UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

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DIGITAL COMICS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF FEAR:
THE GOTHIC ENVIRONMENT IN EMILY CARROLL'S WORK

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Rafael Conter

**Digital comics and the architecture of fear:
the gothic environment in Emily Carroll's work**

Tese de Doutorado em Sociedade, (inter)textos literários e tradução nas Línguas Estrangeiras Modernas, apresentada como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Doutor pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation investigates how the digital affordances available to the comics medium are used by Emily Carroll in the construction of a gothic environment. The study focuses on six digital comics: *His Face All Red* (2010), *The Prince and the Sea* (2011), *Margot's Room* (2011), *The Three Snake Leaves* (2013), *Out of Skin* (2013), and *When the Darkness Presses* (2014). The comics were chosen for their capacity to inspire gothic narrative responses and their connection to the digital affordances of the infinite canvas, hypertext, and animation. In a broader context, this research considers comics as expressions of a visual language, and explores the synergy between materiality and content in the digital realm. The Gothic is treated as a mode in which a piece of art can be made, a mode marked by narrative tropes such as the haunting, the monster, and the *locus horribilis*. The selected critical framework combines semiotics and narratology, acknowledging the dual nature of comics as both graphic and narrative artifacts. The semiotic approach is mostly based on Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen's (1996) grammar of visual design, and the narratological approach is largely supported by Neil Cohn's (2013c) visual narrative grammar and Meir Sternberg's (1992) writings on narrativity. A close reading method of analysis reveals that Carroll's manipulation of narrative and artistic elements turns the reader interface into a digital *locus horribilis*, creating a gothic reading environment that inspires feelings related to fear. This dissertation contributes to the development of a digital comics narratology, the elaboration of the concept of the *locus horribilis*, and the study of the Gothic as a mode of drawing.

KEYWORDS: Digital Comics; Gothic; Emily Carroll; Intermediality; *Locus Horribilis*.

RESUMO

Esta tese de doutorado investiga como as potencialidades digitais disponíveis ao meio das histórias em quadrinhos são utilizadas por Emily Carroll na construção de um ambiente gótico. O estudo se concentra em seis quadrinhos digitais: *His Face All Red* (2010), *The Prince and the Sea* (2011), *Margot's Room* (2011)*, The Three Snake Leaves* (2013), *Out of Skin* (2013), e *When the Darkness Presses* (2014). Os quadrinhos foram escolhidos por sua capacidade de inspirar respostas narrativas comuns ao Gótico e por sua conexão com as potencialidades digitais da tela infinita, hipertexto e animação. Em um contexto mais amplo, esta pesquisa considera os quadrinhos como expressões de uma linguagem visual e explora a sinergia entre materialidade e conteúdo no ambiente digital. O Gótico é tratado como um modo no qual uma obra de arte pode ser feita, um modo marcado por tropos narrativos como o passado fantasmagórico, a figura monstruosa e o *locus horribilis*. O arcabouço crítico selecionado combina semiótica e narratologia, reconhecendo a dupla natureza dos quadrinhos como artefatos tanto gráficos quanto narrativos. A abordagem semiótica é majoritariamente baseada na gramática do design visual de Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen's (1996), e a abordagem narratológica é em grande parte amparada pela gramática narrativa visual de Neil Cohn (2013c) e pelos textos de Meir Sternberg (1992) sobre narratividade. Um método de análise de leitura atenta revela que a manipulação de elementos narrativos e artísticos por parte de Carroll transforma a interface do usuário em um *locus horribilis* digital, criando uma experiência de leitura gótica que evoca sentimentos relacionados ao medo. Essa tese de doutorado contribui com o desenvolvimento de uma narratologia dos quadrinhos digitais, com a elaboração do conceito do *locus horribilis* e com o estudo do Gótico como um modo de ilustração.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Histórias em Quadrinhos Digitais; Gótico; Emily Carroll; Intermedialidade; *Locus Horribilis*.

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1 AT THE GATES

Comics have the reputation of being extremely difficult to classify, a long history of alternative names and definitions, and a relationship with varied and diverse media. They have been associated with visual art, literature, and language, referred to as funny papers, picture stories, ang graphic novels, and published in newspapers, magazines, and books. Comics are a slippery medium.

For a long time, comics were considered to be "an impure mode of expression" (GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 162) and relied on other areas for a scrap of cultural legitimacy. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, comics had already undergone a process of rehabilitation and secured a more respectable status for themselves (GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 166). Comics conventions such as Comiket, Angoulême and Comic-Con International, with their star creators and cult followings, have become popular cultural events, and attract thousands of people every year (ROUND, 2014, p. 8). No more only a consumer good to be discarded, comics are now regularly featured in places such as libraries, museums, galleries, schools, and universities (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 124).

The growth of professional comics scholarship began in the last three decades of the twentieth century (BRAMLETT; COCK; MESKIN, 2017, p. 22). In the past, comics research focused almost exclusively on mass-produced comic books, a limitation that has contributed to distort the nature of the medium by exaggerating the significance of genres such as the superhero (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 23). Nowadays, comics scholarship has solidified and diversified, and studies of individual genres, titles, writers, and series, and treatments from other disciplinary perspectives have begun to emerge (ROUND, 2014, p. 51). As comics continue to be introduced into schools and university curricula, comics scholarly writing keeps flourishing both in quantity and quality (HEER; WORCESTER, 2009), with new journals and associations accompanying a constant stream of publications (DUNST; LAUBROCK; WILDFEUER, 2018, p. 2). Freed from the shackles of literature and visual art, comics have carved out their own academic space, a place where they can be taken seriously, read in relation to their own traditions, understood through their own vocabularies, and engaged with by people who know how they are produced and consumed (JENKINS, 2012, p. 2).

Over the centuries, graphic narratives and hybrid word-image languages have continued to evolve and branch out in different and unexpected directions (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 238). As expressions of such a rich tradition, comics are routinely exploring new territories and uncovering new grounds. "The vocabulary of possible ideas only grows in complexity as readers become more proficient in understanding old conventions and become open to developing new ones" (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 261). A good case in point concerns the domain of digital comics, a vast and fertile field which presents us with fresh and unconventional ways of producing, consuming, and studying comics. Comics are an ever-changing medium, and comics research should reflect that.

Speaking of ever-changing natures, one could also turn their attention to the Gothic and its narratives of transgression (BRUHM, 2007, p. 263), which commonly break with and redefine old patterns and boundaries and breathe new life into the different media products they come in contact with. And if one takes an even closer look, they will see that comics and gothic narratives[1] have quite a few things in common. Besides their dynamic qualities, they also share cultural and formal connections of many kinds (CORCORAN, 2020; ROUND, 2014), and these connections have led to a fruitful relationship. Culturally speaking, both know what it feels like to be relegated to the sidelines of society and academic circles, or mixed up with other, better appreciated genres or art forms. At one point or another, both have been disregarded as nothing more than cheap entertainment for the masses and, at the same time, seen as a risk and a bad influence on them. Comics and the Gothic share a subcultural status, moving back and forth from the margins to the mainstream in a process that disrupts definitions of high and low and continually challenges societal assumptions.

Perhaps more importantly, there are also parallels concerning their formal structures. A gothic configuration marked by a "haunted" architecture and an "aesthetic of excess" is apparent in the comics medium (ROUND, 2014). In comics, past and future are both real and visible, and panel relations are affected by a sense of haunting and foreshadowing (ROUND, 2014, p. 60). Round (2014) compares the comics reader to a specter, a ghost who moves across the page alternating between embodied and disembodied perspectives. Readers move between diegetic layers;

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[1] I will keep the adjective (gothic) in lowercase and capitalize the noun (the Gothic).

one panel may assign an extradiegetic viewpoint, while the next one may give us an intradiegetic point of view of a character (ROUND, 2014, p. 85). Also, an extradiegetic narrative voice may be combined with an intradiegetic visual perspective, or vice versa (ROUND, 2014, p. 9). These multiple and mobile perspectives are signs of an overall style of excess, which is made even more excessive by the myriad of visual and verbal elements present in a comic (CORCORAN, 2020, p. 6; ROUND, 2014, p. 76).

Some of the most popular entries in the early history of each new art form are related to horror and the Gothic (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 54), and this is especially true in the case of comics (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 179). Gothic and horror comics have been fundamental to revitalize the medium, giving rise to new and experimental narrative and artistic techniques. They have presented readers with exceptional artists, memorable imagery, innovative layouts, and sophisticated storytelling (ROUND, 2014). What is even more impressive is that they have done all that while fighting against censorship.

Censorship practices have never been restricted to a specific medium or genre. Literature, for instance, has always been subject to it (FLUDERNIK, 2009, p. 15), and American cinema was plagued by the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, for decades. American movies from that era were not allowed to show blood or gore, present overtly sexual material, or deprecate religion (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 219). Witch-hunts and Red Scares of all kinds are quick to promote persecution and suppression of a great number of artistic, cultural, and political activities. That said, few censorship cases were as emblematic as that of gothic and horror comics in the second half of the twentieth century.

It all started with the American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham and his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Wertham made a series of attacks on comics, accusing them of fostering moral corruption and blaming them for juvenile delinquency (HEER; WORCESTER, 2009). Public outcry led to investigation and hearings in many countries, starting an international movement to restrict comics publication (LENT, 2009; PETERSEN, 2011). As a consequence, the UK government approved the Children and Young Persons Harmful Publications Act, against "acts of violence and cruelty" and "incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature" (ROUND, 2014); in the United States, citizens and newspapers pressured the comics industry into creating the Comics Code, a self-censorship that would last decades

(COLAVITO, 2008, p. 261). Naturally, the different codes and laws affected gothic and horror comics the hardest. Fortunately, however, they have proven to be extremely resilient, and have the nasty habit of coming back from the brink of death.

Thanks to that, they not only survived but actually thrived under all the scrutiny and regulation. Although widespread, the censorship movement was not universal. Without access to gothic and horror comics from big markets such as the UK and the United States, a few domestic markets started boosting their own production in order to keep up with internal demand. Gothic and horror comics flourished even within the United States, where they simply migrated to publications which did not fall under the Code's control, such as magazines and fanzines.

Digital comics have also had their share of obstacles, and they too have shown to be a breeding ground for the Gothic. Digital operations can enhance the delivery of gothic narratives and their affective responses, turning the web into a truly "chilling reading environment" (MONFRED, 2018, p. 135). Digital comics can be especially effective in this regard, for their spatial contrivances imitate the experience of horror (MONFRED, 2018, p. 137). The page of a digital comic can, for example, restrain the reader's vision by way of a hunkered and rigid panel layout, the anticipation of a browser window, and suspenseful links (MONFRED, 2018). Similarly, the Gothic can help digital comics unlock new forms of communicating. Eager for expansion and for breaking new boundaries, the Gothic can act as a guide for new media types and products, leading them to a world of discoveries and transgressions. Digital comics and the Gothic have already been formally introduced, and it is now time to deepen their bond.

I too have a close relationship with comics and the Gothic. Comics taught me how to read and have been part of my education since preschool, as well as the focus of both my undergraduate research and my master's degree. I grew up reading some of my country's most celebrated comic book series, such as *Turma da Mônica* and *Turma do Pererê*, and moved on to Marvel and DC superhero comics during my teenage years. My own grandfather was a comics artist. He wrote a series called *Vila Feliz* and distributed it for free among the public schools of my hometown. Following in his footsteps, I too have become a comics artist. I have published my strips on the web and sold print collections of them at local graphic arts trade shows. The practice and experience I have acquired, both as comics writer and illustrator,

have no doubt enriched my research on the topic, and provided it with a few insights on the nature of the medium.

My personal experience with the Gothic takes a different route. Over the years, I have been plagued by anxiety and claustrophobia to greater and lesser degrees, as well as by intermittent episodes of confusional arousal[2] and nightmares of terrifying vividness. The Gothic, with its language of fixations, obsessions, and blockages, can act as a kind of therapy, or exorcism. "Contemporary life constantly reminds us that we are moving toward death (...) Paradoxically, we need the consistent consciousness of death provided by the Gothic in order to understand and want that life" (BRUHM, 2007, p. 274). Bringing my fears to the surface by consuming them, either through reading, writing, or drawing, is a way to alleviate real or imaginary threats. By doing that, I can keep them at bay like the boogeyman at the end of *The Babadook* (2014), alive and dangerous but safely contained, locked away in the mind's basement. Once again, having a personal experience with chronic fear could actually prove to be an advantage when studying its ramifications and effects. Separately or in combination, both comics and the Gothic can become a kind of safe space, a place where our fears, or at least my fears, can be played out and symbolized over and over again, until they finally subside.

1.1 OBJECT OF STUDY

Writing this dissertation is like entering a haunted space. I see it as a locus of uncanny events, a strange and mysterious place full of occurrences that challenge my worldview and my scientific understanding. I push the decrepit double gates and they open with a creaking sound. I walk through a courtyard surrounded by dense foliage and withered trees which cast deep shadows under the full moonlight. I see a towering house with pointed arches and ornate traceries up ahead, and hear strange, lamenting voices coming from behind and around me. Tragic events have happened here, and now the whole place has become evil… and possibly even sentient. As I draw closer to the house, I think about the person who has been responsible for such events. I believe that it was the work of Emily Carroll.

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[2] Confusional arousal is a sleep disorder characterized by a state of extreme confusion and disorientation upon waking from sleep.

Emily Carroll is a Canadian artist who has been making comics since 2010. On Halloween Day of that same year, one of her comics, *His Face All Red*, went viral. From that day on, many of her stories have been nominated for awards, and she has earned widespread acclaim online. Carroll is the writer, illustrator, colorist, and letterer to her own comics, doing the share of work that is usually split between four artists in regular, mainstream comics. All this effort and versatility means that she has complete control over her stories, which cover a wide range of genres and aesthetics related to the macabre and the terrifying, from dark fantasy to psychological horror. Apart from her digital comics, which are all available for free on her website, she has also published a few short stories and graphic novels in print.

Carroll's graphic style has been described as "scary but beautiful to look at" (RANDLE, 2014). An animator by education and practice (COLLINS, 2011; RANDLE, 2014), her artistic influences include fantasy illustrators, picture book artists, Japanese woodblock prints, manga artists, and other cartoonists and comics artists (HUBBARD, 2016; SMITH, 2014). Before she started creating comics, Carroll tried her hand at a variety of artistic practices, such as cartoons, fan art, stand-alone drawings, writing, and world-building (COLLINS, 2011). It took her some time to get into comics because she used to think that there were a set of strict and unwritten rules for doing them "properly", and that she would never be "good enough" at it (COLLINS, 2011). She drew her very first comic in May 2010; thirteen months later, she won the Joe Shuster Award for Outstanding Web Comic Creator (COLLINS, 2011).

In an interview that has become lost in the depths of the web and buried at the Wayback Machine[3], Carroll talks about the role of fear as a creative motivator. Horror, for her, is "fun" to create, and she tries to produce the sort of horror that would scare her personally (SMITH, 2014). She creates or adapts fairy tales precisely because they were the first things that really scared her as a kid (HUBBARD, 2016), a practice that reveals an innate understanding of the value of playing out her own personal anxieties. To keep herself in the appropriate mood, Carroll sometimes writes in cemeteries and watches horror movies while drawing, immersed in a kind of "ambient dread" (RANDLE, 2014).

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[3] A digital archive of the World Wide Web that preserves copies of defunct web pages.

To achieve her horrific storytelling goals, Carroll explores the possibilities of digital media in unique and innovative ways, using the tools of the web to her advantage. One example is the use of scrolling, a resource that print comics do not have at their disposal. In Carroll's own words, "scrolling creates a sort of tension because you reveal things bit by bit as opposed to a page where in your peripheral vision you see the rest of the page" (HUBBARD, 2016). She also feels in greater control when she makes a digital comic, because "it's more difficult to flip ahead and check for scares, or accidentally see something that gives the mystery away" (SMITH, 2014). In this case, the use of scrolling is directly connected to the effect of suspense, which relies on the tension between reader anticipation and narrative obstruction (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 159). By giving readers the means to scroll around the page, Carroll provides them with a modicum of control; at the same time, the infinite canvas[4] of a digital comic allows for an indefinite protraction of the action, effectively obstructing reader anticipation and thus intensifying the effect of suspense.

By itself, the scrolling already introduces a number of possibilities exclusive to digital media. But Carroll goes further and also employs hyperlinks[5] and animated images, presenting readers with a more interactive and immersive experience. In Carroll's work, these resources are frequently employed in the characterization of the *locus horribilis*. The *locus horribilis* is a common feature of gothic and horror fiction, and will be thoroughly examined in subsequent chapters. For now, it can be briefly conceptualized as a place that evokes a series of spatial sensations that are related to the emotion of fear, such as entrapment and/or disorientation. By connecting her *loci horribiles* with one or more digital resources, Carroll traps and disorients her readers with scrolling movements, embedded links, and loop animation, and converts the digital interface itself into a kind of terrible place.

By making one or more digital resources integral to the narrative, Carroll proves that she is capable of "thinking with the medium" (RYAN, 2005). Thinking with the medium is the "ability to create an original experience which cannot be duplicated in any other medium, an experience which makes the medium seem truly necessary" (RYAN, 2005, p. 516). For instance: in *Margot's Room* (2011), readers

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[4] The potentially limitless space available to web pages. This concept and other concepts related to digital media will be better explored in the next chapter.

[5] Hyperlinks are interactive elements within digital documents that allow users to navigate to other web pages by clicking on them.

can only keep reading and unravel the story's bloody murder mystery if they point and click on different objects around the page. In *When the Darkness Presses* (2014), the main character's troubled mental state is manifested in the story by means of intrusive animation. In both cases, the reading experience cannot be duplicated in print, and the reader's activity of reassembling the narrative is endowed with a meaning specific to the text (RYAN, 2005, p. 523).

Carroll is part of a long-standing tradition of transgressive women who create under the shadow of a much debated, highly disputed category: the Female Gothic. The term Female Gothic was coined by Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women* (1976), and defined as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (FITZGERALD, 2009, p. 16). Moers established an essentialist link between the biological sex of the writer and the genre of the text, and her definition has been contested from the beginning (FITZGERALD, 2009). Since then, the Female Gothic has been renegotiated and reformulated numerous times. For some (GONÇALVES; ROSSI, 2018; SANTOS, 2018; WALLACE; SMITH, 2019), it is seen not so much as a tradition made by women as one aligned with women's interests. For others (COPATI, 2018; HAEFELE-THOMAS, 2016), even the category 'women' is considered problematic, and thus inadequate to redefine the concept. They advocate for a 'Queer Female Gothic', which would move beyond a gender binary to embrace a multiplicity of intersecting identities.

The Gothic has always been involved with a series of concerns, which revolve around old and current anxieties (BRUHM, 2007). Historically, the Female Gothic has dealt with anxieties about women's condition in patriarchal societies (HORNER; ZLOSNIK, 2016; WILLIAMS, 1995), a condition which is reflected in themes such as monstrosity and domesticity. The feeling of monstrosity is recurring in the woman artist, for the woman who rejects a submissive role is considered an aberration (GONÇALVES; ROSSI, 2018). The female body itself is seen as disruptive and monstrous, and women are viewed as "ontologically out of order" (CORCORAN, 2020, p. 20). On a similar note, domestic life becomes an imprisoning structure enforced by patriarchal ideology (BOHATA, 2009). "Possession, confinement, penetration, loss of identity are all shadows which haunt the home for women, particularly those who inhabit - or fear inhabiting - the roles of housewife and mother" (WALLACE, 2016, p. 75). As a result, Female Gothic artists express a strong desire

"to burst physical and social barriers and aesthetic categories, and to enact transgression" (MILBANK, 2009, p. 86).

Monstrosity and domesticity are central themes in Emily Carroll's work. By addressing and challenging these and other concerns, Carroll keeps the Gothic updated and able to do what it does best: transgressing. For the Gothic, transgression is important not only as an interrogation of received rules and values, but in the identification, reconstitution, or transformation of limits (BOTTING, 2004, p. 5). In that sense, Carroll's transgressions shape new values and set new limits not only for the Gothic and its concerns, but also for the comics medium. The form of comics provides an invaluable space for nuanced representations of female expression, and "the types of challenging images that we see in women's graphic narrative are not found anywhere else" (CHUTE, 2010, p. 4). This is especially true for alternative and/or underground comics such as Carroll's, where women are allowed to explore their own artistic impulses without having to answer to anyone (CHUTE, 2010, p. 20). Similarly, digital media and its lack of gatekeepers presents a great opportunity for female creators. In the words of Rebecca Cohen, creator of *The Adventures of Gyno-Star*: "I can have total creative control. I don't have to prove myself to editors or publishers who might doubt me; I don't have to change what I'm doing to match what somebody else perceives is good, or funny, or marketable" (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 167).

All in all, the digital comics of Emily Carroll are some of the best examples of what the medium has to offer. By taking advantage of the special affordances of digital media, Carroll expands our comprehension of what can be done within it and crafts chilling, unsettling environments for her readers to dwell in. "This is boom time for narratives that dare to peer into the darkest corners" (ANDERSON, 2021). And what could be darker than the vast and unfettered landscapes of the web?

1.2 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The pathway ends at an open porch with dark stone pillars and a tall somber front door. I stop for a moment to catch my breath and get a better look at the house. Sinister shadowy figures are visible through the window panes. They seem to be curious about my presence and the purpose of my visit. Trying not to panic, I search for my notes and remind myself of the work in hand. What am I doing here, exactly? *I*

am here to investigate the architecture of fear in digital comics. More specifically: *I am here to investigate how the digital affordances available to the comics medium are used by Emily Carroll in the construction of a gothic environment*.

To accomplish this, I have selected six digital comics for analysis: [*His Face All Red*](#) (2010), [*The Prince and the Sea*](#) (2011), [*Margot's Room*](#) (2011), [*The Three Snake Leaves*](#) (2013), [*Out of Skin*](#) (2013), and [*When the Darkness Presses*](#) (2014). All of them can be accessed and read directly on [Carroll's website](#)[6], which also features her illustration art and information about her print projects. The comics have been chosen by their connection to one or more digital affordances (the infinite canvas, hypertext, and/or animation) and their capacity to inspire gothic narrative responses. Also of importance is their potential to build digital *loci horribiles* for the readers to experience, turning them into kinds of gothic occupants themselves.

