Between

Gothic Technologies

Anna Chiara Corradino, Massimo Fusillo, Marco Malvestio

Abstract

This issue focuses on the relationship between Gothic fiction and technological innovation in contemporary culture from different perspectives and media formats. We explore how Gothic narratives have consistently engaged with, and responded to, technological developments—from the early anxieties about scientific discovery in 19th-century literature to contemporary fears surrounding digital media, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality. Our contributors examine how Gothic aesthetics have been transformed by new technologies while simultaneously providing a framework for articulating the uncanny dimension of technological advancement itself. The articles in this issue analyze how modern Gothic has evolved beyond traditional oppositions to embrace the fluid boundaries between human and non-human, natural and artificial. We investigate the "phosphorescent" aesthetic of contemporary visual Gothic with its colors and digital distortions, the viral nature of digital urban legends, and the haunted infrastructures of our networked existence. Through diverse case studies spanning literature, cinema, television, and digital storytelling, to podcasts, this issue maps the spectral territories where technology and Gothic sensibilities converge, showing how today's Gothic is fundamentally shaped by the technological structures and virtual realities that define contemporary experience.

Keywords

Gothic, Neogothic, Gothic fiction, Digital Gothic, Gothic cinema.

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The Gothic has historically maintained a close and ambiguous relationship with technology. On one hand, it has consistently explored the dangers of technological advancement – as exemplified in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a foundational text of the genre. On the other hand, it is precisely through cutting-edge technological innovations that the Gothic began to take hold of theatrical spaces. These advancements were first applied to drama – as in Matthew Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* (1797) – and later to popular entertainments such as phantasmagorias. In this context, phantasmagorias «suggest the monstrous potential of media in terms of their spectral effects on consciousness, to the point that consciousness itself is rendered virtually spectral» (Botting and Spooner 2015: 3; see also Castle 1995, Jones 2011, Warner 2006). In the decades that followed, the emergence of new communication technologies – such as the telegraph, the radio, and the telephone – became closely intertwined with the rise of spiritualism and, by extension, with modern iterations of the ghost story (Sconce 2000).

In the 20th century, other technological media – such as film and photography – further invigorated the Gothic imagination surrounding technological advancement. With their capacity to evoke presences, manipulate time, and 'animate the inanimate,' these media expanded the repertoire of spectral imagery and intensified the uncanny effect. However, in the diachronic evolution of media, the notion of «technological reproducibility» (Benjamin 1936; see also Kittler 1999: 130) had already begun to haunt the 19th century, anticipating many of the modern anxieties surrounding presence and absence.

In recent years, the interplay between Gothic forms and technological developments has continued to evolve – unsurprisingly, given the extent to which technology now permeates our daily lives. If the telephone carried spectral associations in the early 20th century, and the computer did so at the century's end, this is even more pronounced today, in an era when these media have converged into a single device we carry with us at all times. The Gothic – along with related speculative genres such as horror

and the weird – consistently interrogates the irreducibly spectral nature of the contemporary media landscape[1], a landscape shaped by nostalgia and haunted by the ghosts of post-digital hyperreality.

The intersection of imagery and technology had already been observed by Walter Benjamin, who explored the links between photography and cinema, highlighting the role of media in shaping new sensory experiences (1982). More broadly, the imaginary of contemporary horror is deeply shaped by technology's capacity to hybridize with the biological body, by anxieties surrounding artificial intelligence, and by a reimagining of the current environmental crisis – sometimes spectral in tone (Tsing *et al.* 2017), at other times explicitly Gothic (Edwards *et al.* 2022). In this context, horror no longer functions solely as the Freudian return of the repressed; it also stages the resurgence of the inorganic and the hybrid, evoking a world in which human primacy is increasingly destabilized. Among the many recent anxieties, the most prominent is perhaps that linked to the technological and military escalation of the latter half of the 20th century. As Steven Bruhm (2002: 260) observes, this has rendered contemporary culture particularly attuned to fantasies of total annihilation, prompting the emergence of superhuman entities that defy destruction – cyborgs and sentient machines such as those seen in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the *Terminator* series (1984, 1991), *Dark City* (1998), and *The Matrix* franchise.

The pervasiveness of digital media – and their social, psychological, and ontological consequences – finds in the Gothic a language uniquely suited to articulating collective anxieties about the growing hybridization of the natural and the artificial, and the resulting redefinition of human boundaries. From this perspective, the Gothic becomes a space in which the anxieties of contemporary media spectrality and technological "dorsality" come to the fore – what Wills describes as «a name for that which, from behind, from or in the back of the human, turns (it) into something technological, some technological thing» (2008: 5). As Marshall McLuhan already argued, media technologies are «extensions» of the human (1964), generating new sensory relationships that simultaneously ground and reconfigure our very understanding of the human. Terry Castle, in her study of spectral technologies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, relocates the supernatural within the realm of the imagination, suggesting that the mind itself becomes «a kind of supernatural space, filled with intrusive spectral presences» (1995: 167). Valentina Tanni has expressed a similar

[1] See Kittler 2010; Luckhurst 2014; Leeder 2015; Botting - Spooner 2015.

view in relation to the contemporary experience of being online (2023: 194-196; see also Tanner 2016; Fisher 2022).

