shoeless way across the ground, arms bound at her back. Against her throat a delicate bruise. He's killed her already, so at least there's that. And there's the spot where she's been left, right up against that tree. Right behind that wall. There's the spot where she'll be found. (McClory: 2)

McClory's *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* has much to do with the action of 'watching' and deals with the technology of screens in multiple ways. First, the relationship that McClory's short-story establishes with the screen is representational; to explain which kind of intermedial relation I am referring to, I will use Lars Elleström's taxonomy. According to the scholar, media representation occurs when there is a «representation of another medium of a different type» (Elleström 2021: 81). His model not only allows to discern the type of relationship between media, but it also enables the analysis of their compositional structure through the classification of 'media aspects'. In this case, we know that the screen is represented on the page but we also genuinely understand that they both give access to specific media products, depending on their technical affordances<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Elleström calls these aspects «technical media of display» (2021: 33). For example, the page can let access images, drawings, texts and words. Screens employ different technical elements that relate much more to audiovisual consumption. In the settings of the short-story it may include newscast, horror movie, investigative video, true crime documentary, etc.

At each step forward in the story, the represented screen in *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* gives access to different information that gains distinct narrative functions, providing the reader with a cinematic mode. In this regard, I find the concepts «decor screen, diegetic screen and metadiegetic screen» (2021: 158), formulated by Andrea Virginás, extremely useful for the type of analysis I intend to undertake. Looking back at the text, we realize that at the very beginning of the story we come across a decor screen, that is when we understand that what we are reading is actually played on TV. Virginás considers the décor screen as «a background [...] always on the verge of bursting into semiotically meaningful surfaces of communication» (2021: 153); this occurs in the very moment the protagonist is described to step out of the screen.

The moment she put a foot in the house, she starts manipulating the diegetic level. In fact, when she looks at the TV and sees what is happening, the relationship between the narrative of the story and the represented screen shifts towards a diegetic alteration<sup>7</sup>, witnessing the representation of what Virginás calls 'diegetic screen'<sup>8</sup>, that in fact «are employed to show content that founds, explains or perhaps precedes the diegetic events, thus performing a temporal reordering as well, on the level of the plotline» (156). As we see, the protagonist provides the readers with details that were not previously mentioned, clarifying that she was actually killed, describing the marks on her body and the place where it was left.

'Metadiegetic screens' result perceivable only by readers, they can affect them engaging their «mental screen» (Odin 2016) by recalling as one of the main purposes of Gothic stories: to unsettle. This 'metadiegetic' function is operated by the page itself, in the way it showcases multilevel narrative events but only entails with the reader, who is not part of the storyline. In fact, Virginás deems them as «evident or meaningful only for the actual viewer» because «no diegetic character is capable of creating semiotically meaningful cognitive import based on them» (2021: 157).

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that, in the short-story, this situation matches what Virginás states on this matter, namely that «the same objects that functioned or will function as decor screens may re-appear as diegetic screens having further function(s) and role(s) within the diegetic world» (155).

<sup>8</sup> These screens, according to the scholar, «are watched, manipulated or otherwise used by diegetic characters» (153); just as it happens in McClory's *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break*.



## The page as mirror of contemporary fears

What is frightening in *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* has much to do with the virtual power of its threat, whose intensity grows each time the TV screen comes into play. *What* happened to her before she died and *how* was she killed? The 'unspoken' feeds the scope of the fear. Screen level after screen level, scene by scene, it becomes apparent that at a certain point of the exploration, also the readers seem to be in danger, or at least, they *could* be in danger. Murder is no news in gothic stories and the effect that follows, as Bayern-Berenbaum underlines, can put the reader in a state of alert:

Agony, or the attempt to imagine it, is a very effective technique for intensifying perception. [...] The contemplation of the possible degrees of pain, apart from any related anxiety, stimulates curiosity and may draw people to witness or even suffer cruelty. [...] Terror is a primary Gothic ingredient not only because it is a reaction to threat but also because of its own physiological quality. The terrified person, and the reader by identification, becomes suddenly alert. (1982: 30-31)

In that way, an external threat creeps in the world of the readers, jumping out of the 'metadiegetic screen', approaching at any moment, just as the protagonist did in the story. With a clean, concise style and bitter irony, the message *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* wants to express is as clear as it is terrifying: that girl could be us in many ways, and this is how «cognitive dimension of the gothic» (Reyes 2015: 18) unfolds its 'affect'.

As we have observed in the narrative details of the story, bodily references are manifold, and they define the experience of the protagonist. It is no coincidence that the gothic holds a certain connection with the corporeal, in terms of both the effect it aims to elicit and literary narrative object. Indeed, according to Reyes, «the gothic is always corporeal» because it operates as «a mode that seeks to involve readers or viewers viscerally» (2014: 166).

Brian Massumi, one of the most representative of Affect Theory, considers affect as intensity and emotions as a «qualified intensity», namely, the «point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning» (Massumi 1995: 88). Through the combination of Reyes' perspective with the conceptions of Massumi, it is possible to understand the Gothic mode as a vector of intensity. Since «texts may be gothic at dif-

ferent levels and in different ways according to their angle, intention, and aim» (Reyes 2015: 20), it is crucial to explore the intermittencies of that intensity. In fact, the analysis of the media representations shows how the text can work as «narrative trappings» (19) for the protagonist of the story but also for the readers.