As a visual medium, comics are intrinsically connected to the domain of graphic narratives (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 15), and their capacity to inspire gothic narrative responses involves much more than just the use of digital affordances. It also entails the skillful manipulation of narrative effects through a series of elements and techniques related to narrative development and artistic expression, such as choice of words, story events, narrative tropes, use of color, use of shapes and lines, page layout, and panel arrangement. These elements and techniques bring graphic narratives to life, and all of them can contribute to the production of fear as an aesthetic experience. That being the case, an analysis of narrative development and artistic expression is also integral to my investigation of Carroll's work.

Another essential aspect of my study involves the selection of a framework, or critical approach. Kukkonen (2013) highlights six possible approaches to comics studies: historical, cultural, psychoanalytical, cognitive, semiotic, and narratological. To better account for the dual nature of the medium, I have opted for the last two; while semiotics deals with the 'graphic' half of the equation, narratology handles its 'narrative' counterpart. Semiotics is the study of signs, and a semiotic approach to comics aims to outline how the different graphic signs (color, lines, shapes, and layout) contribute to the meaning-making process (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 126). Narratology is the study of narratives, and a narratological approach to comics is interested in the stories that they tell and the processes involved in the telling

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[6] For a better and more immersive experience, Carroll's comics should be read on medium to large-sized screens, such as tablets and/or laptops.

(KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 129). Together or separately, semiotics and narratology serve as high-quality tools in the dissection of Carroll's digital comics.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The next chapter, 'comics domain', looks into the development of the comics medium and the semiotic modalities and cultural practices that characterize it. It also examines the differences and similarities between print comics and digital comics, highlighting the additional resources available to the latter. Chapter 3, 'gothic territory', dives into the history of gothic narratives and explores some of the elements that are commonly associated with fear, giving a special emphasis to the narrative tropes, feelings, and states associated with the Gothic. Chapter 4, 'methodological grounds', gives an outline of the narrative effects that can be manipulated for artistic ends. It also discusses a couple of critical approaches to comics studies and establishes a close reading method of analysis that can take both the narrative and the artistic elements into account. Chapter 5, 'the architecture of fear in Emily Carroll's work', performs an analysis of the selected comics to understand how the author explores the distinctive possibilities of the medium to evoke fear as an aesthetic effect. Chapter 6, 'through the backdoor', serves as a conclusion and offers a brief panorama of my research.

2 COMICS DOMAIN

I step inside the house and see myself in a dark, cold hall. Behind me, the doors close suddenly with a bang. Have I walked willingly into a trap? The place looks deserted, but I feel like something is watching me. As I move around the rooms and corridors of this strange place, I see the traces of the people who have lived and died here. Stains and scratches cover the floors and the walls, letters and documents lie around the house, paintings and photographs decorate its many surfaces. If I look closely, they will tell me a story.

The history of comics is as multifaceted as their nature, with multiple origins and ramifications. Some would have us believe that they are the brainchild of a singular mind, an all-powerful father figure incarnated either by Rodolphe Töpffer or Richard Outcault[7] (MILLER, 2007, p. 15). But comics are "a continuous saga (...) there is no point in their history where we can pick up a particular paper and proclaim it Comic Number One" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 245). They were not invented or discovered by a single genius; instead, they have been put together and pulled apart by several hands and minds. Despite their invaluable contributions to the medium, both Töpffer and Outcault are but links in a global network of artistic, cultural, and technological developments spanning many centuries.

Exactly how many centuries is also up for debate. Graphic storytelling is undeniably old; we can see traces of it in ancient cave paintings, in beautifully decorated stained glass windows of religious buildings, and in well-preserved embroidered cloths. Cultural artifacts such as the Lascaux Cave Paintings, the Canterbury Cathedral's Miracle Windows, and the Bayeux Tapestry all tell stories with images in a sequence, and sometimes are even complemented by written words. Is this enough to call them comics? For some, most notably McCloud (2005), yes. For others (GROENSTEEN, 2009a; KUKKONEN, 2013; ROUND, 2014), they may display the features of comics storytelling, but are not comics themselves. They share the modalities of comics, but not their technologies or institutions, which are equally essential. Comics as we see and understand today are a product of the nineteenth century, more or less contemporary with the invention of photography.

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[7] Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846) was a Swiss artist known for his illustrated stories with multiple panels and captions. Richard Outcault (1863-1928) was an American cartoonist and creator of the comic strip *Yellow Kid*.

They are the heirs of caricature art, satirical drawings, and political cartoons developed in the previous centuries, and "a byproduct of the newly emerging mechanized world" (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 73).

Mass production and mechanization played key roles in establishing new ideas about time, space, and movement (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 73). The advent of journalism and the rhythm of news cycles altered conceptions of simultaneity and periodicity, enhancing the notion of a fragmented perception of events (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 73-4). Cast-iron printing presses and cheaply manufactured paper contributed to the proliferation of inexpensive magazines and newspapers, and many of these publications featured illustrations such as cartoons (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 74). Little by little, cartoon language became more elaborated as artists started experimenting with new conventions, like the use of panels (instead of continuous images inside a single frame) and text balloons (instead of captions located under the images).

At the turn of the twentieth century, a wave of newspaper strips helped popularize these conventions and make them familiar to the general public. It takes a while before a sufficient number of original media products can become characteristically similar enough to be thought of as a new media type (ELLESTRÖM, 2021, p. 60), and it was no different for comics. The next step in their development was the expansion of publication formats, moving from newspapers to books. In the 1930s, newspaper comics started reprinting their most popular strips in magazine format (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 106); soon after, comics started publishing new and original material in a variety of genres. Subsequent years would bring a series of significant events, such as the birth of the superhero genre, the rise and fall of gothic and horror comics, the emergence of underground comics, the advent of the graphic novel, the arrival of digital media, and so on, but the main point remains: by the early 1900s, comics had finally adopted both the modalities and cultural practices that would characterize and define the medium until today.

Comics is a broad term which encompasses a number of different formats: comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, gag cartoons, webcomics, webtoons, etc. Although distinct in nature, they all fall under the general category of comics, the term that "people who actually make them use among themselves" (WOLK, 2007, p. 57), myself included. If so, what do these formats have in common in order to be

seen as parts of the same whole? In other words: what are the modalities and cultural practices that characterize and define the comics medium?

A medium is a system of communication that relies on a particular set of technologies and is anchored in society through a number of practices and institutions connected to its creation, distribution, and consumption (KUKKONEN, 2013). Each medium employs its own combination of media modes, or "semiotic modalities" (ELLESTRÖM, 2019, p. 49), the semiotic resources used for communication (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2001). A given mode may be realized in different media, and several modes may be realized in the same medium (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2001, p. 67). In the case of comics, the basic modes of communication are image, text, and sequence (KUKKONEN, 2013). This combination can be verified in all kinds of comics, even silent comics and single-image comics[8], from cartoons to novels, across all sets of technologies and cultural dimensions. "Perhaps we do not need each constituent in each instance of a comic, but all three serve as the basic elements through which what we call 'comics' unfolds" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 5).

The key to understanding the message of a given medium is trying to comprehend its process of production and operation (POSTEMA, 2018, p. 7), that is, to comprehend what the medium and each of its modes can actually do. Specific modes favor particular ways of communicating and carry their own set of capabilities and limitations, or media affordances (KRESS, 2010, p. 84; KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 75). In comics, the meaning-making potential of each mode can corroborate, reinforce, or question that of the other modes; in that case, it is also important to consider how the different modes interact (KUKKONEN, 2011; KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 40). How do comics work with images, text, and sequences? And more importantly, how do these modes affect each other in the process of reading and meaning-making?

As it turns out, image and text affect each other deeply and in a number of ways. The interdependence of image and text is vital to comics; "words (...) contribute to the meaning of the pictures and vice-versa" (HARVEY, 2009, p. 26). There is a clash and collaboration of two different types of signs that can be used

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[8] For a discussion of sequentiality in single-image narratives, see Aggleton (2019, p. 398), Ryan (2012, p. 51), and Postema (2018, p. 51-53).

either to elucidate and illustrate or to contradict and ironize each other[9]. More than that, they can actually perform each other's functions. Traditionally, pictures are expected to represent (show), whereas words are expected to narrate (tell) (NIKOLAJEVA; SCOTT, 2006, p. 1). In comics, however, words and pictures can both show and tell (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 34). Images become a kind of visual language made of readily recognizable signs and conventions; at the same time, the text takes on a visual quality and works as a graphic representation of sound. In essence, "the written text can function like images, and images like written text" (HATFIELD, 2009, p. 133). Rather than confusing what image and text can do, comics capitalize on their overlap and collapse their supposed dichotomy.

The visual and verbal elements of comics are also engaged in a sequential relationship. They are placed "in a narrative chain where the links are spread across space, in a situation of co-presence" (GROENSTEEN, 2007, p. 15). Meaning is produced not only by the integration of image and text, but also out of their relational play as part of a sequence. To better describe this process, Groensteen (GROENSTEEN, 2009b) comes up with the notion of "iconic solidarity". Iconic solidarity is the effect of interdependent panels "that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated (...) and which are plastically and semantically overdetermined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*" (GROENSTEEN, 2009b, p. 128). What he means is that it is not enough to simply align panels in order to produce a narrative comic; they have to be correlated. Panels operate independently but interface together, and this kind of sequentiality is precisely that which enables static media such as comics to tell stories (GROENSTEEN, 2007, p. 17-8; MILLER, 2007, p. 75; POSTEMA, 2018, p. 53).

The capacity to tell stories through the combination of image, text, and sequence is indeed a crucial aspect of the comics medium. But comics are more than just vehicles of communication; as a form of artistic expression, they also have significant aesthetic value. As a consequence, comics employ not only semiotic modalities but also a number of semiotic "categories" (KRESS, 2010, p. 61) related to artistic style. In comics, artistic style involves image, text, and sequence, and refers to all the elements that go into a comic's 'look' and 'feel' (WOLK, 2007, p. 27). These elements include semiotic categories such as color and layout, which are tied

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[9] For a more comprehensive view of the integration between image and text in comics, see Cohn (2013a, p. 1-2).

to the trio of modalities and can be used as additional resources in the construction of meaning.

As a semiotic category, color can be used to perform a variety of informative and/or aesthetic functions (CAIVANO, 1998). As a sign, it can be employed to highlight a physical phenomenon, a physiological mechanism, or a psychological association (CAIVANO, 1998, p. 390). It can also be used expressively to evoke atmosphere or give unity of tone to sequences (MILLER, 2007, p. 95). In many cases, "colors work as symbols as arbitrary and conventional as words" (CAIVANO, 1998, p. 391), and the codes and associations established through them relate to specific contexts. For that reason, the use of color has to be analyzed in a case by case study, taking into consideration the unique style of each artist (CAIVANO, 1998, p. 392).

Another semiotic category which can be employed to convey meaning is layout (COHN, 2021, p. 11; KRESS, 2010, p. 81; POSTEMA, 2018, p. 56). Layout refers to the spatial configuration of a comic, that is, to the way that the visual and verbal elements are organized around the page (COHN, 2016; GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 43). Comics layout always creates a tension between the holistic space of a canvas and the segmented panel units arranged within that canvas (COHN, 2021, p. 9). Spatial configuration goes beyond sequentiality and prompts a global look across the page (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 40), forcing readers to adopt multiple perspectives and move between individual panels, sequences of panels, and the entire page. The page is "traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered" (GROENSTEEN, 2009b, p. 130), inspiring readers to construct meaningful connections between all structural levels.

As mentioned before, these and other semiotic categories are intrinsically related to artistic style. Broadly speaking, contemporary comics can be divided into two distinct traditions of visual representation. "The first grows out of caricature, with its basic principles of simplification and exaggeration, while the other derives from the recreation of physical appearances in realistic illustration" (WITEK, 2012, p. 28). Naturally, an artist does not have to conform to a single style, and many comics have explored the interaction between the two approaches (WITEK, 2012, p. 28). Moreover, artistic styles can also be influenced by one or more visual "dialects"

(COHN, 2013c). For instance: in the United States, many artists draw in a "Kirbyan" or "Barksian" style, inspired by the art of Jack Kirby and Carl Barks[10], respectively.

The notion of visual dialects results from the symbiotic relationship between comics and visual languages. A visual language is "the biological and cognitive capacity that humans have for conveying concepts in the visual-graphic modality", and comics are "a socio-cultural context in which this visual language appears" (COHN, 2012, p. 18). So comics are not a language themselves, but a medium and an art form used as an expression of a visual language (COHN, 2021, p. 5). The same is true for other forms of expression, such as cave paintings or picture books; they are examples of visual language use, but tied to their own unique and specific cultural contexts (COHN, 2012, p. 18). Which brings us back to the matter of characterizing and defining the comics medium: besides their semiotic modalities, we must also consider their cultural practices.

Cultural practices involve the technologies and institutions responsible for comics production and recognition, such as platforms, artists, publishers, retailers, fandom, researchers, etc, as well as the graphic vocabulary of medium-specific features that give comics their unique aspect. The most basic and distinguished of these features is the panel, the smallest unit of meaning-making on the page (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 126). Panels are the isolated portions of space where image and text are located, and serve to focus the attention of the reader on particular elements of the sequence (COHN, 2007, p. 42). They are usually drawn in rectangular shape (GROENSTEEN, 2007, p. 45), but can assume any form the artist desires and/or the format allows.

Panels are either borderless or surrounded by a frame, the lines and contours that enclose them and separate them from other panels. The frame of the page is called a hyperframe (GROENSTEEN, 2007), and both the frame and the hyperframe can range from simple geometric shapes to highly intricate and detailed patterns. The space between the panels is called the gutter. "The gutter can have a literal form (an empty space) or remain virtual (a mere frame separating two panels, or frameless panels, for instance)" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 39). Some authors, such as

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[10] Jack Kirby (1917-1994) worked in mainstream superhero comics and helped popularize an action-packed style full of muscular men and curvy women in dramatic and dynamic poses. Carl Barks (1901-2000), on the other hand, worked for Disney comics and focused on a comic style of visual gags and overt visual metaphors, with simplified and exaggerated characters created primarily by line and contour.

McCloud (2005), give gutters a special significance, while others believe that their value has been inflated. "We must recognize the importance of the panel relation, not the space in between" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 40).

The comics page can also be filled with carriers, the elements responsible for representing speech, thought, and sound effects (COHN, 2013c, p. 35). They are not mandatory conditions for the existence of comics, but emblematic possibilities of expression. The most common types of carriers are the text balloon and the caption. Text balloons are used in the representation of a character's speech or thought, and are attached to their roots through a tail. Captions represent verbal narration or a character's inner dialogue, and remain unattached to their sources. Sometimes, however, their functions can be modified or become interchangeable. "Speech in comics can (...) occur in captions, verbal narration can take place in text balloons, the narrator's and the character's voices may intermingle, and neither verbal narration nor direct speech or thought must be placed in boxes or balloons" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 220). Moreover, "text in comics can occur outside these two categories in the image background or as part of the image" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 220)".

Besides the graphic vocabulary of medium-specific features, there are also a number of narrative elements that behave in specific ways when applied to comics. These elements are related to the notions of narrative agency and storyworld, and will be properly examined in the methodological chapter. In the rest of this chapter, the focus changes to another set of medium-specific features: the ones related to digital media and the world of digital comics.

2.1 THE WORLD OF DIGITAL COMICS

Just like their print counterparts, the history of digital comics is marked not by a single origin or starting point, but by a series of experiments and developments. The growth of digital comics is tied to the advent of the World Wide Web, "the network of computers that serves hypertext documents via the internet" (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 225). Thanks to hypertext, web pages can link with other documents and display not only text but also image, video, and audio, and it is precisely this functionality that leads to digital comics (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 14). Before the web, communication on the internet was done entirely through text. Without access to

other kinds of graphic resources, people started using forms of textual notation such as these :-) to convey or illustrate their intent (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 18). These symbols gave birth to the first emoticons, and their combinations with written text can be considered as kinds of proto-digital comics, the first attempts to combine image, text, and sequence on electronic documents.

Digital comics started appearing around the web as soon as the early 90s and reflected the people who populated it at the time, i.e., gamers and technophiles (FRANCO, 2001; KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 21). This first generation of digital settlers and explorers contributed to define the primary tone and style of digital comics (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 21). It is impossible and actually unnecessary to map out everything that was published at that time and to pinpoint the true digital comics pioneers[11] (FRANCO, 2001, p. 63). What matters is that, little by little, comics artists started experimenting with digital technology such as programming languages, animation tools, and hyperlink-based interfaces (NODING, 2020, p. p. 12-13). Some of them ventured into CD-ROM territory to take advantage of its multimedia resources, but the enterprise did not last long and died out in a few years (SÁ; VERGUEIRO, 2015, p. 86-90).

In the late 90s, as more and more people started accessing the internet, the number of digital comics creators and consumers increased exponentially. The growth of personal computers facilitated digital comics production and distribution, and inspired the proliferation of small publishers and independent artists (FRANCO, 2001, p. 41). Blogging tools and similar functionalities also helped, as creators no longer had to be interface designers in order to produce a comic. Comics started linking to each other's pages, sharing audiences, and influencing each other artistically (NODING, 2020, p. 11). In other words, they started developing a culture. At this point, roughly a hundred years after print comics had established themselves as a medium, digital comics secured cultural practices of their own and achieved exactly the same.

A series of breakthroughs would come with the turn of the 21st century. Cultural practices were reinforced by the emergence of digital comics collectives, places where readers could keep up with and/or discover hundreds of new comics

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[11] However some of them claim to be "the internet's first comic strip" (*Where the Buffalo Roam*, by Hans Bjordhal), or "the world's longest running daily webcomic" (*Kevin & Kell*, by Bill Holbrook), or "the first long form webcomic" (*Argon Zark!*, by Charlie Parker), and other self-important titles like that.

and artists (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 27). As a consequence, digital comics got more and more diversified and specialized. "With the much larger audience provided by the internet, readers could gather into smaller subsections and still be substantial enough in numbers to support their favorite comics" (NODING, 2020, p. 17). In the 2000s, digital comics gained even more critical and popular recognition, as they started to be nominated for - and win - important comics awards and be shared through social media. Nowadays, there are countless digital comics being published in a variety of languages, and many people read digital comics on a daily basis (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 6).

Like their print cousins, the term 'digital comics' is somewhat hazy; ambiguity, as it seems, runs in the family. They have been given different names, including "internet comics", "cyber comics", and "e-comics" (FRANCO, 2001, p. 104), and they encompass distinct formats, such as webcomics, webtoons, and appcomics. They are still part of the comics tribe, and everything that has been said about print comics should also apply to digital comics. At the same time, they belong to a different branch and exhibit their own characteristics, potentialities, and limitations. Considering all that, what is it that makes them unique?

Kukkonen (2013, p. 177) describes digital comics as "comics which are distributed in digital form through the World Wide Web. Sometimes, they are also created entirely in digital form and make use of its particular affordances". This definition focuses both on distribution and production, and rightly so; but it fails to account for the differences between digital comics and digitized comics. Digitized comics are nothing more than digital versions of print comics (PETERSEN, 2011, p. 228). They are designed and published with the print format in mind, but are also available to be read online, or on a screen.

Digital comics, on the other hand, are created with the digital format in mind (GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 68) or "made first for the web with no originary print version" (MONFRED, 2018, p. 122). If they have a primary print version, they have to be more than just "the 'same expression' in a new manifestation (or format)" (AGGLETON, 2018, p. 397). "A print-born comic that has been adapted into digital format can be considered a digital comic if it is a 'new expression' of the original work" (AGGLETON, 2018, p. 397). In this case, 'same expression' means "electronic presentation of a print comic", and 'new expression' means "use of digital technology" (AGGLETON, 2018, p. 397).

The comics on Emily Carroll's website, for instance, are undoubtedly created with the digital format in mind, even if some of their parts are actually made on paper. Carroll illustrates her comics on paper, then scans and assembles panels on the computer and colors everything on Photoshop. All through this process, she keeps "the screen in mind and how people are going to be viewing it" (HUBBARD, 2016). In her own words: "I don't think I would transfer them to print because they were designed for the screen. Some of them could be transferred but others are specifically supposed to be read online" (HUBBARD, 2016).

There are, of course, many similarities between print and digital comics, such as the basic terminology (panel, frame, gutter, carrier, etc), the main semiotic modes (image, text, and sequence), and the degree of narrativity, or "the capacity to inspire a narrative response" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 2). But there are also a number of important differences concerning their processes of production and distribution, some of which can end up affecting content and reading experience. The most obvious differences have to do with their respective reading materials. Print comics are usually bound into a book-format publication and have a fixed-page layout which will remain more or less the same in any edition (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 80). In contrast, digital comics are stored digitally and can only be read through an electronic device, like a cell phone, tablet, or laptop. Different devices have different screen sizes, resolutions, and orientations, which can impact how much of a web page can be seen at a time (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 51). As a result, layout may vary from one device to another.

However, what truly differentiates between print and digital comics are the additional affordances available to digital media, particularly the ones related to interactivity and access to multimedia content (BATINIC, 2016, p. 80; FRANCO, 2001; GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 68). Interactivity is the computer's ability to respond to user input, and multimedia content refers to the multiple sensory and semiotic channels available to digital systems (RYAN, 2005, p. 515). In digital comics, interactivity involves a series of choices and commands that go beyond the usual action of simply flipping through the pages (FRANCO, 2001, p. 92). It can also involve actions like scrolling (moving content up, down, left, or right on the screen), hovering (positioning a pointer over a specific element on the screen), and the point

and click[12], all of which can contribute to more immersive reading experiences. "The web reader uses the screen like a moving frame, a mobile windowing system that gradually reveals, as it moves, new twists and turns and, in some cases, new forks on the road" (GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 73).

These actions are made possible through the use of hypertext and the infinite canvas. The term 'infinite canvas' was coined by McCloud (2005) to highlight the fact that physical boundaries do not restrict the size and shape of a canvas on a computer screen. "Liberated from print and paper, the very physical shape of a comic is thrown wide open" (GRAVETT, 2005, p. 184). At least in theory, a web page can be as small or as large as needed to contain a comics page of any conceivable size. The infinite canvas "allows for a multitude of creative and dynamic layouts, along with novel navigational methods (COHN, 2013c, p. 105). Thanks to hypertext and its realm of interlinked documents, a digital comic can also have far more pages than would be possible in print. By pointing and clicking on elements around the screen, readers can explore (once again, theoretically) an infinite number of canvases within canvases.