In other words, to understand the prominence of the technological Gothic in contemporary culture, one must not only examine how technology is represented within the fictional works of the genre, but also consider more broadly the inherently Gothic dimension of technology itself and its entanglement with a new, rationalized yet pervasive hauntology. This dynamic interplay – of internalizing and engenderizing the phantasmatic – is central to both Gothic sensibility and technological experience, forming the core of a dialectical relationship that invites deeper reflection on the very nature of the human in an age defined by technical reproducibility and digital expansion. The contemporary Gothic thus emerges as a narrative and visual mode that reflects and interrogates the anxieties of technological modernity – anxieties that are simultaneously "Gothicized" and rendered spectral (Botting - Spooner 2015).

Whereas the early Gothic was structured around binary oppositions – reason versus unreason, the ancient versus the modern, science versus the supernatural – these distinctions have largely collapsed in the contemporary moment. Today, the uncanny emerges not from such contrasts, but from the intricate interweaving of the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial, the biological and the technological. The forward-looking historical consciousness characteristic of the early Gothic novel has given way to a dynamic presentism, in which it is precisely the technological innovations of the contemporary world that return to haunt it. This transformation is constitutive of the contemporary Gothic, increasingly populated by novel configurations of the monstrous. As Botting and Spooner observe, «The emergence of new technologies, the marvels of modernity and science, is intimately bound up with the production of monsters and ghosts» (2015: 1). The Gothic thus incorporates anxieties surrounding digital mediation and the instability of identity to such a degree that, to cite Deleuze and Guattari, «ce n'est pas le sommeil de la raison qui engendre les monstres, mais plutôt la rationalité vigilante et insomniaque» (1972: 133).

These vigilant anxieties manifest themselves across a wide array of contemporary cultural products, where Gothic sensibility intersects with the digital mediasphere, generating new narrative forms of the uncanny. What emerges is a continuous evolution of the Gothic, which, while preserving its foundational concerns with transgression and otherness, expands its expressive repertoire in response to technological experience and its implications for subjectivity and the perception of reality. One of

the most salient features of the contemporary Gothic is its engagement with digital aesthetics and the hyperreality that has long been a feature of modern visual culture, as exemplified by the "possessed" televisions of *Poltergeist* (1982). Yet the digitization of reality introduces new spectral presences: from the virtual entities haunting the internet – as in *Unfriended* (2014) and *Cam* (2018) – to the disquieting potentialities of artificial intelligence, voice assistants, and sentient operating systems, as portrayed in *M3GAN* (2022), or in the more philosophical meditations of *Ex Machina* (2014) and *Her* (2013; cfr. Fusillo 2018).

Simultaneously, the Gothic is articulated through a reconfiguration of time and digital memory. Series such as *Black Mirror* (2011-) leverage Gothic tropes to explore the persistence of the past within a technological world that promises, but does not necessarily ensure, the transcendence of mortality. It is within this cultural landscape – defined by the ongoing tension between technophobia and technophilia – that what we refer to as contemporary 'Gothic technologies' emerge.

This spectral dimension also manifests in the technical and aesthetic reflections on the visual, with the contemporary Gothic harnessing the possibilities of the digital realm to craft unreal environments and color saturations that evoke dreamlike and unsettling atmospheres. The 'neon-Gothic' aesthetic (Pop 2018), with its ability to Gothicize films, thus becomes a key tool for representing the boundary between the real and the unreal. In films such as Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016) and Jane Schoenbrun's *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024), neon lighting and saturated colors create a space suspended between reality and the hallucinatory, conjuring a Gothic sensibility nourished by perceptual distortions and otherworldly atmospheres. This spectral digital cryptography is also a hallmark of the hybrid genre of cyberpunk, as Botting notes: «[T]hough cyberpunk abounds with ghosts, demons and monsters, they all appear as technological effects: ghosts are virtual, haunting screens, neural circuits, the dead living on as data» (2008: 185).

In today's "phosphorescent" time, the Gothic is expressed not only through the traditional poetics of the dark and the abject, but also through a visual aesthetic characterized by vibrant color schemes, which blends with bright hues, neon lights, and surreal effects, fostering a new sensibility that fuses the ancient Gothic with digital contemporaneity.

The hybridization of the real and the virtual, however, is not confined to audiovisual media. It also permeates contemporary literature, where novels explore the intersection of corporeality and digital simulation. Mark Danielewski's icono-text *House of Leaves* (2000) employs a labyrinthine and

fragmented structure to evoke disorientation, a sensation closely aligned with Internet's anarchive. Meanwhile, authors like Mariana Enríquez (*Nuestra parte de noche*, 2019) and Paul Tremblay (*Horror Movie*, 2024) experiment with blending traditional horror tropes with hypermodern narratives.

The proliferation of creepypasta and digital urban legends has further transformed the literary Gothic, moving its narratives into an inherently participatory space that challenges traditional notions of authorship. Most significantly, it shifts into a liminal space between truth and fiction, where the tale itself goes viral, evolving into something autonomous. The figure of Slender Man, originally born on the web and later adapted into various media, epitomizes this new form of horror, where the Gothic expands through collective user participation and the accumulation of fragmented narratives.

This issue seeks to address a complex form of the Gothic, one deeply intertwined with technological innovations that not only serve as the subject of narratives but also constitute the very structure and narrative essence of contemporary virtual realities. To this end, it provides a comprehensive exploration of both textual and audiovisual forms of the present.

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