The function of screens in *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* fosters porosity: as the boundary between two different narrative times becomes blurred, the same is for the fictional and the real world. However, this 'narrative proximity' implies a perturbing 'familiarity' with the main event of the short story, which strikes the contemporary readers. Gothic mode occurs in *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* by mirroring the monsters and fears of our times from a female perspective, exposing the severe social consequences of gender inequality and discrimination: «Her death is always about things other than her death» (McClory: 2). As the text states, the background of the protagonist's death could be: «Countryside[...] low and humid and green, like a summer dying from oversaturation, or it's a city-side bleak in February» (McClory: 2). She posits alternatives, different options. The vagueness surrounding her death reveals the fact that what happened to her can also take place in many different scenarios; to anyone and anywhere, a man that kills a woman: «He's killed her already, so at least there's that» (*ibid.*). What we read can trouble us because it is as fictional as it is real. As dreary as it is urgent, as upsetting as it is frequent:

The objects, subjects, and situations conducive to gothic affect on specific readers will thus naturally depend on forms of threat that are specific to their cultures and societies. According to the alternative affective model, a text may be identified as gothic when it purports to generate emotions and reactions that threaten the safety and integrity of the reader. (Reyes 2015: 17)

Screens' representations may recall different audiovisual products within the page borders. For instance, the scenes reproduced by the 'decor screen' resonate with the content of crime news or true crime documentaries. Several studies show how exposure to negative news reports can negatively influence people's mental health. In this short-story, the presence of possible crime news broadens the scope of the reader's affection process<sup>9</sup>. Thus, when the text engages the semiotic mode of screens, namely repre-

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<sup>9</sup> See Johnston - Davey 1997.

senting an audiovisual product, affect becomes an «intensity owned and recognised» (Massumi 1995: 88). The presence of the 'metadiegetic screen' allows readers to appeal to the «human self-preservation instinct» because of what they perceive as «external threats, whether these are ominous and shapeless, or embodied» (Reyes 2015: 17).

In the text, the screen serves as a vector of violence and terror. Therefore, in the narrative each diegetic scene nourishes the power of the threat, which gradually becomes more dangerous and frighteningly closer, and it implies different semiotic modes. In this light, the girl is clearly an icon of death, the way in which she was found is an indication of murder, the killing of a woman in those specified dynamics is a symbol of femicide<sup>10</sup>.

The story frightens us because it pertains to *us*. Not supernatural elements, not superhuman creatures, but ordinary people. While it is true on the one hand that «affect can be a result of the threat being, in some form or other, extrapolated into the reality of the reader but which can be apprehended at a purely imaginary level» (Reyes 2015: 17), on the other hand what is portrayed in the story affects each of us as contemporary people. Femicide does not only affect mental and imaginative reality; rather, it dramatically concerns gender issues and power relations as they occur in contemporary socio-cultural reality:

About 66,000 women and girls are violently killed every year, accounting for approximately 17 per cent of all victims of intentional homicides. While the data on which these conservative estimates are based is incomplete, it does reveal certain patterns with respect to the male v. female victim ratio in homicides, intimate partner violence, and the use of firearms in femicides defined here as 'the killing of a woman' (Nowak 2012: 1).

When the protagonist turns back to the other storyline, stepping across the technological boundary of the screen, she confirms where the nature of the threat lies, that is the paralyzing feeling of not being able to escape from that narrative loop which results in the social challenge affecting the contemporary female condition, that is still difficult to be changed: the intentional killing of women is still a persistent phenomenon<sup>11</sup>. Be-

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<sup>10</sup> By using the term 'femicide' I acknowledge its political, cultural and social connotation and consider literature as an act of resistance and exposure. For a detailed overview of the subject, see Radford - Russell 1992.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of data see Weil - Corradi - Naudi 2018.

sides, it is no coincidence that the protagonist finds herself in a house after crossing the screen. This may be associated with the large number of domestic violence and murders that take place in the household<sup>12</sup>.

Furthermore, mentioning the technical device of the screen in the dynamics of gender-based violence also sheds light on another type of violence, specifically perpetrated through screens against the female gender, and that, unfortunately, is becoming more and more common: revenge porn<sup>13</sup>.

The sense of defeat relies on the difficulty in changing that social condition, and this might lead to more frightful matters: losing hope and surrendering to circumstances. The surface of the page, that is the 'meta-diegetic screen', testifies this fear but it also becomes a catalyst for a collective trauma, fostering a sense of community, since «the text is intended to make an intervention» (Reyes: 14). The protagonist of *Pretty Dead Girl Takes a Break* is unknown. She can have any name. We do not know her age or where she comes from, but we know what has happened to her. She is no longer afraid. She comes back to the world of the living, taking a break from her dead status because she has the impulse of narrating-showing her story<sup>14</sup>.

Contemporary Gothic mode makes literature act as a louder voice exposing political and socio-cultural issues, stressing the urge to keep talking about what terrifies us; pointing out that «to ascertain the object of our terror, is frequently to acquire the means of escaping it» (Radcliffe 1826: 150).

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<sup>12</sup> See UNODC and UN Women 2024.

<sup>13</sup> For further analysis, see Stroud 2014.

<sup>14</sup> To explore the social condition related to femicide, see Taylor - Jasinski 2011; Weil 2016.

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