Besides hypertext and the infinite canvas, digital comics also have additional multimedia content at their disposal, such as animation and audio. For some authors, like Brunetti (2011) and Groensteen (2013), the addition of animation and audio to comics is almost a sacrilegious act. They believe that their inclusion compromises reader's freedom and destabilizes the fictional world of comics. It is not an irrational belief: comics are a static medium, whereas animation and audio are known for taking temporal control away from the audience. What they fail to realize, however, is that it does not have to be like this. In Carroll's digital comics, for instance, animation always comes in short, cyclical sequences, "in which the last frame leads seamlessly back to the first" (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 5). These loop animations allow readers to remain in control of the reading rhythm and the rate of information absorption (MARTIN, 2017, p. 7). They have the choice of how long to spend on each moment and, to some degree, what order to view those moments (AGGLETON, 2018, p. 401). The same is true for audio: when used in the same limited way as loop animation, it can enrich the reading experience and add a new

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[12] In touchpad devices, the point and click action is replaced by tapping (moving a pointer to a certain location on the screen and then pressing a button).

perceptive dimension to comics without turning them into a different medium altogether.

As we can see, the challenge of exploring the affordances available to digital comics is also a technical one (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 97). Digital comics artists are not only authors, but "designers of narrative experiences" (RYAN, 2005, p. 516). The use of the infinite canvas, hypertext, animation, and audio require additional skills and specialized knowledge other than artistic and storytelling skills. An extra layer of difficulty lies in exploring the format and, at the same time, making it accessible to readers. Visual languages continue to evolve, and their understanding requires a visual fluency, a proficiency acquired through exposure and practice (COHN, 2021, p. 3). Digital authors/designers have to ask themselves whether the distinctive properties of digital media are a boost or an obstacle to the creation of narrative meaning. When a digital comic achieves narrative coherence, does it do so by working with or against its medium?

I suspect that Emily Carroll keeps similar questions in mind when working on her digital comics, for she explores the affordances of digital media without deviating too much from a recognizable comics aesthetic. She also does her exploration gradually, working with new affordances only after mastering the previous ones. By doing that, she gives herself and her readers enough time and opportunities to develop a digital visual fluency. Like a skilled tutor, she teaches them how to scroll, how to point and click, how to look at loop animations, and, from time to time, how to be properly scared. "We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones" (ANDERSON, 2021). If that is the case, we must also ask ourselves: What are the horrors of our digital age?

3 GOTHIC TERRITORY

I believe I now have a bigger picture of what has happened in this house. Its vestiges of life have told me a fascinating story. However, not all traces of its past occupants are readily visible to visitors. Some of them are kept hidden in chests, safes, and drawers, or behind locked doors. Some may only be found through secret and winding passages beyond dead ends, old bookcases, and other false walls. If I want to grasp a fuller scope of this place, I must grope into its darkest corners. I must step into the territory of the Gothic.

Studying the Gothic is like wandering through a labyrinth of contradictory concepts and ideas. What exactly is the Gothic? Is it a genre, an aesthetic, or something else entirely? What are its defining features? What is its relationship with horror? Are they the same thing or, perhaps, subsets of one another? Authors do not usually see eye to eye on any of these topics, and give distinct, sometimes even conflicting, answers. However, many of them (BOTTING, 1996; GONZÁLEZ, 2019; SENCINDIVER, 2010) seem to highlight the fact that the Gothic is designed to produce an emotional effect in its audience. If that is the case, an investigation into the nature of the Gothic ought to begin by identifying that effect.

Can you guess what that is? It is something we all know pretty well, and have known all our lives. The Gothic is concerned with the production of *fear* and the feelings associated with it (FRANÇA, 2017; PUNTER, 1996; RATA, 2014; UGELVIG, 2014). "The Gothic concerns itself with the romantic portrayal and exploration of fear in all its forms; fear being both a widely communal and deeply personal syndrome (UGELVIG, 2014, p. 2). Fear comes in a variety of forms, and it can range from slight apprehension to sheer terror (EKMAN; FRIESEN, 2003, p. 49). People fear harm, be it physical, psychological, or both; sometimes, people feel fear in advance of real or imaginary harm, which can be more miserable than the harm itself (EKMAN; FRIESEN, 2003, p. 47). In any case, fear is a terrible experience, and "probably the most traumatic and toxic of all emotions" (EKMAN; FRIESEN, 2003, p. 48). And if that is so, then why would anyone or anything be concerned with the production of fear, even if only as an aesthetic effect?

People need channels through which they can explore and reflect their own fears (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 25), and the Gothic offers them that. The Gothic has become an artistic tradition that enables societies to express their fears through

fictional narratives (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 117). It provides imagery to address individual and collective anxieties (DAVENPORT, 1998, p. 1), showing people ways to deal imaginatively with the horrors of the world around them. Grueling, painful, sickening ways, but effective ones nonetheless. Like a cleansing fever coursing through our societal body, the Gothic debilitates the host to better fight the infection.

The production of fear in gothic narratives relies in part on terrifying their own characters. Such narratives teach us the appropriate ways to respond to them, and characters' reactions to the events in the story serve as a set of instructions to the emotive responses of the audience (CARROLL, 1990; CLOVER, 1987; WILLIAMS, 1991). Fear is usually accompanied by changes in the body (EKMAN; FRIESEN, 2003, p. 48), and it can be represented by characters cringing, recoiling, shuddering, screaming, wincing, sobbing, and more. As characters are confronted with frightening events, audiences are supposed to follow the progression of the story and mimic some of their reactions. Sometimes, the emotional response is so intense that it stays with the audience long after they have had contact with the narrative. A student of mine once said that, after watching *Psycho* (1960), she would never again close the curtains around her when taking a shower in hotel rooms. And how many people have thought twice about going into the ocean after *Jaws* (1975) was released?

Of course, responses are supposed to converge, not duplicate exactly. Gothic narratives do not want to frighten their audiences to death or madness, only to move them "out of a normal physical state to an agitated one, one marked by inner movings" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 24). Even if they do not become physically agitated, they might get mentally restless by imagining themselves in the characters' situations. Also, different people will experience different sensations, and feelings "may vary within a single subject on different occasions" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 25-26). Emotional states cannot be associated with a unique physical or mental feeling, or even a recurrent pattern of feelings. Every member of the audience will respond in their own way each time they are exposed to fear.

In Western literature, the gothic fever seems to have started with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole (ANDERSON, 2021; COLAVITO, 2008; ROUND, 2014). Set in a haunted castle full of vaults, tombs, caverns, trap doors, secret passages, locked chambers, and winding staircases, the novel tells the story of a young noblewoman persecuted by a tyrannical lord.

Characters move to-and-fro while trying to interpret a series of prophecies and visions related to the history of the place, and come across a series of extraordinary sightings and apparitions, from giant helmets and moving portraits to bleeding statues and talking skeletons. In *Otranto*, Walpole brought together many of the elements and techniques that would come to characterize the Gothic as a literary genre, such as revenge plots, ill omens, ancient settings, supernatural events, the illusion of authenticity, the breaking of taboos, and a style of excess (ROUND, 2014). More importantly, it was the first novel to combine these elements and techniques in the service of fear (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 41).

It was not, however, conceived in a literary vacuum (DAVENPORT, 1998, p. 133). "Literary genres do not emerge overnight, nor do they arise in cultural isolation" (HALE, 2002, p. 63). Before *Otranto*, a "quasi-gothic" (WILLIAMS, 1995, p. 13) or "proto-gothic" (DAVENPORT, 1998, p. 135) tradition had been developing in Europe as early as *Beowulf*, and traces of a gothic bloodline can be detected in *The Fairie Queene* (1590), Jacobean drama, Milton's poetry, Anne Finch's poetry, Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), The Graveyard School, and *The Adventures of Ferdinand, Count Fathom* (1753) (DAVENPORT, 1998; WILLIAMS, 1995). It is also imperative to recognize Ann Radcliffe's aesthetic legacy, who took the newly-born tradition in her arms and transformed the material from *Otranto* "into a deeply meditated narrative structure" (MILES, 2009, p. 50) that culminated in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). If Walpole was the literary Gothic's forefather, Radcliffe was its loving and nurturing mother.

In hindsight, it is plain to see that gothic fiction was born and raised in Western literature to considerable acclaim and success, reaching its maturity by the late 1800s in English-speaking countries. After *Otranto* and *Udolpho*, several novels kept the gothic tradition alive and secured its place as a literary genre. During the nineteenth century, literature produced some of its finest and most enduring gothic specimens, with works like *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Dracula* (1897), and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) (RATA, 2014). But gothic fiction was never meant to be restricted to a literary school or to a historical period (BOTTING, 1996, p. 9).

Colavito (2008) sees the Gothic as a subcategory of the horror genre, as the first wave of what would later give way to different periods in horror fiction history. For him (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 12-13), gothic fiction, which he calls "gothic horror", ended in the 1800s and was superseded by other kinds of horror, like the spiritualist,

the cosmic, the psycho-atomic, and so on. Other authors (BOTTING, 1996; PUNTER, 1996; RATA, 2014; ROUND, 2014), however, know better. The Gothic is an insidious and ever-mutating tradition that insinuates itself into different media and contemporary times (PUNTER, 1996). "Today [the] Gothic has morphed into multiple genres and has contaminated others" (RATA, 2014, p. 104), even if its many forms are not always recognized as such. It is not consigned to the past, but "composed of very real present fears and anxieties" (PUNTER, 1996, p. 10). The Gothic is dead, long live the Gothic!

Some see the Gothic popping up everywhere, anytime; others believe that it has a clear limit that should not be crossed. How to account for both views and the myriad of nuanced approaches that fit in-between? By differentiating between the Gothic as a *genre* and the Gothic as a *mode*. A genre is a kind of narrative with "particular character types, particular conflicts, and standard situations, as well as particular probabilities of actions and particular ways in which the 'reality' of the storyworld can be represented" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 171). Authors may sometimes disagree on the specific particularities of the Gothic, but few would deny that the definition applies. In addition to that, the Gothic is a mode; not a media mode, a semiotic resource such as image or text, but a mode of telling stories, a mode in which a piece of art can be made (ROUND, 2014, p. 7). That is precisely what allows the Gothic to subsume other genres and cross different media, from medieval architecture to contemporary gaming, from graveyard poetry to modern dance, from the eighteenth-century novel to internet fiction. They get "infected by gothic anxiety" (ROUND, 2014, p. 156) and are contaminated by a gothic aesthetic.

To better illustrate that, let us consider the case of visual media. In cinema, for instance, gothic can be found across all genres, especially horror and melodrama, but there is no such genre as 'gothic film' (REYES, 2019, p. 395-6). Instead, there are only "gothic images and gothic plots and gothic characters and even gothic styles within film" (REYES, 2019, p. 395-6). The same is true for other kinds of visual media, such as comics: what we call 'gothic comics' are horror comics, or fantasy comics, or any other kind of genre comics, that have been infected by a recognizable gothic aesthetic. Like cinema, comics have offered their audiences a way to visualize and re-imagine the Gothic. In turn, the Gothic has presented comics with some of the best and most acclaimed works ever produced in the medium, like *Swamp Thing* (1982), *Hellblazer* (1988), and *The Sandman* (1988).

The Gothic is a territory in dispute; a no man's land. It can be found in a variety of different media and be approached both as a genre and as a mode. At the same time, the Gothic is continuously revamping itself and invading new territories. Naturally, it spread to digital media as soon as it was available, taking advantage of the relatively low-cost and unconstrained domain of the web. In these new landscapes, gothic narratives are still feeling their way around and choosing their victims with care. Even so, gothic digital comics can already be found on any number of independent and specialized websites, and have also proven to be some of the best samples of what their specific medium can produce.

3.1 GOTHIC NARRATIVE TROPES

A recognizable gothic aesthetic relies on a series of traits, the recurring elements and techniques that characterize it as a genre or as a mode. These traits may vary from medium to medium and artist to artist, but some of them are more constant than others. They also refer to different facets of the gothic experience, such as style, atmosphere, themes, and narrative tropes. Some of the Gothic's most prominent traits are a style of excess, an atmosphere of darkness, ruin, and decay, themes of knowledge and transgression, and the narrative tropes of the *locus horribilis*, the monster, and the haunting (BOTTING, 1996; DAVENPORT, 1998; FRANÇA, 2017; PUNTER, 1996; RATA, 2014; ROUND, 2019; SENA, 2021).

3.1.1 The haunting

In gothic narratives, the trope of the haunting is connected to the notion of *trauma*. The notion of trauma is described by Caruth (1996, p. 3) as "the repeated infliction of a wound". Not any wound, but a wound caused by catastrophic events that have not been fully assimilated and seem to repeat themselves for those who have survived them. "Trauma describes an overwhelming experience (...) in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (CARUTH, 1996, p. 11). To be traumatized, then, "is to be possessed by an image" (CHUTE, 2010, p. 3), or, in other words, to be haunted by it.

Caruth's trauma theory has been criticized for its socio-political limitations (BUELENS; DURRANT; EAGLESTONE, 2014), but recognized for its capacity to establish a dialogue with the Gothic (BRUHM, 2007; ROUND, 2014). Gothic narratives are a response to social trauma (ROUND, 2014, p. 15), and gothic protagonists are consistently traumatized: they "usually experience some horrifying event that profoundly affects them, destroying (at least temporarily) the norms that structure their lives and identities" (BRUHM, 2007, p. 268). These events become strange and potentially terrifying, returning in a ghostly manner to affect present actions (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 117-8). Moreover, trauma theory is "an attempt to trace the inexhaustible shapes both of human suffering and of our responses to suffering" (BUELENS; DURRANT; EAGLESTONE, 2014, p. 7). Coincidentally or not, this is also one of the Gothic's main functions.

Gothic hauntings are the intrusive phenomena, the distortions, nightmares, and obsessions that proceed from the traumatizing experiences described or depicted in gothic narratives. They frequently take the form of monsters (HAGLE, 2002, p. 2) or *loci horribiles* (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 16), or are deeply connected to one or both of them. Sometimes, monsters and *loci horribiles* are themselves the survivors of traumatic experiences. In such cases, they carry with them a debt that has to be paid by the present to the past, usually at the price of characters' lives or sanities.

3.1.2 The monster

The monster is one of the defining objects of "art-horror" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 12), meaning the horror produced in the arts as opposed to real-life horrors such as tsunamis and genocides. To qualify as monsters, creatures have to meet three criteria (CARROLL, 1990): (1) they have to be supernatural or sci-fi, that is, they cannot be found in real life; (2) they have to be threatening; and (3) they have to be disgusting. The first condition refers to "any being not believed to exist now according to contemporary science" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 27), like vampires, zombies, or werewolves. The second means that they have to be either lethal or dangerous, physically or cognitively threatening, like Vecna from *Stranger Things* (2016) or the cosmic entities from *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928). They tend to kill those who encounter them or render them "insane, mad, deranged and so on" (CARROLL,

1990, p. 34). And the third criterion states that the creatures are in some way impure, beings who cannot be normally categorized. They are indescribable, incomplete, formless, or inconceivable, when not outright repulsive, like the parasitic extraterrestrial life-form of *The Thing* (1982) or the unseen adversaries from *Bird Box* (2014). Naturally, some monsters are more threatening than disgusting, and vice-versa; but all three aspects have to be present for any given creature to deserve the title of monster. Characters such as Mike Wazowski and James P. Sullivan from *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), or any member of The Addams Family, for instance, all lack the 'threatening' trait. They might be *monstrous*, but they are not truly *monsters*.

There are five basic structures for representing monsters in narratives (CARROLL, 1990, p. 43-52): fusion, fission, magnification, massing, and horrific metonymy. A fusion figure is "a composite that unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 43), like a creature made from the parts of different animals. With fission, "the contradictory elements are (...) distributed over different, though metaphysically related, identities" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 45-6), as in the case of humans and wolves who inhabit the same body at different times. Magnification and massing increase the level of threat and disgust for beings already considered dangerous and/or impure, like a giant spider or an army of little ones. As for horrific metonymy, the "being is surrounded by objects that we antecedently take to be objects of (...) phobia" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 51), like a vampire lying in a coffin. Once again, these major structures are not mutually exclusive, and may appear in any combination.

Monsters are metaphorical embodiments of our fears, desires, and anxieties (COHEN, 1996; FRANÇA, 2017). They are usually "native to places outside of and/or unknown to the human world" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 35), and incorporate "the outside, the beyond" (COHEN, 1996, p. 5). As such, one of their main functions in narrative is to embody *otherness*, establishing and reframing the boundaries between the human and the inhuman (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 118). They warn us against the risks of crossing such boundaries (SENA, 2021, p. 41), and ask us "to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression" (COHEN, 1996, p. 20).

3.1.3 The *locus horribilis*

Settings are a fundamental element in most narratives. They establish the situation and the nature of the world in which the events of the story take place, communicate a sense of time and place for the actions depicted, instigate plot development through contrasting or dramatic change, and provide an atmosphere that affects emotional responses (NIKOLAJEVA; SCOTT, 2006, p. 61). Some are integral to the narrative and an indispensable component of the story; others are only backdrop, and not all that relevant for the plot (NIKOLAJEVA; SCOTT, 2006, p. 70). If a particular setting reveals itself as integral to the narrative and inspires emotional responses related to fear, then it is likely we are in the presence of a *locus horribilis*.

The *locus horribilis* can be found across all media and gothic subgenres, and stands out as one of its main landmarks (FRANÇA, 2017; SENA, 2021; SENCINDIVER, 2010). The word 'gothic' referred to architecture long before it was borrowed from literature (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 3), so its link with a sense of space actually predates fiction[13]. The architectural landscape is a key feature of the Gothic, and the common thread between *The Castle of Otranto* and the digital comics of Emily Carroll. "With the dispersal of gothic elements among genres, it leaves its recognizable spatial traces" (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 30).

The archetypal manifestation of the *locus horribilis* is a "spooky old house or castle" (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 412), but its shape and nature can vary significantly depending on the medium, different subgenres within that medium, and the specific narrative or story being told. In slasher movies and rape-and-revenge movies, for instance, it refers to a place where characters find themselves unprotected and in danger. More often than not, such places are also unfamiliar and decrepit, and are inhabited by individuals or families just as terrible (CLOVER, 1987). In the slasher film, it "may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim" (CLOVER, 1987, p. 31). In the rape-and-revenge film, it is "a place where rules of civilization do not obtain" (CLOVER, 1987, p. 124), usually represented by the country in opposition to the city. Some classic examples of this sort are the suburban houses in *Halloween* (1978), Camp Crystal Lake in *Friday the 13th* (1980), and Litchfield County in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978).

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[13] Before writing *Otranto*, Walpole built for himself the house of Strawberry Hill, a gothic villa that may as well have served as inspiration for his book.

As a general rule, the *locus horribilis* refers to any place, natural or man-made, that evokes in the characters and/or in the audience feelings related to the emotion of fear[14]. In literature, famous examples include the castle of Otranto, the Wuthering Heights farmhouse (and the moorlands around it), Dracula's castle, and the Bly country house. A more modern literary example is the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (1977), "a haunted house blown up to a colossal scale, returning it (...) to the dimensions and the functions of the gothic castle of two centuries past" (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 307). From cinema, we have places like the Manderley mansion in *Rebecca* (1940), the spaceship Nostromo in *Alien* (1979), and the remote island in *The Lighthouse* (2019). Also, the Upside Down in the *Stranger Things* television series, the mansion in the *Resident Evil* video game (1996), the marshlands of Louisiana in the *Swamp Thing* comic book, and so many others.

Houses, castles, abbeys, prisons, hotels, factories, laboratories, graveyards, ships, urban areas, rural areas, summer camps, spaceships, natural ecosystems, parallel worlds, you name it. Whatever shape the *locus horribilis* decides to take, the setting itself is not as important as the atmosphere and the power to evoke certain responses (WILLIAMS, 1995). "Very different dream images may express virtually identical dream thoughts" (WILLIAMS, 1995, p. 39). What then are the common denominators of all these distinct manifestations? What is it that makes them so horrible and how do they evoke feelings related to fear?

To begin with, the typical *locus horribilis* has a rich history of violence. "The dismal gothic construction usually contains a horrible secret, ancestral curse, or mysterious crime that forebodes and insistently ensures its spectral return" (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 16). Practically all of the examples mentioned before will conform to this notion. Alfonso the Good was poisoned and had his title and land usurped (*The Castle of Otranto*), Catherine Earnshaw died in childbirth (*Wuthering Heights*), the Count and his brides fed on the blood of their victims (*Dracula*), Miss Jessel took her own life (*The Turn of the Screw*), countless guests killed each other at the Overlook Hotel (*The Shining*), the first Mrs. de Winter died in mysterious circumstances (*Rebecca*), Jason drowned in the lake (*Friday the 13th*), the Upside

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[14] Not all authors agree that the *locus horribilis* can take on endless forms. Barros (2020), for instance, agrees that setting and décor are the most relevant aspects of gothic fiction, but believes that they should be marked by culture, or by the signs of history. In that sense, natural places such as jungles, deserts, and oceans, however frightening, would not count as truly horrible.

Down was probed and invaded by another dimension (*Stranger Things*), the population of Raccoon City fell victim to a zombie plague (*Resident Evil*), Alec Holland burned to death (*Swamp Thing*). In a way, these secrets, curses, or crimes are almost like myths of origin, or rites of passage from its transformation from *amoenus*[15] to *horribilis*.

Loci horribiles can also be just as dangerous and impure as monsters and, as a consequence, just as frightening. They too can be physically or cognitively threatening and/or difficult to categorize, killing or disturbing their occupants deeply. The difference lies in the cause of fear, which is essentially a response to physical surroundings (UGELVIG, 2014). The *loci horribiles* of gothic narratives express the discomfort and strangeness that characters and audiences experience in the physical and social environment they inhabit. As oppressive narrative spaces, they affect and determine the character and the actions of their occupants (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 117).

Occupants of *loci horribiles* vary greatly between different media and subgenres, in accordance with their own conventions and tropes. In slasher movies, for instance, they are commonly the killer, who hides and stalks in the shadows, and the groups of teenagers who end up getting slashed; in feminist gothic novels, we usually have a patriarchal figure and the heroine that he forces into submission; in haunted house narratives, residents generally include a supernatural creature or force and the unsuspecting families that said creature/force tries to hurt, possess, or scare away. Different character roles are attached to different sets of feelings and states, such as entrapment, disorientation, and anxiety related to the figure of the monster.

3.1.3.1 Entrapment, disorientation, and monster-induced anxiety

A particular emotional experience of confined space remains central to many definitions of the Gothic (SENCINDIVER, 2010; WASSON, 2019). "Gothic fiction lingers at the duplicitous thresholds dividing inside from outside: doors, gates, locks, and keys are desperately used to protect the menacing from without" and even more often "to enforce claustrophobic confinement and separation from the outside world"

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[15] From the Latin, 'pleasant'.

(SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 7). *Loci horribiles* often represent the danger of being shut in and cut off, as well as the fear of intrusion by some external force, playing with our fears of separation and of unification (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 13).

In gothic narratives, characters feel trapped both by their surroundings and by the circumstances around them. Most *loci horribiles* are already physically confining, but a series of conditions can make characters feel doubly trapped. Gothic heroines, for instance, are commonly trapped by patriarchal conventions, as Cathy Linton (*Wuthering Heights*) and the second Mrs. De Winter (*Rebecca*) will promptly attest. Many other characters are also trapped by socioeconomic reasons, either by duty or by necessity, like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and the keepers in *The Lighthouse*. Poor Jack Torrance (*The Shining*), all work and no play, is trapped by his financial situation, the weather conditions, and the evil will of the hotel, all at the same time.

Loci horribiles also threaten characters and audiences with physical and mental disorientation (RATA, 2014; SENCINDIVER, 2010). They are often chaotic, labyrinthine, or unending, in a state of "excess that cannot be processed by a rational framework, be contained in a semantic notion or within the individual's gaze and grasp" (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 9). "The Gothic victim in flight (...) inadvertently and repeatedly returns back to the very same venue. [It is an] incident of spatial disorientation, futile escape, and forward movement converted into endless repetition" (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 23). Unable to navigate or make sense of their environment, they are rendered helpless in spatial systems beyond their control (SENCIDINVER, 2010, p. 1-2).

Sometimes, spatial disorientation is yet another layer of entrapment. To escape from her unwanted suitor and the confines of the castle of Otranto, Isabella has to move through "several intricate cloisters" and a "long labyrinth of darkness" (WALPOLE, 1764, p. 16). Other times, spatial disorientation can lead to strong mental confusion, or even madness; in such cases, it is a danger in itself. Like the character of Yossarian in chapter 39 from *Catch-22* (1961), wandering around the dark and ruined streets of Rome and coming across a series of brutal and disturbing scenes which make him question his own sanity and the reality of the situation. *Catch-22* is not a gothic novel, but this chapter, titled "The Eternal City", was nonetheless written in a truly gothic mode.

Apart from generating feelings of entrapment and disorientation, *loci horribiles* may sometimes play with anxieties related to the figure of the monster. Such places commonly hide and/or breed monsters, and the monsters' presence or mere suggestion can also heighten the feelings of entrapment and disorientation. As we know, we fear encountering monsters because they are threatening and impure. They can kill us in gruesome ways, like Mrs. Voorhees and her famous son in *Friday the 13th*, render us insane, like the Mind Flayer in *Stranger Things*, or turn us into monsters ourselves, like Count Dracula and his vampire spawns. Admittedly, *loci horribiles*, especially sentient evil ones like the Overlook Hotel, can do some or all of these things by themselves, without the aid of monsters. In the course of *The Shining*, the infamous hotel smashes Jack's face with a mallet, takes over people's minds and produces a veritable horde of vengeful ghosts, all by itself. Nevertheless, by adding the monster element to their environments, *loci horribiles* go deeper into the territory of fear and deliver a truly dreadful scenario.

3.2 THE UNCANNY AND THE SUBLIME

The Gothic relies heavily on atmosphere and its triad of narrative tropes to incite a pair of psychological experiences that derive from fear: the *uncanny* and the *sublime*. Freud (1919, p. 1-2) places the uncanny within the boundaries of the "terrible", that "class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar". More to the point, it is the fear provoked by something familiar that has become strange, or something strange that takes on aspects of the familiar (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 126; RATA, 2014, p. 108). To illustrate the uncanny, Freud (1919, p. 11) comes up with truly gothic examples: "when one is lost in a forest in high altitudes, caught (...) by the mountain mist, and when every endeavor to find the marked or familiar path ends again and again in a return to one and the same spot", or "when one wanders about in a dark, strange room, looking for the door or the electric switch, and collides for the hundredth time with the same piece of furniture".

The uncanny exists in real life and even more so in fiction (FREUD, 1919, p. 18), thriving remarkably under gothic fiction. Through the depiction of mental and physical spaces, the Gothic makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar, invading not only physical familiar spaces but also familiar concepts and structures

(UGELVIG, 2014). "The Gothic operates through internalization/externalization of fear, and does so often through spatial dualities, particularly, as we shall see, through home/away, [and] domestic/foreign" (UGELVIG, 2014, p. 3). Monsters and *loci horribiles* are examples of liminal spaces; they stand at the thresholds of home/away, domestic/foreign, safe/unsafe, familiar/unfamiliar, life/death, etc, constantly transitioning between two states of being. In that transition, "when the banal and homely everyday is disrupted, an opening is created from which the strange and alien irrupts, and one can 'catch sight of' the uncanny" (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 24).

Sometimes, the forces that threaten are also the forces that amaze and awe (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 175). When encountered from a position of safety, the overwhelming properties of dangerous objects can produce a special kind of delight (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 11-12). This delight, which "pertains to the sense of being liberated from the previous perceptual confinement and experiencing a feeling of transcendence" (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 12), is the root of the sublime. The concept of the sublime was theorized by Edmund Burke, and it inaugurated a new dimension to the relation between fear and works of fiction (PUNTER, 1996, p. 39). It connected the products of human knowledge and objects of art to nature (SÁ, 2010, p. 52), conferring on horror a major narrative role (PUNTER, 1996, p. 40). The sublime can be described as "an apprehension of danger in nature or art without the immediate risk of destruction" (CLERY, 2002, p. 28). It is characterized by extreme obscurity, vastness, or emptiness (WASSON, 2019, p. 37), like a magnificent night sky, a raging ocean, or a barren wasteland. Sublime environments possess "a quality of awesome grandeur" (BALDICK, 2001, p. 247-8), and inspire "an overwhelming force that takes control of one's soul and fills one with intense and all-consuming feelings" (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 37).

3.3 GOTHIC TRANSGRESSION

Ask any gothic scholar and they will probably tell you that gothic fiction is obsessed with the idea of transgression (ANDERSON, 2021; BOTTING, 1996; FRANÇA, 2017; PUNTER, 1996; RATA, 2014; SENCINDIVER, 2010; WILLIAMS, 1995). The Gothic is always trying to play against the rules, to imagine things differently, to cross boundaries. The term itself cannot be kept within confines; is it a

demonym, an architectural style, a fashion culture, a genre, or a mode? Transgressing is in its genes.

Gothic transgressions come in many forms: on one hand, of humanistic values and codes of conduct, but also, on the other hand, of limits, both physical and aesthetic, as well as moral (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 116). In any case, they enable the reconstitution of boundaries, contesting and/or restoring them (BOTTING, 1996, p. 6). "Gothic is all about transgression; and thus it is also about the threshold, the point at which one might cross from the inside to the outside, from the home into the outer world, from (...) the homely to the unhomely" (PUNTER, 1996, p. 322). The pervasive presence of the *locus horribilis*, the monster, and the haunting in gothic narratives is not by accident, for they offer the Gothic opportunities to transgress. They violate the parameters of traditional realism by presenting settings, characters, and events that either extend or challenge our understanding of the world (FRANÇA, 2017, p. 116). They expose the fragile nature of the boundaries that separate subject from object, known from unknown, life from death. It is right there at the permeable borders that the gothic horrors begin to arise.

4 METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDS

If I ever want to see the outside again, I will have to inspect the very structure of this house. Luckily, my venture into the territory of the Gothic did not leave me with any permanent damage. I am happy to be back in one piece, but this whole place still looks like a terrifying rabbit hole. It keeps moving and changing before my very eyes. Before I visit any new levels, then, I must draft a kind of floor plan. If I want to stay alive, I will have to devise a roadmap. With the right tools, I believe I can put it into paper.

As previously mentioned, my research framework consists of two critical approaches to comics: narratology and semiotics. Narratology is the theory of cultural artifacts that tell a story (FLUDERNIK, 2009, p. 105). It is an instrument used to identify the basic structures of narratives, to enrich the interpretation of particular narrative works, and to help us analyze the significance of specific narrative features (KUKKONEN, 2013; MIKKONEN, 2017). Semiotics is the systematic study of signs (BALDICK, 2001, p. 232). Signs are basic elements of communication, and the scope of semiotics goes beyond spoken or written language to include other kinds of communicative systems, such as cinema, advertising, and comics (BALDICK, 2001, p. 236). Both narratology and semiotics understand comics as an artistic phenomenon and focus on the patterns of meaning-making, the interplay of text and image, and the specific affordances of the medium. Putting them into practice is primarily a matter of conducting an informed, close reading of the text, looking at all the ways the narrative and graphic elements contribute to its meaning.

The combination of these two critical approaches also facilitates a media-conscious analysis (RYAN, 2014, p. 30), which is concerned with the specificities and generalities of media products. There are three possible relations between narratological concepts and media categories (RYAN; THON, 2014, p. 4). They can be either (1) medium-free, where they are common to all media (such as characters, events, settings and other defining components of narrativity); (2) transmedial, where they are common to some media but not to all (like interactivity, which is applicable to video games and tabletop roleplaying games, but not usually to film or print comics); or (3) medium-specific, where they are developed for a certain medium, occasionally extending to others (like the arrangement of panels on a page, exclusive to the comics medium).

A media-conscious analysis will take all these relations into account, and investigate "how the medium affects narrative form and meaning, or how a given medium may be better equipped to carry out some kinds of narrative functions than others" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 3). The semiotic resources and categories available to each medium make a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, and why they are told (RYAN, 2014, p. 25). In my case, adopting a media-conscious analysis involves recognizing the specificities of digital comics and their similarities with other narrative media. These encompass the basic modes of image, text, and sequence, which are available to all comics, and the affordances of the infinite canvas, hypertext, and animation, which are exclusive to digital media.

As I see it, a functional view of narratology is the best way to understand how digital comics use different modes and affordances to produce a series of narrative effects. In functional narratology, "things are defined by their purpose or effect" (STERNBERG, 2011, p. 39). We start with the effect in mind and then try to see what forms can trigger or be triggered by that effect (STERNBERG, 2011, p. 40). In this view (as opposed to a formalist or a structuralist one), texts have no fixed forms. Any effect can produce an infinite number of forms, and vice versa. "What you understand the text to be doing determines the forms that you see. Forms do not exist anywhere, except in the mind that makes functional sense of discourse" (STERNBERG, 2011, p. 41). For example: the features of a narrator, such as omniscience and reliability, are not given in the text, but "(re)constructed according to our understanding of the work as a whole" (STERNBERG, 2011, p. 47). People can be confronted with the same collection of signs and interpret it in different ways. Some will read *The Turn of the Screw* and believe in the supernatural content of the governess's tale; others, for a series of different reasons, will not. The same is true for all aspects of the discourse, including, as we will see, narrative itself.

4.1 COMICS NARRATOLOGY

What is a narrative? A simple, straightforward definition can be found in Ryan (2012): a narrative is "a discourse that conveys a story". Mikkonen (2017) and Kukkonen (2013) elaborate on the concept of story and cover the notions of narrative agency and internal coherence. Mikkonen (2017, p. 29) describes narrative as the representation of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one or more

narrators to one or more narratees. For Kukkonen (2013, p. 48), narrative is "a process which establishes causal connections between events, which introduces agency and intentions for characters and which suggests that there is a 'point' which makes the story worth telling".

Following a functional view, Sternberg (1992; 2011) turns the concept of narrative on its head. Functional narratology gives emphasis to effects; all forms are produced by specific effects, even narratives. They are not given on the surface, but something that we "import or construct by reference to an operative framework" (STERNBERG, 2011, p. 46). According to Sternberg (1978; 1992; 2011), the three "master" or "universal" effects common to all narratives, and from which all other effects derive, are *suspense*, *curiosity*, and *surprise*. The manipulation of these effects not only creates narrative interest, it actually brings narratives, fictional or non fictional, to life. "Any sign or any collection of signs is a narrative if it produces in us suspense, curiosity or surprise" (STERNBERG, 2011, p. 48). In other words, narratives are mental constructs inspired by such effects.

All three master effects, suspense, curiosity, and surprise, are generated by the manipulation of gaps in the discourse. Suspense is an act of anticipation generated by a gap of information related to the future. We keep guessing as to how events will unfold by asking ourselves, over and over again, what will or may happen next (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 527). Curiosity, on the other hand, is an act of retrospection generated by a gap concerning preceding information. There is a perceptibility of a gap in the discourse and, with it, a movement toward its closure (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 524). To repair this breach, we try to establish causal connections between the chain of events that lead to it and speculate about what has or could have happened before. As for surprise, it is generated when a hidden gap is suddenly made salient (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 176). It is neither anticipation nor retrospection, but pure (and instant) recognition; there are no attempts to fill the gap because it was not even perceptible until the moment of its shocking discovery (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 510-521). It is a process of manipulation "for the purpose of withholding or distorting antecedents in the telling, until the time comes to spring (and, at will, to repair) the fact of misdirection" (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 519). Together, the effects of suspense, curiosity, and surprise cover "all the workings that distinguish narrative in any medium from everything else" (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 528).

A concrete example will help us elucidate each effect. Consider the opening sentence of *Knock* (1948), a sci-fi short story by Fredric Brown: "The last man on Earth sat alone in a room". As we read it, curiosity immediately comes into play and we start wondering about the chain of past events. What happened to Earth? Why is he the last man on it? How did he survive when all others died? We glance at it again and then read the second sentence: "The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door…". Surprise! The text took an unexpected turn and we discover that we have been misdirected by the first sentence. Anxious to make sense of things, we start wondering about the chain of future events. Will he answer the door? Who might it be? Is it something dangerous? The suspense is already killing us. And just like that, after only two sentences, we already have a complete narrative. We do not even have to keep on reading.

In the previous chapter, we saw that the production of fear in gothic narratives relies in part on terrifying their own characters, who serve as a set of instructions to the emotive responses of the audience. As we can now see, this is only half, maybe less than half, of the equation: fear can also be created, intensified, or prolonged by the manipulation of suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Narrative interest "depends more on *how* the story is told than on *what* it tells" (INDRUSIAK, 2018, p. 46-47). Different devices may be present at the same time, reinforcing each other and working together for their common, frightening objective. Nevertheless, the manipulation of narrative effects is the driving force behind it.

Every narrative will always entail two sequences: "there is the sequence of events in the world (the order of happening) and there is the sequence of events in the discourse about the world (the order of reading, or telling)" (STERNBERG, 2011, p. 46). The order of happening is the *fabula*, the order of reading/telling is the *sujet*[16] (STERNBERG, 1978). The fabula is the chronological order of the events, the sujet is the order in which those events are presented. "The sujet is the finished artifact before us, the text as actually molded by the artist, the fabula is essentially both an abstraction and a reconstitution" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 10). The beginning of the sujet is the beginning of the narrative; the beginning of the fabula is the earliest event we know about (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 10). Out of a fabula, millions of sujets can be molded, "each with its own temporal structure and narrative strategy and

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[16] Other authors (KUKKONEN, 2013; MIKKONEN, 2017) prefer to use the terms 'discourse-time' and 'story-time', which refer to the fabula and to the sujet, respectively.

consequently with its own peculiar effect on the reader" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 9). In comics, the challenge lies in applying the fabula and sujet distinction to both image and text (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 64).

The notion of exposition is intrinsically tied to the fabula/sujet pair. The role of exposition is to introduce the reader, viewer or listener "into an unfamiliar world, the fictive world of the story" (STERNBERG 1978, p. 1). Exposition can be either preliminary or delayed and concentrated or distributed (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 236), and different combinations are used to distinguish between different genres, authors, works and artistic goals. Concentrated or distributed exposition is a matter of continuity, whereas preliminary or delayed is a question of position. Do I get all the necessary information at once (concentrated) or piece by piece, scattered through the narrative (distributed)? At the beginning of the story (preliminary) or at a later moment (delayed)? Expositional information constitutes the beginning of the fabula (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 13); any motif that antedates the first scene in time is expositional (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 21). The end of exposition coincides with the beginning of the fictive present, which usually entails a change of state or a destabilizing element (STENBERG, 1978, p. 25-6).

"The movement back and forth from present to past to present is the story's basic rhythm" (BAL, 2017, p. 69), and any deviation from chronology indicates artistic purpose (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 33). Authors deform time for a variety of reasons and in many different ways, not only by breaking with chronology and changing the order of events. Narrative time can also be sped up or slowed down, manipulated to skip through irrelevant information or to highlight important ones. Different time-ratios fulfill different functions (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 24), and "there is a logical correlation between the amount of space devoted to an element and the degree of its aesthetic relevance or centrality" (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 17). In comics, "there is no automatic correspondence or direct proportionality between the shape or size of the panel and the duration of the action presented in the image" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 55). Panel shapes and sizes are marks of style and/or relevance, not duration. A series of multiplying panels, for instance, does not necessarily prolong time, but narrative pacing (COHN, 2013c, p. 12).

Narrative meaning is a mental image built by an interpreter in response to a text (ELLESTRÖM, 2019, p. 13; RYAN, 2014, p. 8; STERNBERG, 1992, p. 513). It involves two complementary activities: a communicative construction and an

interpretive reconstruction (STERNBERG, 1992, p. 513). In the case of comics, these activities require an author, or author collective, and a reader. To achieve narrativity, visual media must capture the temporal unfolding of a story through one or more static frames (RYAN, 2012). Comics do that through panels (static frames) and sequence (temporal unfolding), producing effects that evoke in the reader a narrative response. Readers will always formulate hypotheses to connect panels in sequence, even abstract panels (GROESNTEEN, 2013, p. 19). Panels and panel sequences "articulate the narrative by showing certain things in certain ways" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 73), and the reader has an active role in the process of narrative (re)construction.

The comics page becomes an edifice where the reader performs the act of reading, and the story cannot exist until the reader has mapped its pages out (ROUND, 2014, p. 61/97). Comics reading process is a dynamic experience which involves multiple interacting systems (COHN, 2014b, p. 1). Readers recognize that the drawn graphics on the page "are not isolated glimpses of unconnected events" (COHN, 2013c, p. 11), but objects organized in sequences. They follow a navigational structure and make predictions about where to go next (COHN, 2013c, p. 10; COHN, 2013b, p. 1; COHN, 2021, p. 26). Readers go through page layouts guided by a desire to create grouped structures out of panels. The decisions that they make are based on the alignments between panels, but these choices are subservient to the larger goal of making hierarchical groupings (COHN, 2019). Readers also understand that the panels show objects engaged in events and states, and create expectations about what might happen next (COHN, 2021, p. 24). They monitor space, time, entities, motivation, and causation (COHN, 2015, p. 442), updating their mental model when necessary and inferring meaning left unseen (COHN, 2014b, p. 2). As reading progresses, inferences must be constantly readjusted; some will be realized, others will be canceled out (ROUND, 2014, p. 100-101). And the "narrative unfolds as we configure the story from the clues" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 44).

In the process of reading, readers will also project a narrative agency of some sort. Narrative agency refers to the source of narrative discourse, "some agency or agent that is responsible for the selection, arranging, and distribution of the story material" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 129). This agency/agent is not the author of the narrative; it is a function, not a person (BAL, 2017, p. 11). In literature, the instance

that we project as organizing the narrative is called, as we all know, a narrator. The functions of the narrator are "to create the narrative, to communicate it, and to vouch for the authenticity of the narrative they tell" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 174). In other media, however, things are not so clear-cut. The applicability of key narratological concepts across different media is a recurring problem, especially when it comes to the matter of narrative agency.

In the case of comics and other visual media, narrative agency is a composite of different semiotic sources (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 147). For that reason, some authors (ELLESTRÖM, 2019; GROENSTEEN, 2013; MILLER, 2007) make a separation between visual and verbal narrators connected to a single, overarching narrator, or meganarrator. Others (KÖPPE; KINDT, 2011; KUKKONEN, 2013; MIKKONEN, 2017) think that there is no need, theoretical or practical, to posit the presence either of a visual narrator and of an overall narratorial authority. "When there is no narrator perceptible, then (most likely) there is none" (KÖPPE; KINDT, 2011, p. 84). "In a visually represented storyworld, there is 'no place for the narrator to hide'" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 44), that is, what is shown or represented is not necessarily tied to a particular experience or spatial position. For the comics reader, it may not matter much who is responsible for showing or organizing the images and the other aspects of comics structure (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 136). "To whom can we attribute these images? Are they part of the narrator's direct discourse or paratexts that are neither direct nor indirect? Are they shown as they were seen by the characters? Or does it really matter?" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 215).

As for verbal narrators, they are restricted to specific roles. In old gothic and horror comics, for example, it was common to have a narrator fulfilling the role of host[17]. Readers would open the magazine and The Old Witch, Uncle Creepy, Cousin Eerie, or any other similar figure, would guide them through the story, commenting on some aspects of it in a campy, dark humorous tone. However, verbal narrators are neither a mandatory source nor are they responsible for any other aspect of narrative agency in comics. In a way, the overall authority of comics narrative is *narration itself*. The concept of narration "can embrace the whole complex of narrative devices and expressive techniques in the medium without referring to an implicit agent of narration and enunciation" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 135). All power is

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[17] Hosts are a venerable tradition of gothic and horror narratives. Besides comics, they can also commonly be found in old radio dramas, television shows, and films.

in the hands of the meaning-making process, that is, in the combination of artistic creation and reader's activity.

The meaning-making process also involves the projection of a storyworld, a "fictional world in which the events of a narrative take place" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 176). The narrative suggests a storyworld through the production of signs, and the reader uses the text to construct a mental image of this world (RYAN; THON, 2014, p. 3). This image is by no means static, but a dynamic model of evolving situations. "Its representation in the recipient's mind is a simulation of the changes that are caused by the events of the plot" (RYAN; THON, 2014, p. 33). The reader's knowledge about the storyworld is limited by focalization, and his or her engagement with it is strongly influenced by the presence and actions of characters.

The process of following a character is one of the audience's main means of access to a story (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 102). "They set the events of the story in motion in their interactions, and relate to these events through their intentions and emotional responses" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 168). In comics, they act as visual points of reference and give images an extra dose of cohesion (POSTEMA, 2018, p. 90). "The continuing presence of a character or a group of characters in a sequence of images, acting out a situation, or participating in an event, is possibly the most conventional feature of narrative comics" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 90). Every medium, genre, and artistic style has its own set of character tropes, exploited by their narratives in order to perform specific functions, such as facilitating movements of the plot, triggering emotional responses from the audience, and playing with the audience's expectations.

4.2 THE CLOSE READING METHOD OF ANALYSIS

When applied to comics, a close reading method of analysis should take into account both the narrative and the artistic elements of the medium (DUNST; HARTEL, 2018; EWERT, 2004; MIKKONEN, 2017). It should supplement purely literary aspects and cover "the investigation of the basic narrative techniques, the functions of these techniques, and artistic solutions, that are available in specific forms of production and publication, genre, or body of work at a particular time" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 246). With that in mind, I have managed to secure the cooperation of a pair of complementary analytical tools: Cohn's (2013c; 2015) visual

narrative grammar and Kress & Leeuwen's (1996) grammar of visual design. Together, they provide me with a rich framework of analysis that encompasses both the narrative and the artistic elements of visual storytelling.

4.2.1 Cohn's visual narrative grammar

Groensteen (2007) and McCloud (2005) have proposed models for analyzing the creation of meaning in comics narratives. McCloud's (2005) model focuses on linear panel-to-panel transitions, whereas Groensteen's (2007) focuses on the global view, stating that every panel in a comic exists in relation to all others. Cohn (2010; 2014a) believes both models to be problematic. For him (COHN, 2010, p. 128), McCloud's linear panel-to-panel analysis and Groensteen's loosely defined principles of connection are unable to describe how meaning is created in sequential images. To correct that, Cohn (2013c) proposes a visual narrative grammar that focuses on the content of panels and breaks sequences into manageable segments. Under this model, the transitions between panels are less important than the roles that each panel plays within a sequence (COHN, 2013c, p. 419). Naming and identifying these roles is an effective way of extracting and elucidating narrative meaning in comics.

The five core panel roles in visual narrative grammar are those of (1) establisher, (2) initial, (3) prolongation, (4) peak, and (5) release (COHN, 2013c, p. 70). Establisher panels provide referential information without engaging characters and objects in actions or events (COHN, 2013c, p. 74). They conform to the general preference for describing who is doing an action, or where the action is taking place, before describing the action itself (COHN, 2013c, p. 75). Initial panels set the primary action or event of the sequence in motion, initiating the tension of the narrative arc (COHN, 2013c, p. 73). Prolongation panels depict the trajectory between a source and a goal, often the extension of a path (COHN, 2013c, p. 75). They can function as narrative pause for delaying the climax of the action or event, adding a sense of atmosphere and/or building tension (COHN, 2013c, p. 75). Peak panels are where the most important things in a sequence happen, marking the height of narrative tension (COHN, 2013c, p. 71-2). They contain primary actions and the climax of a sequence, usually depicting a change of state or the culmination of a growing event (COHN, 2013c, p. 73). Release panels wrap up the events, relaxing narrative tension (COHN, 2013c, p. 73). They show resolutions or aftermaths, and revert things to a

passive state. An extra, ancillary role is that of (6) refiner. Refiner panels repeat information from other panels with a different framing, perspective, or composition (COHN, 2013c, p. 84).

Together, these categories form sequence phases. Sequence phases are "panels that form a cohesive grouping in a broader structure" (COHN, 2015, p. 18). Characters and/or actions change in each phase, and readers can intuitively sense where segments begin and end in an ongoing sequence (COHN, 2013c, p. 70). Peaks "are the most important category of a narrative sequence, and the rest of the sequence most often 'hangs' around the content in the peak" (COHN, 2015, p. 17). Initials trigger a preparatory action that culminates in the peak (COHN, 2013c, p. 73), prolongations "delay a peak with an additional medial narrative state" (COHN, 2015, p. 18), and releases show the aftermath of the peak's action (COHN, 2013c, p. 73).

4.2.2 Kress & Leeuwen's grammar of visual design

The grammar of visual design was developed by Kress & Leeuwen (1996) as a descriptive framework and tool for visual analysis. The authors argue that visual communication can be understood in terms of a visual grammar, which consists of choices and combinations of visual elements that convey meaning in a similar way to how words and grammar convey meaning in language. They offer a terminology of useful concepts that can be applied to different visual media, such as cinema, photography, and comics.

Under this framework, all kinds of images, or graphics, can be divided into participants and processes (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 49). Participants are the subject matter of communication, the represented people, places, and things (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 48). In visual media, they are presented as volumes or masses which have visual weight. "Volumes are perceived as distinct entities which are salient ('heavy') to different degrees because of their different sizes, shapes, color, and so on" (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 49). Participants can be further divided into actors, goals, and reacters. Actors are the most salient volumes and those who play the most crucial roles in a given visual communication (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 50). Their salience can be indicated through size, place in the composition, contrast against background, color saturation, sharpness of focus, or psychological prominence, like human figures and faces (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996,

p. 63). Goals are the participants at whom or which the action is done to or aimed at (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 64). Reacters are participants who don't act, but look at or surround actors (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 67). As for processes, they are the vectors, tensions, and dynamic forces that depart from actors or that connect actors to goals (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 49). A common vector in comics is the carrier, the text balloon or caption that connects characters to content (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 68).

Kress & Leeuwen's (1996) framework also offers a useful terminology to describe and analyze framing, perspective, and composition. Framing terminology is described in relation to the human body: close shot (head and shoulders), very close shot (less than head and shoulders), medium close shot (at the waist), medium shot (at the knees), medium long shot (full figure), long shot (body occupies half of the frame), and very long shot (body occupies less than half of the frame) (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 124). Shots of objects, buildings, and landscapes can be described as close distance, where the object or setting is shown as if the viewer is engaged with it; middle distance, where it is shown in full without much space around it (within the viewer's reach, but not being used or interacted with); and long distance, where it is there for our contemplation, but out of our reach (KREES; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 127-8).

Perspective describes the selection of an angle or point of view for the image, implying "the possibility of expressing subjective attitudes towards represented participants, human or otherwise" (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 129). Images can have frontal or oblique points of view, or be seen from the back. They usually mean involvement, detachment, and ambivalence, respectively (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 135-8). Also, images can be seen from a high angle, which can make the subject look small and insignificant, from a low angle, which can make it imposing and awesome, or at eye level, which eliminates power differences (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 140). Finally, composition attaches value to different zones of the image: left and right, top and bottom, center and margin, foreground and background (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 177).

I close my notebook and let out a somewhat relieved sigh. I cannot tell if it is tiredness or satisfaction, but the work is far from over. This is just a sketch, a rough layout. To turn it into a blueprint, a real, detailed plan, I will have to revisit some of

the most frightening rooms, corridors, and corners of this house and confront my deepest fears.

5 THE ARCHITECTURE OF FEAR IN EMILY CARROLL'S WORK

As previously discussed, the gothic mode is concerned with the production of fear and the feelings or states associated with it, such as anxiety, disorientation, entrapment, the uncanny, and the sublime. In comics art, the gothic aesthetic is marked by a style of excess and dark, ruined, and decayed atmospheres. Gothic narratives are obsessed with the idea of transgression and usually revolve around three main tropes: the *locus horribilis*, the monster, and the haunting.

The key question to keep in mind therefore is: what elements and techniques does Emily Carroll use to make readers visualize gothic storyworlds and reconstruct gothic narratives? These elements and techniques are related either to artistic expression or to narrative development. Artistic expression includes use of color, use of shapes and lines, page layout, panel arrangement, and use of digital affordances (included but not limited to the infinite canvas, hypertext, and animation). Narrative development involves the choice of words, story events, and narrative tropes. In comics, these elements are intertwined and affect each other deeply. Together, they consolidate Emily Carroll's overall style and make up the core of the analysis of her work.

5.1 EMILY CARROLL'S GOTHIC ENVIRONMENT

Emily Carroll's work is gothic in itself. Her comics tap deeply into the gothic nature of comics and of digital media as a whole. Julia Round (2014) wrote about comics' intrinsic style of excess, and there are numerous examples in Carroll's work to illustrate that idea. Most of them refer to an excess of perspective, which in comics encompasses both focalization and narration. It is worth remembering that, in comics, *what is shown* is much more important than *who speaks* or *who sees*, and the expression of content will follow that rule. In *His Face All Red*, for instance, the character of the little brother is both the focalizer and the narrator, but some panels show things that go beyond his perception.

Excess of style can also be explained by the dual nature of comics. Content can be motivated either by image, text, or a combination of both. Image and text can open and/or close narrative gaps independently of each other, sometimes inside the same panel or in the same sequence of panels. Other times, the image inside a

panel can take on a narrative function and the text inside that same panel can take on another function. Things get even more interesting when it comes to the gothic nature of digital media. Terms like 'shadow domains', 'troll farms', 'dead-end pages', 'digital ghosts', 'doomscrolling', 'dark patterns', and 'deep web' reveal the underside of the digital enlightenment. In the case of digital comics, there are also issues with system availability and interface use.

As the early webcomics can attest, the lifespan of digital media can be extremely ephemeral. Most of them have simply vanished from the web and are no longer available for reading. This gives digital comics a kind of spectral quality: they are always on the verge of going offline for a few hours or days or even disappearing from view forever. To counter that, comics fans have created a doppelganger website for Carroll[18], a place where people could still access her comics should her own official website ever shut down. As with many doppelgangers, this mirror site is of lower quality: it takes longer to be updated, it takes longer to load images, and it is slightly more distracting (it displays a bar at the top of each page to show users a timeline of the website's versions). There are also websites dedicated to preserving Carroll's lost comics and illustrations, that is, artwork she no longer displays on her official website, like graveyard monuments for her dead art.

As for digital interface use, a series of factors comes into play. To begin with, the user interface can sometimes assume a contaminating quality. Websites are full of intrusive and/or unwanted information, such as tabs, buttons, links, widgets, pop ups, etc, that invade the page and take control of the digital organism. Of course, intrusive information is not exclusive to digital media: "the early narrative strips were experienced across the serial disruptions of the weekly (and later daily) newspaper, with its own cacophony of tragic headlines, advertisements, and data" (GARDNER, 2014, p. 194). However, digital media has complicating factors, powerful contaminating agents such as animation and audio that bypass the reader's defenses. Carroll understands that, and either reduces intrusive information to a minimum or, as we will see, uses it to her own advantage.

Publication format and the requirements of technology also shape the narrative forms (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 47). In digital comics, the "global look" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 40) does not offer a complete picture of the page, only

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[18] https://web.archive.org/web/20231103180752/https://www.emcarroll.com/.

fractured parts of it as delimited by the screen. The page becomes fractured, and so does the reader's gaze. Readers have to negotiate with the page constantly to make panels fit inside the screen and their view. Gothic and horror narratives constantly explore the act of seeing and the dangers related to it. Such narratives are often about "seeing too little (to the point of blindness) or seeing too much (to the point of insanity)" (CLOVER, 2015, p. 166). The fractured page is inherently transgressive and makes that point over and over again.

Sometimes, the heavy use of the scrolling movement and/or the point and click action can make readers feel like they are groping in the dark. It is a kind of "textual claustrophobia", or the "disoriented movements of a reader looking for fresh links in a hypertext labyrinth" (AARSETH, 1997, p. 78-9). Carroll's comics can certainly make readers feel that way, creating an uncanny environment that extends outside the diegetic world. The uncanny, after all, entails a lack of orientation. "The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it" (VIDLER, 1992, p. 23). Aware of that, Carroll does her best to impair this sense of orientation and leave readers lost in the shadows of her stories.

5.2 EMILY CARROLL'S NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

A significant part of Carroll's narrative development concerns the use of gothic narrative tropes. The primary tropes of the *locus horribilis*, the monster, and the haunting can be observed in all of the selected comics. From them, it is also possible to identify a series of supporting tropes that contribute to the production of fear and to the forging of a unique style.

In Carroll's comics, the haunting trope is usually motivated by a loss, a violent act, or a reckless promise. Most of them are examples of acts of betrayal that catch up to the characters in the end, "typically in some gruesome way" (COLLINS, 2011). More often than not, the haunting is perpetrated by a monster, and haunted characters usually suffer from guilt, anxiety, or sleep disorders. Reckless promises and sleep disorders play such a significant role in her comics that they become tropes in their own right.

The violent acts that motivate the hauntings usually involve betrayal and murder, and are almost always committed against a family member. There is a

fratricide (brother killing brother) in *His Face All Red*, a nepoticide (uncle killing nephew) in *The Prince and the Sea*, and two mariticides (wives killing husbands), one in *Margot's Room* and the other in *The Three Snake Leaves*. The murders and the revenge-killing in *Out of Skin* are not committed against family, and the one in *When the Darkness Presses* might not even have happened (more on this later on). The two mariticides are an interesting case, for they add complexity to another common narrative trope: the cruel spouse (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 398).

The cruel husband is a recurring feature of international folktale, but domestic violence against women, be it physical or psychological, is seldom condemned in such tales (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 398). In folklore and mythology, wife beating has generally not been considered cruelty, but sound family management. "Cruel husbands are rarely criticized, much less punished" (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 401). This is not the case at all in Carroll's comics. The mariticides in *Margot's Room* and the *Three Snake Leaves* are committed by the victims of abuse themselves, and make it pretty clear that domestic violence will not go unpunished. These acts of revenge, as righteous as they may be, also reveal the murderous instincts of their agents. "It lies in the nature of revenge or self-defense stories (horror makes the point over and over) that the avenger or self-defender will become as directly or indirectly violent as her assailant" (CLOVER, 1987, p. 123).

All these violent acts that usually result in murder leave behind them a trail of death. In gothic narratives, death is a powerful symbol of ruin and decay, as it makes us confront our own mortality. In Carroll's comics, death is ever-present, and not only as a consequence of violence. Besides murder, we also have sickness. The list of sick characters is long, and all of them end up dying: a princess in the *The Three Snake Leaves*, an old man and a little girl in *Margot's Room*, and a whole family in *Out of Skin*. Most of these deaths happen off-panel; one is shown only in a flashback. In Carroll's work, sick characters are absent characters, and their absence is felt through a heavy sense of loss.

Sometimes, death evolves into undeath. The malevolent return from the dead usually involves creatures that return to inflict punishment. This is particularly true if said creatures were murdered, and their principal motive is to out the murderer (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 181). These creatures are called revenants, and they are the most recurring kind of monster in the selected comics (Figure 1). They can be spotted in *His Face All Red* (one occurrence), *The Three Snake Leaves* (two

occurrences), and *Out of Skin* (many occurrences). Besides revenants, the other kinds of monsters that can be observed in the selected comics are doppelgangers, mythical creatures, and nightmare creatures.

Figure 1 - The revenants from *Out of Skin*

Source: Carroll (2013b)

The doppelganger is a double, a duplicate of an individual through physical resemblance, disguise, impersonation, or effigies (such as portraits, protographs, or statues) (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 453-6). It is one of the most recurring tropes in gothic narratives, because it evokes an undeniable uncanny feeling (RANK, 1971). The doppelganger can be seen in *His Face All Red*, impersonating a character who was supposed to be dead (Figure 2). Mythical creatures are creatures that combine bestial and human form (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 69). They are a recurring trope in fairy tales, and do not always behave in a traditional monstrous way. They can be found in *The Prince and the Sea* and in *Margot's Room*, as a mermaid and a werewolf, respectively. As for the nightmare creature, it is exactly that: a creature that inhabits our scariest nightmares. It can be encountered in *When the Darkness Presses*, tormenting the troubled psyche of the protagonist.

Figure 2 - The doppelganger from *His Face All Red*

Source: Carroll (2010)

Monsters need places to haunt and terrify, but some places are so horrible that they become haunting and monstrous themselves: the (in)famous *loci horribiles* of gothic and horror fiction. In the selected comics, the *locus horribilis* can take many forms: the woods, the underground, the domestic space, and the dreamscape.

Carroll's obsession with the woods as locus *horribilis* can be partially explained by the literary preoccupations of her own home country: Canada. Canada is an archetypal scene of gothic unsettlement, and Canadian writers have always been haunted by its vast and sublime landscapes (SUGARS, 2014, p. 9). Canadian literature is marked by a deep terror in regard to nature, a terror connected to the realization that "one does not, in fact, belong there" (SUGARS, 2014, p. 24). Under this perspective, nature becomes an overwhelming and antagonistic space which threatens to engulf its vulnerable human subjects[19].

Of course, it is not only Canadian writers who are obsessed with the woods. The wilderness has been viewed as dangerous for most of human history. A famous narrative trope of horror, thriller, or fantasy stories is "Don't Go in the Woods" (TV TROPES). The forest is the thickly wooded distance that separates us from moral codes (BACHELARD, 1994, p. 187); when people go deep into the woods, horrible things ensue. That is exactly what happens in half of the selected comics: *His Face All Red*, *Margot's Room*, and *Out of Skin*. Deep into the woods, characters come across strange sightings, dreadful beasts, terrible secrets and, sometimes, their own demise (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - The woods as a manifestation of the *locus horribilis*

Source: Carroll (2010)

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[19] A perspective which has definitely not been shared by Canada's indigenous people, who have never experienced the same kind of terror to their surroundings (SUGARS, 2014, p. 24).

Deep into the woods it is also possible to come across other *loci horribiles*, horrible places inside horrible places revealing even darker secrets. Two of these places take characters underground: the hole in *His Face All Red* and the pool in *The Prince and the Sea*. Bachelard (1994, p. 22) compares natural undergrounds to the poetic image of the cellar. In the cellar/natural underground, "darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on dark walls" (BACHELARD, 1994, p. 19). Natural undergrounds are symbols for the unconscious mind, and the unconscious can never be civilized (BACHELARD, 1994, p. 19). The underground is also a representation of the underworld, or lower world (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 14/192). The lower world is usually associated with death, like the crypt in *The Three Snake Leaves* (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - The Crypt from *The Three Snake Leaves*

Source: Carroll (2013a)

Dark forests can also hide creepy cottages, like the one in *Out of Skin*. The cottage is an expression of the domestic space, an important setting for two other comics: *Margot's Room* and *When the Darkness Presses*. In Carroll's work, domestic spaces are always isolated: one in the woods, one in the country, and one in the suburbs. Isolated places reinforce feelings of entrapment, a crucial aspect of the *locus horribilis*. In isolation, you have nowhere to go and no one to call if danger were to befall you. As the iconic tagline of *Alien* suggests, "in space no one can hear you scream". The same is true for any other dangerous and desolate place.

In Carroll's work, the domestic space is embodied by the house. The house is one of the most frequent settings of gothic fiction, and a favored site for uncanny disturbances (VIDLER, 1992, p. 17). It is usually presented as a safe haven or as a

haunted space (MAJLINGOVÁ, 2011, p. 31). The safe haven is connected to the ideal of domesticity and the house as a female sphere; in the haunted space, the evil is contained inside the building, usually in the form of a past secret which "will not stop tormenting the inhabitants until the situation is resolved, often ending with the destruction of the building itself or the death of its inhabitants" (MAJLINGOVÁ, 2011, p. 20). Carroll subverts this so-called ideal of domesticity and the role of the woman as guardian of the house. In this sense, she follows in the footsteps of the American Gothic tradition and its threats to conjugal peace and domestic security (DAVENPORT, 1998, p. 268). What was supposed to be a safe haven becomes a haunted, or even monstrous, space. The houses in *Margot's Room*, *Out of Skin*, and *When the Darkness Presses* all cease to be a comfortable place and a source of courage for the heroine to become uncanny places. They bear the signs of their condition: they are gloomy, empty, and silent, almost like tombs (VIDLER, 1992, p. 20). They trap their occupants into social roles and expectations, and they sometimes breed their own homegrown monsters (Figure 5).

Figure 5 - The house as a manifestation of the *locus horribilis*

Source: Carroll (2011b)

The domestic space in *When the Darkness Presses* adds complexity to the trope. The main source of fear is the spare room in the basement, a place that connects the real world of the story with a nightmarish dreamworld. The dreamworld is a special kind of lower or otherworld, and the basement is the domestic underground par excellence (BACHELARD, 1994). In any case, the contrast between the different domestic spaces and their surroundings represents the crossing of boundaries between the human and non-human, places at the margins of civilization (or city life, in the case of the suburbs) where strange things can happen.

Besides the use of narrative tropes, narrative development also involves the operations of visual narrative grammar. These operations connect the other aspects of narrative development (story events and choice of words) with a crucial feature of artistic expression: panel arrangement. The visual narrative grammar of comics states that each panel in a sequence has a specific narrative function: establisher, initial, prolongation, peak, or release (COHN, 2013c). Together, they form the narrative phases that move the story forward and give it a particular rhythm.

Each comics artist has their own individual narrative style, and it is no different with Carroll. In her case, the distinctions are more telling when it comes to the use of prolongation and peak panels. Traditionally, prolongation panels are used to prolong movements that were set in motion by the initial panel. In practical terms, prolongation panels are used to manipulate narrative time-ratio and to sustain curiosity and/or suspense. While this can be true for Carroll as well, she also finds ways to use them in a more gothic manner. Many times, prolongation panels are used to sustain a character's physical and/or mental suffering. The kind of suffering varies greatly, but the effect is usually the same: while happy moments go by in one or two panels, anguish is sustained for long sequences of panels. By doing that, Carroll also subverts the typical function of prolongation panels: instead of only prolonging physical motion, she also prolongs mental processes (Figure 6).

Figure 6 - Prolongation panels can sustain physical and/or mental suffering

Source: Carroll (2011b)

As for peak panels, their function is to show a sequence's climax, i.e., to end the movements (or mental processes) that were set in motion by the initial panel and sustained by the prolongation panel(s). In terms of narrative effects, peak panels are

employed in the manipulation of surprise and to open or close curiosity and suspense gaps. In her comics, Carroll subverts the use of peak panels in at least three ways. The first one concerns the action star panel, a climatic panel that implies the action by providing a graphic cue for it, such as a big star, a fight cloud, motion lines, onomatopoeia, etc. In Carroll's work, the action star panel bears a similarity with the "Gory Discretion Shot" trope[20] (TV TROPES), and always implies murder and/or extreme violence (Figure 7). In some cases, it takes on the form of the movement itself, as if a blade was cutting through the very page.

Figure 7 - Traditional action star panel x action star panel in *Out of Skin*
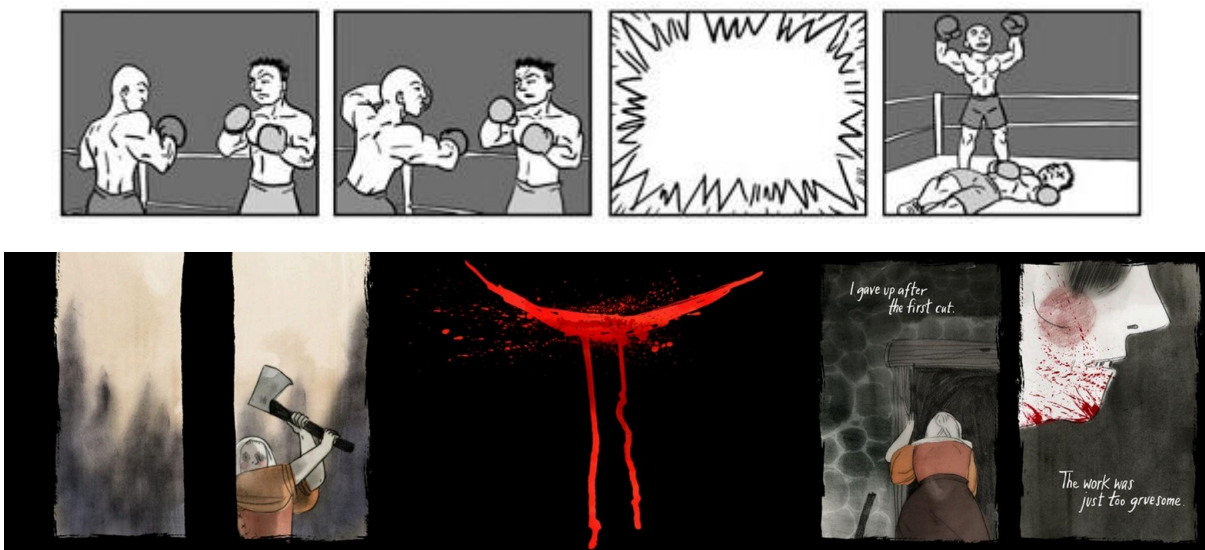
Sources: Cohn (2013c); Carroll (2013b)

Sometimes, peak panels are actually peak drops, which skip the climatic event and show only its result (Figure 8). Similarly to the action star panel, the peak drop panel is a testimony to the fact that we do not need to see what has happened to understand what has happened. Unlike horror, gothic violence is seldom explicit; it is much better to just leave the details to the reader's excitable imagination.

Finally, Carroll overturns the function of peak panels by making them her end panels. In her comics, they are commonly used to end narrative phases or placed at the end of pages, effectively sustaining the tension by offering no kind of release or by presenting an ambiguous ending to the whole story. In this sense, her peak

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[20] The "Gory Discretion Shot" is the film technique of suggesting that something gruesome has happened off-camera, like the sound of a gunshot followed by blood splattered all over a wall.

panels are tied to the "Ambiguous Ending" trope (TV TROPES) and to the concept of the anti-dénoument. As the name implies, the anti-dénoument is the opposite of the dénouement, the "clearing up or 'untying' of the complications of the plot" (BALDICK, 2001, p. 63). It is that which undermines the resolution of the story, the curiosity gap that stays open after the story ends (STAIGER, 2015, p. 223). There are numerous examples in the selected comics to illustrate that idea, like the enigmatic last-panel gazes in *His Face All Red* and *Out of Skin*, and the cryptic last-panel sounds in *The Three Snake Leaves* and *When the Darkness Presses*.

Figure 8 - Example of the peak drop technique

Source: Carroll (2010)

There are clear reasons for the popularity of the anti-dénouement in gothic and horror narratives. For such narratives, closure equals death; "to have closure is to accept death" (STAIGER, 2015, p. 226), and adopting any discourse as final seems impossible. Moreover, leaving things unresolved is a way to echo the ever-present uncertainty that characterizes gothic and horror fiction. By evoking ambiguity, artists mirror the elusive and mysterious nature of the very themes that they explore.

5.3 EMILY CARROLL'S ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

As mentioned before, artistic expression encompasses use of color, use of shapes and lines, page layout, panel arrangement, and use of digital affordances. These are the graphic aspects of comics, the elements and techniques that render image, text, and sequence meaningful. As is the case with narrative development, Carroll's particular style of artistic expression is carefully crafted for the construction of gothic storyworlds.

Color is an integral part of the visual storytelling process, and comics artists use color for a variety of reasons. In Carroll's work, for instance, color is used to differentiate between fictional worlds and/or time periods within her overall fictional universe. Her color comics are set in a kind of medieval or pre-industrial society, whereas her black and white comics take place in the modern fictional town of Keeping. She also uses color as cues for characterization, shifts in chronology, and narrative salience. Most importantly (at least from a gothic standpoint), she uses color as a symbolic mechanism. In Carroll's comics, color hues are usually associated with specific themes. For instance: red signifies murder and/or violence, magenta conveys jealousy and/or betrayal (Figure 9), pink represents life and/or intimacy, white symbolizes death, gray denotes sadness, and black indicates danger.

Figure 9 - Magenta, the color of jealousy and/or betrayal

Source: Carroll (2013a)

The use of black to indicate danger is a trademark of gothic fiction. The visual is associated with the symbolic: black is connected to darkness (the visual), and darkness usually means danger (the symbolic). Fear of the dark is, after all, one of our oldest fears (GRUBER, 2019, p. 215). It is the primitive fear of being startled by something unknown, something that might be hiding in the shadows and awaiting to attack us (GRUBER, 2019, p. 215). When we are unable to see, our brains go on high alert, and this is especially true when we feel threatened (GRUBER, 2019, p. 214). Nighttime is monster time.

In many of her comics, Carroll applies huge blocks of black color between and around panels, in the gutters and hyperframes, i.e., in the canvas itself (Figure 10). In digital comics, the infinite canvas allows for an expansion of the gutters and the hyperframes. Carroll uses that to her advantage and creates an effect of impending

danger, of a darkness that looms big over the panels and threatens to invade them, corrupt them, suffocate them. "While light space is eliminated by the materiality of the objects, darkness is 'filled', it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him" (VIDLER, 1992, p. 175).

Figure 10 - A panel engulfed by the darkness of the page

Source: Carroll (2010)

Shapes and lines make up the core of graphic representation in comics. Together, they constitute all the things (participants and processes) that are actually shown on the surface of the page, and how they are distributed within each panel. Historically, comics artists have given special emphasis to the shapes and lines that constitute the human figure, and it is no different with Carroll. However, she favors a much more subtle approach to the representation of the human figure and how it conveys human emotion and/or intention.

One example of her approach concerns characters' facial expressions. In comics, the physiological and expressive responses of an emotion stand for the emotion (FORCEVILLE, 2005, p. 72). While most comics artists make use of stereotypical exaggerations in order to suggest a particular emotion (FORCEVILLE, 2005, p. 71-2), Carroll focuses solely on a character's mouth or eyes, and for great effect. She crops characters' faces in very close shots and directs the reader's attention to them (Figure 11). On their own, mouth and eye shapes are enough to convey a wide range of emotions, alone and/or in combination, and even intensity of feeling. Moreover, these shapes are also crucial to the characterization of monstrous creatures, such as the werewolf in *Margot's Room* and the revenants in *Out of Skin*. The monstrous nature of these creatures is stressed by the unnatural shapes of their mouths and/or eyes. In some cases, the same shape is used to represent different emotions (FORCEVILLE, 2005, p. 84). A bulging eye, for instance, can suggest fear

or anger. In cases like these, the specific shape will be accompanied by other signs, such as color or text, in order to cue readers into the correct interpretation of the emotion.

Figure 11 - Extremely close shots of the eye and the mouth

Source: Carroll (2013b)

Another powerful shape is that of the hand. The human eye and the human hand are commonly seen as magic body parts in popular narratives (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 139). They play crucial roles in people's everyday interactions, and they connect people to the outside world (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 139). In Carroll's work, the very close shot of the hand shape is also a recurring feature. Instead of representing emotion, though, it is used to suggest action and/or intention. And just like the eyes and the mouth, it is an important aspect in the characterization of the monster. Monstrous hands are not human hands: they are grotesque, animal-like, rotten, out of proportion, etc (Figure 12).

Figure 12 - Very close shots of human and monstrous hands
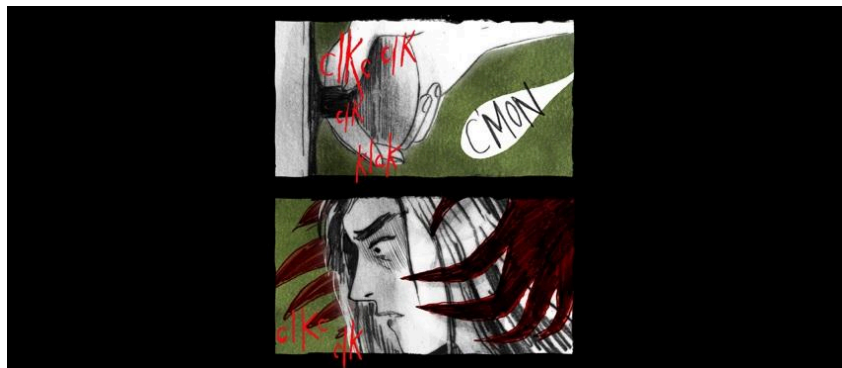
Source: Carroll (2014)

Another shape which Carroll uses to convey intention is what I call the shadowy back view silhouette (Figure 13). It is a fancy name for a simple shape: a character seen from behind, covered in shadows. The regular back view is already sinister enough; it is complex and ambivalent (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 138). The shadowy back view is doubly sinister and always suggests ominous intent. It is connected to the notion of darkness and contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of mystery and danger.

Figure 13 - An example of the shadowy back view silhouette
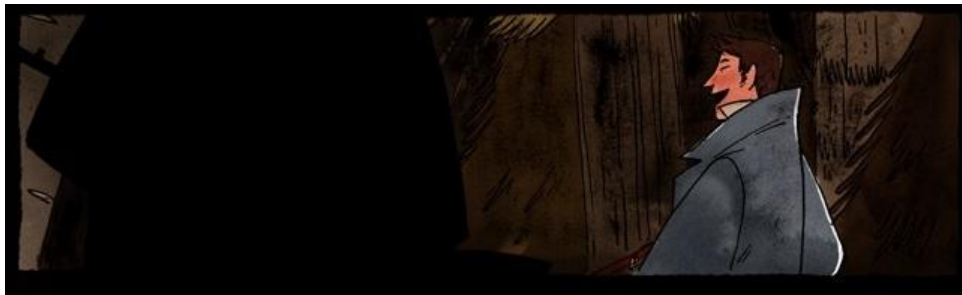
Source: Carroll (2010)

In regard to the human figure, there is yet another relevant image: the corpse. Representations of corpses abound in Carroll's comics as they are the grisly consequence of all the violence and killing. As symbols of death, they are predominantly white in color (Figure 14). They contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of ruin and decay and also connect the human figure to that of the monster. A corpse is not exactly threatening, but it certainly causes revulsion and defies categorization, which are both marks of the monster.

As an improper and unclean shape, the corpse is associated with the abject (KRISTEVA, 1982). The abject is that class of things that disturb identity, system, and order, that do not respect borders, positions, and rules (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 4). The corpse stands for the utmost abjection, it is "death infecting life" (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 4). Bodily fluids, such as blood, saliva, urine, or sweat, are on the other side of the human border, in "the place where I am not and which permits me to be" (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 3). Beyond those limits, one is a cadaver, "a decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic" (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 109). The corpse represents fundamental pollution:

it is "a body without a soul, a non-body, disquieting matter" (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 109). Like much of gothic imagery, the corpse is an ambiguous shape.

Figure 14 - The corpse image in the *The Three Snake Leaves*

Source: Carroll (2013a)

Shapes and lines are not limited to the ones contained by and inside the panels. They also refer to the ones which make up the panel itself, its format and framing. Taking advantage of the infinite canvas, Carroll varies her panel formats greatly, from rectangular to round, narrow or wide, straight or tilted, or even more complex formats, like the outline of a participant or process (in those cases, the framing is the format itself). Her comics are full of "Odd-Shaped Panels" (TV TROPES), which are used to break up visual monotony, reinforce the action, depict a character's mental state, compare or contrast narrative elements, facilitate or hinder the reading process, etc (Figure 15).

Figure 15 - Mirror-shaped panels from *Margot's Room*

Source: Carroll (2011b)

Oftentimes, panel format and framing are dictated by lighting, particularly poor lighting. This can be seen in the candlelit panels in *His Face All Red* and *The Three*

Snake Leaves, the moonlit panels in *Margot's Room* and the panels lit by bioluminescence in *The Prince and the Sea*. This technique contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of darkness and to the production of feelings of entrapment. Exposed to flickering or diminishing light sources, characters and readers feel like they are being taken over by the dark of the screen.

Besides lighting, panel framing can sometimes match a diegetic framing, such as a door, a window, or a mirror (Figure 16). Gothic fiction is full of framing devices, which are living testaments to its style of excess. Gothic literature, for instance, is full of embedded narratives, tales-within-tales enclosed by a frame narrative (BALDICK, 2001, p. 77/101). Following this tradition, Carroll employs a series of graphic framing devices to foster a sense of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization entails "rendering the conventions of narrative or artistic techniques visible to the reader" (KUKKONEN, 2013, p. 170). As such, it can inspire uncanny feelings by disrupting our habitual perception of the world (BALDICK, 2001, p. 62).

Figure 16 - Example of a diegetic panel framing

Source: Carroll (2013b)

A vital shape of the comics medium is the text balloon, and text itself is formed by lines. Besides acting as a vector by connecting characters to content (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 68), the balloon shape can also function as a cue for characterization. In her comics, Carroll does that by exploring different balloon formats, framings, and colors, not to mention font styles (Figure 17). Additionally, she employs different kinds of typographical emphases to call the reader's attention to specific elements of the text. One example is the use of text between parentheses, which often reveals a character's innermost thoughts. In her comics, it is also

common for balloons or text as a whole to run off their framings. This technique, which is often "dramatic and violent" (CORCORAN, 2020, p. 6), is known as 'bleed', a truly gothic term. Carroll loves to make the page bleed, letting its vital stuff (image and text) spill and stain the screen with her art.

Figure 17 - Examples of different balloon shapes and colors

Sources: Carroll (2011a; 2011b; 2014)

Finally, shapes and lines can also be found in the work's paratext. In terms of paratext, the main point is to distinguish between publishing or marketing paratexts and those that are relevant to the narrative; the title of a novel, for instance, is important for the narrative (FLUDERNIK, 2009, p. 24). In Carroll, paratext includes titles, cover pages, favicons, hyperlink icons, browser address bars, title tags, thumbnails, closing credits, and tooltips[21]. All of these are carefully crafted by Carroll and sometimes add meaning to their respective narratives by giving clues to one or more of its central themes.

Besides color, shapes, and lines, page layout and panel arrangement can also contribute to the production of a gothic reading experience. The infinite canvas allows for a great diversity of page layouts, just as it does for panel formats. Pages can range in size, orientation, framing, background color, and gutter space, and these aspects can vary from comic to comic or even within the same comic (Figure 18). Layout is staging, and it follows narrative function (BRUNETTI, 2011, p. 51). Layout shifts can be used to illustrate mental states or indicate a temporal and/or spatial change in the story; when done abruptly or unexpectedly, however, they can

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[21] Favicons (short for 'favorite icons') are the small icons that represent a webpage and that can be saved as bookmark icons. Tooltips are the small pop-up pieces of text that appear when users hover their mouse pointer over an element in a digital application.

also evoke feelings of unease. Carroll uses this technique in all of her comics, flipping the reader's expectations and subverting traditional reading paths in the process.

Figure 18 - Different page layouts from *When the Darkness Presses*

Source: Carroll (2014)

Sometimes, though, Carroll makes things easier for her readers. For example: to counterbalance the effects of the fractured page, she organizes her panels in clusters, usually of two or three (Figure 19). That way, readers have a better idea of how to position them on the screen. And that is why her comics show a greater variation in panel format: so readers can differentiate between one cluster and the next.

Figure 19 - Example of a panel cluster in *Out of Skin*

Source: Carroll (2013b)

Lastly, Carroll subverts the notion of panels as attention units. In her comics, it is not always clear where a panel ends and another one begins. She does that either

by disarranging a series of images or by isolating a piece of text (Figure 20). In some cases, it is impossible to say whether or not a series of images share the same frame, and whether or not a piece of text is attached to a particular image. This is another of Carroll's numerous transgressive features, one that complicates the reading experience at the same time as it enriches it.

Figure 20 - Examples of text-only attention units
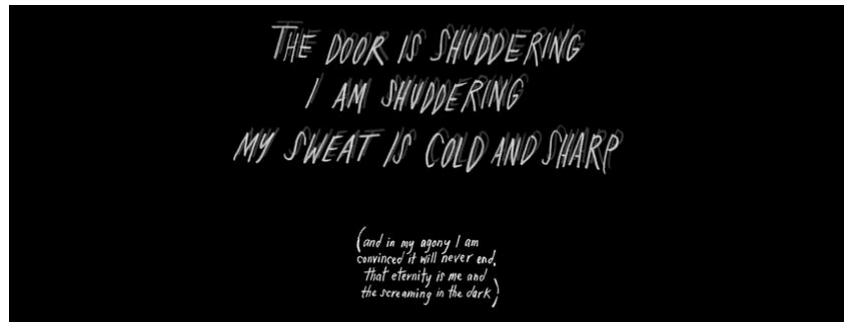
Source: Carroll (2014)

To conclude, these are some of the elements and techniques that Emily Carroll employs in the construction of her gothic narratives. They refer to artistic expression and narrative development, which come together to form her specific style. In what follows, I present a detailed investigation of her use of digital affordances, namely the infinite canvas, hypertext, and animation. These affordances are also part of artistic expression, but merit a more comprehensive analysis. They are the bleeding, pulsing, fast-beating heart of the matter.

5.4 DIGITAL AFFORDANCES IN EMILY CARROLL'S WORK

This section is divided in three parts, one for each digital affordance. The first analyzes the use of the infinite canvas in *His Face All Red* and *The Prince and the Sea*. The second examines the application of hypertext in *Margot's Room* and *The Three Snake Leaves*. The third assesses the role of animation in *Out of Skin* and *When the Darkness Presses*. The individual analyses offer an overview of the plot and other relevant features, followed by a close reading of specific panels and/or sequences. Panels and sequences were selected for their graphic and/or narrative

salience, and also for their association with one or more of the three main gothic tropes and to a specific digital affordance.

5.4.1 The infinite canvas

His Face All Red and *The Prince and the Sea* were Emily Carroll's first serious experiments with the infinite canvas. In both comics, the infinite canvas adds a sense of unfamiliarity to the reading experience while deepening the reader's immersion into the story. The effect is truly uncanny, and it turns the screen into a kind of digital *locus horribilis* where readers might feel lost, trapped, and/or encounter horrible sightings.

5.4.1.1 *His Face All Read*

His Face All Red tells the story of a character tormented by envy and guilt. He envies his big brother, who has so many things: animals, a wife, a lot of friends, better clothes, and a bigger cottage. Their village is plagued by an unknown beast, a creature that kills livestock, wrecks fences, and comes from the woods, so the two brothers volunteer to hunt it. They venture into the cold, quiet, dark woods and come across a wolf; as the little brother hides behind a tree, the big brother shoots and kills the wolf. Resentful and ashamed, the little brother shoots and kills his own brother, throwing his body into a deep, dark hole. Back in the village, he shows the townsfolk a scrap of cloth from his brother's coat and says that the beast must have devoured him. "But I killed the monster," he says. "I avenged my brother." People thank him and console him, and he is even given his brother's animals. Three days later, however, his brother comes back from the woods, and everybody is so happy that no one notices that his coat is intact. For the next few days, the little brother can no longer sleep. If this is, in fact, his brother, then why doesn't he tell the others the truth? Worse yet, thinks the little brother, "why won't he turn to look at me?". Unable to live with the guilt and the doubt, the little brother returns to the woods and goes down the hole where he had thrown his brother's body. At the bottom, something stirs and looks at him with its face all red.

Three sequences stand out as the most relevant to a graphic narrative analysis of *His Face All Red*: the 'hunting sequence' (pages 2-3), the 'doppelganger

sequence' (pages 4-6), and the 'going down the hole sequence' (7-9). There are two *loci horribiles* in the story, the woods and the hole in the ground, and two monsters, a doppelganger and a revenant, who may or may not be the same creature. The haunting is motivated by the fratricide and symbolized by the doppelganger who comes from the woods to torment the killer.

The story is narrated by the character of the little brother and follows his perspective of the events. He tells the story *in medias res*, starting from the moment his brother's doppelganger arrives in town. This sequence, which starts with the "this man is not my brother" panels, and ends with the "I killed my brother" panel (Figure 21), is taken from the middle of the fabula and placed at the beginning of the sujet. By doing that, Carroll generates narrative interest and opens a couple of curiosity gaps (STERNBERG, 1978). Why did he kill his brother? And if he really killed him, then how come his brother is alive and well? It is an effective way to hook readers into the story and convey the feeling that something sinister is going on.

Figure 21 - The "I killed my brother" panel

Source: Carroll (2010)

5.4.1.1.1 The hunting sequence

The narrative purpose of this sequence is threefold. Firstly, it closes a curiosity gap that had been opened by the previous sequences, namely, why the protagonist killed his own brother. Secondly, it establishes a series of contrasts and/or parallels between the two brothers and between the big brother and "the beast". These contrasts and parallels are cues for characterization and also ways of intensifying curiosity related to the nature of the monster(s). Lastly, it introduces the two *loci horribiles* of the story, the woods and the hole in the ground.

The sequence begins with the two brothers deep inside the woods. A series of panels reveals the ominous nature of the place and draws a few contrasts and parallels between the characters and the setting. The contrasting nature of the two brothers, which had already been set in motion on the first page, is reinforced. The little brother is shown as cowardly, small, and poor, whereas the big brother is shown as brave, big, and rich, and contrasts are supported both by image and text.

At this point, Carroll does something very ingenious. The same panels that are used to make distinctions between the two brothers are used to establish connections between them and the woods that they are in. We read that "the woods were cold", "quiet", and "dark", with the last two words carefully placed above each character like brief personality tags (Figure 22). The word 'dark' is particularly interesting here: is it describing the big brother's hair color or a hidden facet of his behavior?

Figure 22 - The settings and the characters are quiet and dark

Source: Carroll (2010)

As the brothers venture deeper into the woods, they come across some uncanny sightings: "a tree with leaves that looked like ladies' hands", "a stream that sounded like dogs growling", and "a hole deep full of black". These encounters are unexpected and disorienting, implying that these are not ordinary woods. Information is contradicted by the character of the big brother, who dismisses the sightings as "a common oak" and "a babbling brook". However, even he recognizes the strangeness of the hole: "how curious", says he, as he pauses to take a better look at it. The pause in narrative rhythm is a way of calling the readers' attention, signaling that this particular sighting should not be dismissed like the other two were (Figure 23). Also, the sense of strangeness in regard to the big brother is reinforced: the hole "smelled of lilac", and we know for a fact that the big brother has a lilac bush in his yard.

Figure 23 - The narrative salience of the hole shape

Source: Carroll (2010)

As readers start forming hypotheses about what sort of creature the brothers will find in the woods, they come across the alleged "beast". At first sight, readers are led to believe that this creature is positively unnatural. Its shape dominates the panel, looking bigger than the trees. Its yellow, squinting eye and big, sharp-toothed mouth seem to reveal a malicious intent and a human-like intelligence. But readers have been deceived. As it turns out, the beast is "just a wolf", easily killed by the big brother. The encounter is perceived through the little brother's eyes, and he is in a state of panic. Fear excites the imagination, and his fear is made clear by Carroll's use of graphic shapes.

After the wolf is killed, the little brother comes out of his hiding place to find his brother laughing. The extreme close-up of the big brother's mouth stresses that the little brother's gaze is fixed on that source of what he sees as further humiliation. Last time, the little brother's perspective was tainted by fear; this time, it is infected by shame, and his brother looks just as monstrous (to him) as the wolf did. He becomes murderous, and his intentions are revealed by the shadowy back view silhouette pointing in the big brother's direction. The little brother's role in the graphic composition shifts from reacter to actor, just as the big brother's changes from actor to goal.

The murder sequence is a perfect example of Carroll's subversion of the action star. The middle panel is filled with red (like a photo in a darkroom), and readers understand that something tragic has just occurred (Figure 24). The same

thing had happened a few panels before, when the wolf was killed. Red signifies murder and/or violence, and its newest victim is the character of the big brother.

Figure 24 - Red-filled action star panels mean murder and/or violence
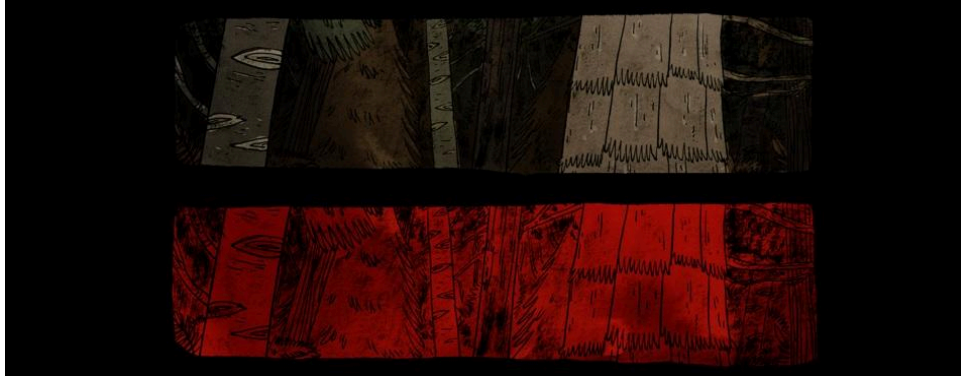
Source: Carroll (2010)

The sequence ends with the little brother carrying his brother's corpse back to the hole. By now, an important curiosity gap has been closed and readers are aware of the details surrounding the big brother's death. But curiosity is pacified only to be triggered again by a close shot of the two brothers' faces. As the little brother holds his brother's corpse and pauses to consider his options with his characteristically blank expression, the corpse's face takes on a blood-soaked, bright red hue, with a barely visible eye just slightly opened. It is a disturbing expression that arouses narrative interest by referring directly to the comic's title and to the monstrous nature of the character of the big brother. The following panel shows the little brother standing by the hole, looking down. There is no sign of the corpse, and readers understand that it has been dropped down the hole. It is a peak panel with no action, only its aftermath. Once again, Carroll has left the grisly details to the readers' imagination, making it more excitable by forcing it to work overtime.

5.4.1.1.2 The doppelganger sequence

This sequence also serves multiple purposes. It comes right after the previous one (the hunting) and takes readers back to the beginning of the sujet. Narrative past and present are starting to converge, and there is a gradual shift from curiosity (what has happened?) to suspense (what will happen now?). This sequence also

introduces the character of the doppelganger and shows readers the haunting effect that its presence has on the little brother.

The sequence opens with a borderless panel, which in Carroll usually indicates narrative salience. It shows a blood-stained scrap of cloth from the big brother's coat, which the little brother brings home as proof that his brother must have been devoured by "the beast". "But I killed the monster", he says. "I avenged my brother". The villagers believe his story, thank him, and console him, and for three days he lives in a state of joy. But joy, in Carroll's comics, is a fleeting emotion at best. The little brother has five panels of relief until his brother, or something that looks like his brother, comes back from the woods.

After the doppelganger arrives, the little brother goes back to his role as reacter. Panel composition places him back at the margins, corners, and backgrounds of panels, in the shadows of his brother's shining image. Villagers are so happy by the big brother's apparent return that they do not even realize that his coat is not torn. But the little brother does, and knows that this cannot be his real brother. Another clue to support the little brother's realization is hidden in the graphic presentation of the text. All along the comic, the use of text balloons is exclusive to the character of the big brother. This can be seen in the first three pages, with a total of six speech balloons connected to him. After his "return", he no longer speaks like that. Instead, he gets a series of four borderless captions. The balloons represented the loud and flashy personality of the big brother, whereas the captions symbolize the doppelganger's secretive and mysterious nature.

Rather than outing the little brother for murder, the doppelganger joins in on the lie and confirms his whole story. Carroll intensifies suspense by delaying the act of revenge, and character and readers keep waiting for a payback that never seems to arrive. Readers share the little brother's torment as he starts forming hypotheses for who or what the doppelganger is and what he is planning to do. This excruciating feeling is represented graphically in at least two ways: through panel arrangement and framing.

Panel arrangement is used to convey the little brother's mental state. He can no longer sleep, and stays up at night watching the doppelganger through the window. The creature is digging a hole in the ground, in the space between their two cottages. It is an unsettling image that might symbolize a number of things: maybe he is digging the little brother's grave, or forcing him to think about the other hole, or

simply indicating that something sinister will be uncovered. In any case, the effect is that of psychological torture. Panel arrangement evokes that effect by stacking one panel on top of another (Figure 25). It feels like the doppelganger is digging right through the little brother's mind.

Figure 25 - Panel arrangement can illustrate the character's feelings
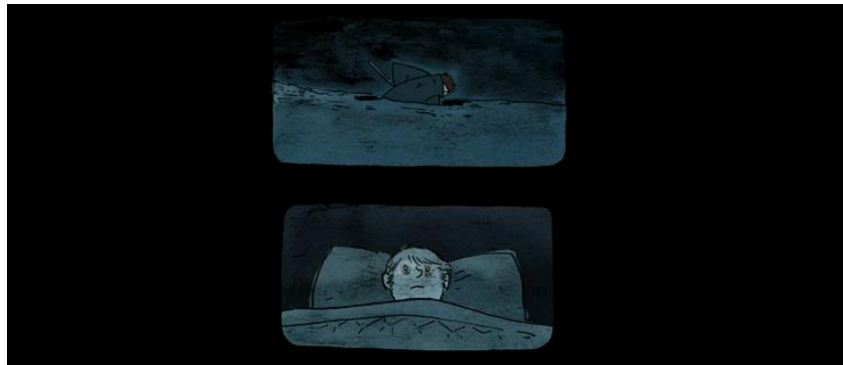
Source: Carroll (2010)

The psychological torture is also represented by a specific framing technique. After the doppelganger arrives in town, the little brother complains that he does not make eye contact. This upsets the little brother greatly. "Why won't he turn to look at me?", asks him in anguish. To give readers a sense of this feeling, Carroll crops the doppelganger's face out every time he appears. Like the little brother, readers can never meet his eyes, and they are left wondering about the big brother's motives. This technique is used to accentuate suspense, bringing an aura of inscrutability to the creature's behavior.

5.4.1.1.3 The going down the hole sequence

The main purpose of this sequence is to show the potential of the infinite canvas in the production of fear and related feelings. The infinite canvas, combined with the scrolling movement, is used to generate and intensify suspense, as well as construct a digital reading environment that assumes the qualities of a *locus horribilis*. This is also the last sequence of the comic, and it aims at an ambiguous resolution of events. It reunites the characters of the little brother and his big brother, while also exploring the nature of the hole in the ground.

The sequence starts with a decision. The little brother gathers up courage and goes back to the woods to investigate the hole where he dropped his brother's corpse. He wants to placate his own anxiety, and readers go along to alleviate theirs. As he stands at the top, readying his rope, a strong suspense gap is opened. What will he find down there? The sequence fractures the readers' gaze from the beginning. It shows two long vertical panels with the character of the little brother going down the hole (Figure 26). Both panels are too long to fit properly on the screen, requiring readers to scroll down the page in order to readjust their gaze and follow the character as he reaches the bottom. Before, during the murder, the hole acted as a witness, as an eye; now, during the descent, it acts as a mouth, swallowing the little brother whole.

Figure 26 - Fractured panels and fractured gazes

Source: Carroll (2010)

Besides helping readers readjust their gaze, the scrolling down movement fulfills a series of other functions. In terms of visual narrative grammar, it activates the different narrative stages of the panel or sequence of panels. It moves from establisher to peak, both by prolonging and advancing the action. Concerning visual design grammar, it subverts the role of the vector. As a process that conveys directionality, the role of the vector is taken over by movement (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 258). This applies both to animation and to reader input methods such as the point and click and the scrolling movements. By scrolling down the page, the readers become actors just like the little brother, and the bottom of the hole is their shared goal. Finally, the scrolling down movement also performs a very distinct

gothic function. It taps directly into the gothic imaginary of the *locus horribilis* while simultaneously exploring the resources offered by the digital medium, reinventing both in the process.

The hole is, after all, an obvious manifestation of the *locus horribilis*. It is dark, narrow, and deep. Panels become stretched and compressed, and are surrounded by a pitch black background. The hole is the driving force behind the whole narrative, haunting everyone's minds, even the author's. "It was the original idea of a bottomless pit that really got me thinking about the story that eventually became that comic", says Carroll (COLLINS, 2011). The hole also functions as a tomb, hiding the memory of a shameful murder. Like most tombs, it is uncannily silent. During the little brother's descent, there is no text of any kind. Unlike all the other pages, there are no captions or balloons. Narration comes to an end and the readers lose their guide. They feel slightly disoriented and are left to their own devices.

When the readers and the little brother reach the bottom of the hole, they can see the corpse of the big brother as a dark shape from behind, that is, as a shadowy back view silhouette. Suspense is intensified as readers wait for some kind of revelation or confrontation. From this point forward, narrative rhythm changes drastically: there is only one panel per page and no possibility of any kind of scrolling movement. Motion and lighting are severely restricted. Panels are framed by the little brother's candlelight, which does not illuminate much and seems to be dwindling. All in all, it is a very claustrophobic setup.

The little brother approaches the corpse from behind and readers can see that it is, in fact, the corpse of the big brother. The real one, not his doppelganger. The tip of one ear is visible, and it is still soaked in blood. As readers get ready to click on the "next" button, the feeling of suspense reaches its climax.

Upon clicking, what we see is a red face, turning back to look at us and at the little brother (Figure 27). It is a slight turn, but a very effective one. A red face is an uncanny face. It is unnatural and startling. This one is even more uncanny, for it should not even be turning. The big brother is dead. Isn't he? One final "next" button can be seen below the panel, inviting readers to uncover a possible explanation.

Only to offer none. The last page is a black page with a single caption and nothing else. "A spurious 'next' button lies below the gutter of the final panel, luring us to a hope of resolution. However, the link only leads to an all-black webpage scribbled with the words 'by emily carroll'" (MONFRED, p. 137). The story ends

abruptly, evoking a strong feeling of surprise and keeping a few narrative gaps permanently open. Who or what was the doppelganger? Was the big brother alive or was he a kind of undead? What happened to the little brother in the end? We will never know. There is no resolution and no release, and readers are left in a lingering state of unease.

Figure 27 - The big brother with his face all red

Source: Carroll (2010)

5.4.1.2 *The Prince and the Sea*

The Prince and the Sea tells the story of an impossible love between a human prince and a mermaid. The prince likes to sit and read near a dark pool whose waters lead to the sea. One day, as he sits there with his book, he hears a soft voice and sees a mermaid coming out of the pool. The two talk, smile, and laugh, and are soon in love. They live in very different worlds, one made of air, castles, and spires, and the other made of water, coral, and seaweed, but the prince promises that he will find a way to unite their two realms and that they will soon be together. "I swear," he says, "on my heart and my bones." So he returns to his castle and starts to plan. A few days later, he comes back to the pool to tell his lover the good news: he will build a great moat that will bridge both worlds. But his uncle, who wants the throne for himself, finds him by the pool and drowns him there. Later, when the mermaid finds the prince's bloated corpse, she cannot believe her eyes. He has fulfilled his promise: he has given up air to be with her forever, deep deep under the sea.

The three sequences selected for analysis in *The Prince and the Sea* are the 'courting sequence' (pages 2-6), the 'murder sequence' (pages 7-9), and the 'dragging down the pool sequence' (pages 11-12). The pool that leads out to the sea

is the *locus horribilis*, and the mermaid who lives in it is the monster. The haunting is motivated by the prince's promise to his mermaid sweetheart, a reckless vow which makes him pay the ultimate price.

The story is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator in a rhyming verse style and presented in the manner of a picture book. The comic is divided into a cover page and twelve other pages, almost all of them single-panel pages with a static frame: the surface of the pool and the patch of forest around it. To visualize the next pages, readers have to click on the panels themselves (there are no buttons or other icons). Carroll chooses this layout to establish a contrast between the first pages and the final one, and emphasize the narrative power of the scrolling movement. In the last page, panels are multiplied and the frame expands to include the bottom of the pool. Readers have to scroll down the page as the mermaid drags the prince's corpse to the depths. By doing that, Carroll brings a gothic feel to a fairy-tale-like story, turning a seemingly innocent romance into something considerably darker.

5.4.1.2.1 The courting sequence

Although short and fast-paced, this sequence aims for a lot of things. It introduces the character of the mermaid, it hints at the horrible nature of the pool and the vast world that lies under it, and it opens a suspense gap in regard to the prince and the mermaid's love. Will they find a way to be together? If so, how? Suspense is also intensified by the contrasting nature of their different worlds, of air and of water, a distinction that is made manifest through a series of graphic shapes.

The sequence's initial panel evokes surprise and opens a curiosity gap. A girl's head can be seen above the surface of the pool, asking the prince if he is "king of the land". She has white skin and long dark hair. Who is this girl that came from underwater? In the next panel, readers already have their answer: it is a mermaid. Curiosity is followed by other narrative interests as readers can see the prince blushing and know that he will fall in love (the complete title of the comic is, after all, "The Prince and the Sea - A Romance") (Figure 28). Two panels later, readers' expectations are met when the prince calls her "my love" and promises her that they will "soon be together".

The character of the mermaid, the mythical half-woman, half-fish, has a lot of folklore baggage (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 71). They are mysteriously attractive

to members of the opposite sex, but their sighting usually means bad luck to the ones they enamor (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 212). Her physical features and ill-fated loving nature are testaments to her monstrous essence. As most mythical creatures, the mermaid escapes classification. Is she a woman, a fish, or both? Like the werewolf or the centaur, she is categorically impure. She is also threatening, although not in conventional ways. She does not kill her victims directly, but through the curse of her love. A common trope in folklore, for instance, is the water-maiden who charms a man and lures him under water (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 213).

Figure 28 - The prince and the mermaid meet for the first time

Source: Carroll (2011a)

The mermaid in *The Prince and the Sea* is no different. Her appearance is both alluring and bestial. She has "damp white skin", "wet black eyes", and a soft voice like "a gurgle of water from a dim distant brook". She has a large fishtail and does not wear any clothes. She has a curious and inquisitive nature, and her reasoning is guided by an otherworldly logic. Even her balloons have a watery quality to them: they are filled with a turquoise hue, have long and winding tails, and show small ripples around the edges. Unlike the prince's, her world is made of curved shapes and lines. Her hair, her tail, her body, her movements, her speech, everything about her is shown with smooth, rounded contours. The prince's world, on the other hand, is angular and pointy. It is full of triangular shapes and steep angles. In visual design, the circle and the triangle belong to different worlds (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 55). The first is the realm of the natural and the organic; the second, of the inorganic and the artificial (KRESS; LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 55).

After the prince introduces himself to the mermaid, she starts talking about her home. "Jellied fish dripping limbs". Her balloons inundate the panel and leak through the borders of the image. "Pearls glinting like beads". They infiltrate the prince's mind and make him quite afraid. "Rich gardens of coral". He cowers in the corner of the panel and his shape takes up less space than the mermaid's, who keeps on describing her beautiful yet intimidating home. "Shot through with seaweed". It sounds like a sublime place occupied by uncanny creatures.

Despite his fears, the prince takes the mermaid by the hand and swears on his heart and his bones that he will solve their dilemma. A typographical emphasis indicates that his promise should not be taken lightly: his "I swear" speech balloon, as opposed to all the others, which are white in color, takes on a magenta hue (the color of jealousy and betrayal). The graphic shift calls readers' attention to the prince's words and signals their narrative salience. As we will see, the color also functions as foreshadowing for the crime committed in the next sequence. The sequence ends and a suspense gap is opened. Will he find a way for them to be together?

5.4.1.2.2 The murder sequence

This sequence is even shorter than the previous one, comprising only three panels. Yet, it is able to generate surprise and suspense, introduce the character of the murderous uncle, reinforce the role of the pool as *locus horribilis*, and show the haunting consequences of the prince's foolish promise.

It starts with the prince coming back to the pool "in a fine cheer": he would build a great moat and unite the two worlds. But his moments of joy, like those of the little brother in *His Face All Red*, do not last more than a few panels. As he kneels by the pool, he does not notice the half-concealed shape that approaches from behind with treacherous intent. "The prince had an uncle who wanted the throne", says the narrator as the figure appears. A suspense gap is opened (is his uncle going to kill him there?) and closed almost immediately (yes) (Figure 29). His uncle finds him there and drowns him in the waters of the pool. The sequence of events is so fast that the feeling of suspense is mixed with surprise. Moreover, readers have been led to believe that death and monsters belong in the mermaid's cold, bluish world, but

there's a subversion of expectations when a murderer appears out of the lavish, colorful forest and kills for power.

Figure 29 - A narrative gap is opened and almost immediately closed

Source: Carroll (2011a)

As the magenta-hued "I swear" balloon indicated, the prince became a victim of his uncle's jealousy and betrayal. The color shift was a warning sign and a foreshadow of the prince's fate. In this sequence, the use of red and blue shapes also contributes to the creation of a fateful atmosphere. The setting is permeated with exotic flora of different colors, many of them red or blue. The flowers, leaves, and twigs are angular and pointy like the red outfit worn by the prince and the blue outfit worn by his uncle, creating intriguing parallels between the scenery and the two characters. Up until the murder act, red and blue shapes are evenly distributed; after the prince is killed, however, the panel becomes saturated with blue, not only hinting at a time shift (from day to night) but also at a shift in the line of succession to the throne (from the prince to his uncle).

Just like the hole in *His Face All Red*, the pool in *The Prince and the Sea* has been the witness of a murder. What's more, the pool has been the instrument of the murder, the murder weapon, so to speak. This fact attests to the deadly nature of the pool, a trait which can also be found in folklore (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 210-1). In folk narratives, a mermaid usually comes from a body of water which is dangerous in itself. There is a widespread belief in popular culture that certain bodies of water require victims and demand human sacrifices from time to time (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 211). Many times, things like wells and springs are also seen as

entryways into underground realms, and fear is not at all an unreasonable response to them (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 210). The prince was right to be afraid, but could not escape his doom.

5.4.1.2.3 The dragging down the pool sequence

This sequence has a similar structure to the last one from *His Face All Red* (the going down the hole), and similar goals. It reunites the characters of the prince and the mermaid, explores the nature of the dark pool, and brings a resolution to the events. Likewise, its main purpose is to demonstrate the narrative possibilities of the infinite canvas. This time, however, it is used to generate and prolong feelings of shock and disgust in its construction of a digital *locus horribilis*.

The sequence begins when the mermaid finds her lover's corpse by the pool. She raises his head with her hands and shows readers his bloated, rotten, lifeless face. It is a grotesque face, or a "Nightmare Face" (TV TROPES), distorted and disgusting. This initial panel also opens a suspense gap, as readers start anticipating the mermaid's reaction. What will she do? Naturally, readers expect her to feel some kind of distress, to become sad, or angry, or both. As it turns out, that is not what happens at all.

The next and last page shows the mermaid dragging the prince down the pool with her. Like the related page from *His Face All Red*, it fractures the readers' gaze and makes them use the scrolling down movement to fit the panels on the screen. And just like the hole, the pool becomes both an eye and a mouth. It has witnessed a crime and is now swallowing the evidence. Everything else that has been said about the scrolling movement in *His Face All Red* can be applied to *The Prince and the Sea*: it activates the different narrative stages of the sequence of panels, it subverts the role of the vector, and it taps into the gothic imaginary of the *locus horribilis*.

By scrolling down, readers also break with the framing pattern of the comic and perforate the bottom of what had been, up until then, a rigid and static panel border (Figure 30). It is as if readers are plunging into the water's depths along with the characters, into a world which can only be accessed by transgressing previously established rules and conventions. In Western comics, characters usually enter settings or initiate movements from the left side of panels, and leave settings or end movements to their right. Prolongation panels often follow this logic and prolong

left-to-right motions. Thanks to the infinite canvas, however, Carroll is able to subvert this logic, disorienting readers by making them go not just down but right to left as well. The two transgressions (going deeper than the bottom of the frame and breaking with the rigidity of the previous panels) also serve a narrative purpose. They suggest that the mermaid's world is much bigger than the lands above, and far beyond the comprehension of its people.

Figure 30 - Breaking the pattern and transgressing the borders
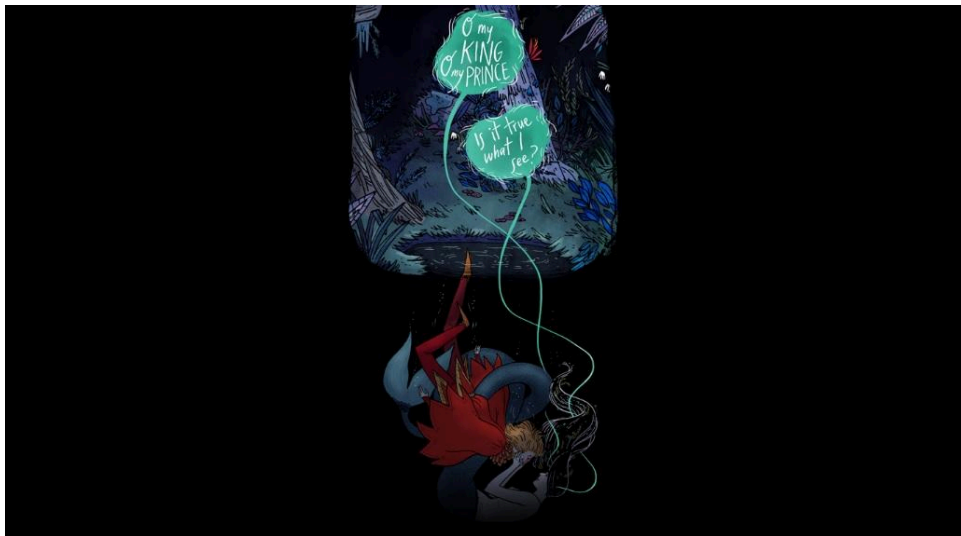
Source: Carroll (2011a)

Its incomprehensible nature is revealed through the mermaid's reaction. At first, it seems like she will despair. "O my king o my prince", she says, as she holds the prince's corpse in her hands, "is it true what I see?". But as she drags him closer and closer to the seabed, readers can see that this is not the case. "Have you given up air out of your love for me?!", she asks in delight. "And these are the parts that you swore on", she adds, as she removes his heart and his insides by hand. She is very touched by what she thinks was a selfless act, loving him even in death and despite his ghastly appearance.

A place that hides such unfathomable creatures is another manifestation of the *locus horribilis* (Figure 31). It is dark, vast, and inhospitable. Panels become borderless and scattered amid almost total darkness. Like the hole in *His Face All Red*, it functions as a tomb for the character of the prince. It has strange fauna and flora, with bioluminescent seaweed and jellyfish. It has "dark caverns" and "ruined colonnades", signs that it has submerged parts of the surface world before and that it

could do it again. It is a sublime place: beautiful yet deadly, inspiring both awe and terror.

Figure 31 - The pool as a manifestation of the *locus horribilis*

Source: Carroll (2011a)

The last panel shows a close shot of the prince's and the mermaid's heads. She is holding him gently and leaning in for a kiss. The panel is heart-shaped in a subtle and not immediately apparent way. For the mermaid, it is a perfectly happy ending. For the prince, it is a bitter one. In a way, this comic subverts the tale of *The Little Mermaid* (1837), in which the title's mermaid is willing to trade her voice for legs in order to marry a prince (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 72). In *The Prince and the Sea*, it is the prince who trades air, even if unwillingly, in order to be with the mermaid.

As for the readers, they become trapped there with the dead prince and the joyful mermaid. The last page is a dead-end page, a page with no outgoing links. There are no buttons or icons to click on and go back to the homepage or any other page for that matter. There is no way out of these "dark and cool waters, deep deep under the sea".

5.4.2 Hypertext

From *Margot's Room* on, Emily Carroll started experimenting with other digital affordances besides the infinite canvas, such as the hypertext. Like the infinite canvas, the use of hypertext contributes to a more immersive reading experience at the same time that it brings a sense of unfamiliarity to it. In *Margot's Room* and *The*

Three Snake Leaves, for instance, Carroll offers readers the possibility to follow nonlinear or multilinear reading paths. Readers have to use the point and click action to navigate around the pages in a "nontrivial effort" (AARSETH, 1997). In these two comics, this process takes on a gothic quality and converts the screen into a digital *locus horribilis*.

5.4.2.1 *Margot's Room*

Margot's Room tells the story of a woman in mourning for her daughter and for her husband. She meets her husband at her father's funeral, and the two get married soon after. Their young daughter, Margot, has her mother's hair and her father's eyes; but she gets sick and dies. After that, the couple grows apart, as grieving couples often do. Her husband begins spending more time in the village, and she spends most of her time alone at home. One day, he becomes lost in the woods and is gone longer than usual. He follows a path lit by the moon (a full moon) and arrives at a gentle stream. There, he drinks from its waters and sees dark shapes around, also drinking deeply. He returns home, but he is changed. Every night, something drives him out and keeps him away. One night (on another full moon), as the woman stands at the window in Margot's room, her husband comes home and growls at her from the bedroom door. He is not a man anymore. He leaps onto her and strikes her with his claws. She grabs a piece of broken glass and strikes back and does not stop until he looks once more like the man she used to love.

The analysis of *Margot's Room* is divided into three parts. The first part covers the root page (page 1), from where all other pages branch out. The second part encompasses the first four sequences: the 'flowers sequence' (page 1.1), the 'doll sequence' (page 1.2), the 'gone sequence' (page 1.3), and the 'wall sequence' (page 1.4). As for the third part, it delves into the last sequence, the 'blood sequence' (page 1.5). There are two *loci horribiles* in the story, the woods and the domestic space, and a monster, a werewolf, who is born in the former and dies in the latter. The haunting is motivated by a tragic and dysfunctional family life which involves the death of a child, domestic abuse, and a mariticide.

The story is narrated by the character of the woman and follows her perspective of the events. She tells the story in hindsight, after she has killed her

own husband. The comic is divided into a root page and five branching pages, that is, pages that can only be accessed by starting at or going back to the root page and clicking on specific icons. By building this elaborate scenario, Carroll explores the narrative capabilities of hypertext, forces readers to perform some nontrivial effort to advance the story, and generates a particular kind of narrative interest. Readers have to act as investigators, finding clues and collecting evidence about the woman's life in order to understand what has happened in Margot's room. By making readers come back to the root page after each sequence, Carroll keeps their curiosity aroused until the moment of revelation.

5.4.2.1.1 The root page

The root page is made of a large single panel which dominates the screen, showing the state of Margot's bedroom right after the horrible things that have happened there (Figure 32). It is a close distance shot of a deeply intimate space. Only a corner of the room is visible, but the image is very rich in details. It is a sparsely furnished room, containing solely a bed and a bedside table. It is also modestly decorated with a bouquet of dead flowers, a small oval mirror, and a rag doll. Moonlight and rain are getting inside through a broken window on the right wall, and signs of struggle are glaringly apparent. Blood and broken glass cover the floor and the surface of the bed, which is also in tatters. The panel is enveloped by shadows and dark patches, and the shading adds a mucky quality to the whole atmosphere.

Figure 32 - The root page showing Margot's room

Source: Carroll (2011b)

The image is accompanied by a caption text in the form of a lyric poem, mentioning some of the elements that are shown in the panel. At first, readers have no idea who Margot is or who the source of the poem is; however, as they examine the image and the text more closely, they start formulating a few hypotheses. To begin with, the poem mentions explicitly four of the shapes which can be seen in the panel: the flowers, the doll, the blood, and the moon. Whoever the narrator is, it is someone who knew Margot personally and was directly involved with the incidents that took place in her room. "First he gave me flowers", it says, prompting readers to construct a mental image of a male character who was probably in love with the narrator. "And second I made her a doll". "Her" is obviously Margot, who is or was very likely a child and someone close to the narrator's heart. In just two sentences, readers can already visualize a whole family, and a happy one at that. "But third he'd be gone for hours and fourth we hit a wall". Happiness does not last long, and these two lines introduce a couple of complicating elements, indicating distance and obstruction. Moreover, the word "hit" subtly lodges in the mind and will resurface later on. "Lastly there was blood, (rich and raw in the light of the moon)". Clearly, someone was attacked and possibly killed, but who? Margot is an obvious candidate (it is her room, after all), but readers cannot know for sure. "I can't forget I will always regret what happened in Margot's room". The poem ends, curiosity is built, and the gaps are opened. What happened in Margot's room? And why does the narrator regret it?

If readers do not take the time to inspect the page more thoroughly, they will never know. Inexperienced readers might read the poem and make a few connections between text and image, but never advance beyond that. They might look for a 'next' button to click on and, not finding any, get stuck on the root page. They can almost be excused, for the page is a complete narrative phase in itself. The image functions as establisher, but the text covers the functions of initial (lines 1 and 6), prolongation (lines 2-4 and 7), and peak (lines 5 and 8-9). More experienced readers, however, will realize that they can click on certain hidden icons to expand the space of *Margot's Room* and unfold the whole narrative. By using the poem as a guide, the icons are as follows: (1) the dead flowers ("he gave me flowers"), (2) the rag doll ("I made her a doll"), (3) the broken window ("he'd be gone for hours"), (4) the oval mirror ("we hit a wall"), and (5) the blood stains ("lastly, there was blood")

(Figure 33). The poem even indicates the linear ordering of the events, but readers can navigate through the story and reconstruct the narrative in many different ways. "Readers complete the text by creating a coherent storyline from the scattered spatial organization of panels on a page" (MONFRED, 2018, p. 135). The overall layout works as a symbol of a fragmented subjectivity that needs to be reconstructed by reliving or recalling the events that led to the destruction of family harmony.

Figure 33 - The clickable elements of the root page

Source: author

Besides generating narrative interest, the combination of the hypertext feature and the point and click action intensifies readers' immersive experience. The structure of the comic forces readers to pay close attention to its content, making them look for details before connecting the pieces of information. It also prolongs curiosity and suspense by delaying the progression of the action, bringing readers back to the root page at least four times. After each sequence, readers have to click on a "return home" button and search around the room for the next clue. As usual, the choice of words is not arbitrary: by suggesting that they are returning home, Carroll makes readers actually feel at home in Margot's bedroom. Despite its gruesomeness, it has become a familiar territory for them. This feeling is reinforced by the recurring presence of graphic shapes related to thresholds, such as mirrors, windows, and doors. Through them, readers are invited to enter and exit the domestic space alongside the character of the woman.

The use of hypertext also contributes to the creation of a digital *locus horribilis*. Going back to the root page after each narrative sequence does more than

making readers feel at home; it makes them feel trapped there. Like the character of the woman, they cannot escape their situation, at least not until they deal with the forces (the images and the words) that are haunting them. It is an ambivalent feeling that crosses the boundaries of the familiar and the unfamiliar, turning the root page into an uncanny page. Also, groping in the dark looking for clues can be a highly disorienting activity, often leaving readers lost and confused. Carroll intensifies this experience by connecting readers' activity with a popular narrative trope: the choice of roads (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 268). The choice of roads trope is especially common in fairy tales, and it designates the need to make a momentous choice or to take a certain road or direction from among others (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 268). In the case of *Margot's Room*, the choice is not in the characters' hands, but in the readers'. It is the readers who have to choose between paths, and the trope becomes part of the reading process itself. It is a fairy tale trope in the digital world, very appropriate for someone who has been called a "fairy tale teller in the digital age" (HUBBARD, 2016). It is also very appropriate for a gothic comic, given that places where roads diverge or cross have always been regarded as unlucky or dangerous. In many cultures, they have also been the sites of executions and/or burials (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 333). Unsurprisingly, this is the case of Margot's room: a haunted place that has seen its share of death and misfortune.

5.4.2.1.2 The first four sequences

Following a chronological order, the first four sequences lay the groundwork for the final confrontation between the woman and her husband. Each sequence has its raison d'être, and together they present readers with the series of events that have led to the gradual deterioration of family life and culminated in the brutal showdown of the last sequence. The 'flowers sequence' (page 1.1) introduces the characters of the woman and the husband and generates intrigue in regard to the outcome of their relationship. The 'doll sequence' (page 1.2) reveals the fate of Margot and shows the first signs of conflict between the couple. The 'gone sequence' (page 1.3) deepens their detachment and adds another layer of curiosity by telling the embedded tale of the husband in the woods. The 'wall sequence' (page 1.4) exposes the signs of domestic abuse and approximates narrative time to the fictive present, preparing readers for the next and last sequence.

All four sequences intensify curiosity by delaying the closure of the gaps. They also intensify feelings of sadness, anger, and fear by focusing on the characters' suffering. Carroll's way of doing that involves manipulating exposition and showing only the aftermath of events. Each sequence is a response to a major tragic life event which takes place off-panel, in-between sequences. The woman's father dies before the beginning of the fabula, Margot dies between pages 1.1 and 1.2, the husband is transformed between pages 1.2 and 1.3, and the woman is hit by her husband between pages 1.3 and 1.4. This technique also establishes a high contrast between the first four sequences and the last one, where every single painful moment is shown in excruciating detail instead of being hidden from view.

The first sequence is the 'flowers sequence' (page 1.1). It starts with an extremely long shot of the woman next to a bare white tree. She stands at the bottom right corner of the panel, a position that evokes feelings of loneliness and isolation (Figure 34). There is a reason for that: she is in mourning for her father, who was buried that same day. Little by little, the panels become smaller and the shots get closer, indicating that someone is approaching. "There you are", says a voice from behind her. She turns around and looks at the man who would soon become her husband. "Would you like some company?", he asks. Suddenly, she is not so alone anymore.

Figure 34 - Extremely long shots can evoke feelings of loneliness and isolation
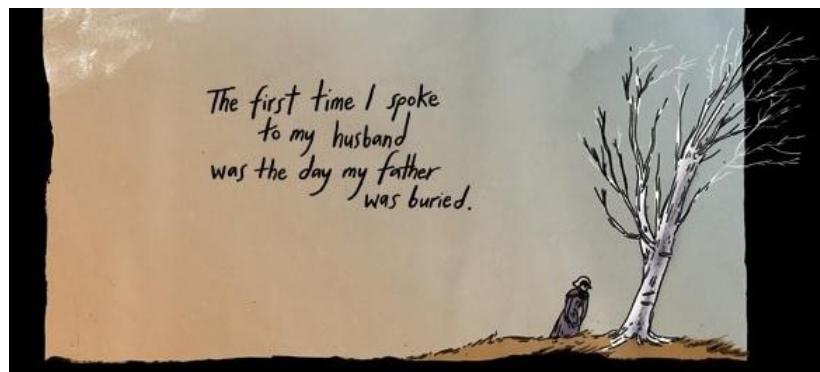
Source: Carroll (2011b)

At this point, an intrusive peak panel interrupts their meeting and breaks the graphic pattern. It is saturated in red and it shows a white silhouette of the man smeared by a dark ink blot. The blot covers his face and illustrates the fact that the woman cannot remember him like that anymore. "I try now, but his face blurs at the

edges, bleeding like a drop of ink in water". This panel opens another curiosity gap, to be closed only near the end. What happened to him?

As usual, Carroll uses color as a cue for characterization. The future husband's text balloons go from light orange to bright red, suggesting his excitement and his loud and festive personality. The woman's balloons, on the other hand, are transparent, as if she were empty inside. Contrast is reinforced by their dialogue. They are talking about death, and the woman says that she wants hers to be quiet. "And the funeral… something simple", she adds. To which the man replies: "Really? I'll have mine loud then".

The sequence ends with their wedding. There is a very close shot of the couple kissing, followed by a passionate embrace. Even though it is tainted by the narrator's guilt and grief, it is a rare moment of joy and intimacy. Unfortunately, it only lasts two panels. That is all the happiness that the couple will ever get (Figure 35). As for the readers, they now know who the narrator is and who the man referenced in the poem is. But they are no closer to finding out what happened in Margot's room, so they return home and click on the shape of the doll.

Figure 35 - Very brief moments of happiness

Source: Carroll (2011b)

The second sequence is the 'doll sequence' (page 1.2). It begins with a very close shot of the doll. The woman is making her in the likeness of her daughter, Margot, like a monument in her honor. She is drawing the doll's facial features, painting the doll's eyes blue, and tying a ribbon bow around the doll's neck. It is an uncanny, lifeless double of her daughter, and the closest the readers will get to an

image of Margot (Figure 36). The woman is talking about her in the past tense, and readers realize that she was born and died in-between sequences. "Why hadn't I been able to save her?", asks the woman, hinting at the first signs of guilt and grief.

Figure 36 - The doll, an uncanny double of Margot

Source: Carroll (2011b)

After that, there is a sequence of sixteen vertical panels with a static frame. They offer readers a glimpse of Margot's room from outside, through the bedroom door, and cover three different time periods, which are marked by daylight, darkness, and moonlight. The purpose of this sequence is to show and prolong characters' suffering, especially the woman's. Both the use of frames within frames (door frames and panel frames) and the focus on violent emotions are testimonies of the Gothic's style of excess.

As the woman adds the final touches to the doll and stops for a moment to cry silently over her daughter, her husband appears at the door. It is a shadowy back view silhouette, which communicates his dark intentions without the need for text. In point of fact, the whole daylight cluster of panels is eerily and unusually silent, and their inability to put their feelings into words is an indicator of how much they have grown apart. Another indicator is the distance between the panels themselves, with long black gutters separating them. Panels also become smaller and smaller, evoking feelings of entrapment and self-doubt (Figure 37). "If we hadn't lost Margot", wonders the woman, "would I still have lost my husband? Would I still have lost myself?". The narrative gaps accumulate, but readers are one step closer to finding out the truth. At the end of the sequence, they are offered a sneak peek of the final

scene, a small taste to whet their appetites. Properly aroused, readers return home and click on the shape of the window.

Figure 37 - Panel shape and arrangement can evoke feelings of entrapment and self-doubt

Source: Carroll (2011b)

The third sequence is the 'gone sequence' (page 1.3). It tells the embedded story of the husband about the night that he got lost in the woods. His tale begins in a different color palette than the rest, with shades of blue and purple glowing in a soft white light. The establisher panel shows a faint line of dark trees and is followed by a borderless panel almost completely dominated by darkness. All that readers can see is a very small bright silhouette of the husband accompanied by text captions. "The night had been dark, and the trees thick", it says, "and my husband had become lost" (Figure 38). Text and image complement each other and together begin to craft another manifestation of the *locus horribilis*.

Figure 38 - Lost in the darkness of the woods and the page
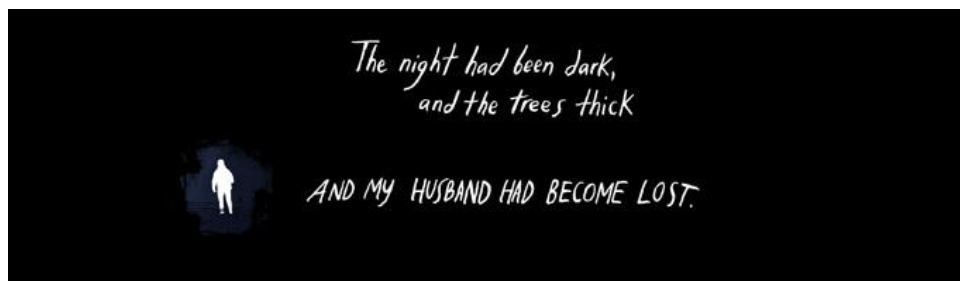
Source: Carroll (2011b)

The soft white glow is coming from moonlight, and it illuminates a path that the husband had never seen before. The moon guides him to a stream, and he

kneels to drink from it. As he is drinking, he hears voices in the water, "as though the very water growled"[22]. "My friend my friend", rumble the voices, "listen listen leave leave". Tension is building up and reaches its climax in the next cluster of panels. The husband turns to look downstream and sees "dark shapes also drinking deeply". The shapes are almost imperceptible but for a pair of white bulging eyes. It is difficult to see where the creature's outline ends and the panel borders start (Figure 39). A subtle peak panel showing only the shape of the moon on a black background cuts the action short. The husband wakes up near the stream as the sun is rising. There are no voices or dark shapes around, and he returns home. In only eleven panels, Carroll has built a fascinating example of the woods as *locus horribilis*. It is a dark, silent, and still place. It is also unfamiliar and unnatural, with strange sights and sounds. People can get lost and trapped there, especially at night. And it hides and breeds monstrous creatures of the mythical kind.

Figure 39 - Unclear outlines and panel borders
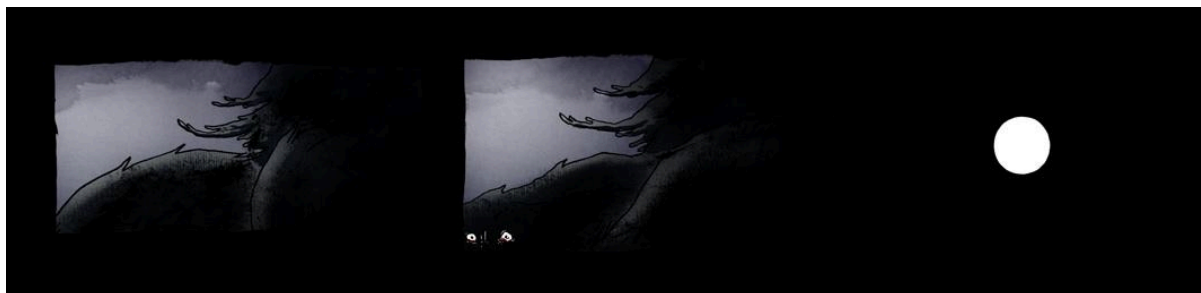
Source: Carroll (2011b)

If the embedded story has a blue and purple palette, the frame story has a red-tinted one. It begins with the character of the woman as she waits for her husband to come back and it ends with her being rejected after his return. Loneliness and isolation frame the embedded story. She is relegated once again to the bottom corner of a large panel, in a graphic parallel with the first sequence. This time, however, the signs of her abandonment are multiplied by the close distance shots of the domestic space. A vacant house, with its open windows and empty beds, bears the marks of her family's absence. The readers, however, have not yet abandoned her. They return home once again and click on the mirror shape.

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[22] Could this be the same stream that the two brothers encounter in *His Face All Red* during the hunt for the beast, which the little brother describes as "a stream that sounded like dogs growling"?

The fourth sequence is the 'wall sequence' (page 1.4). A group of three oval panels shows the woman through the mirror in Margot's room. She is combing her hair and thinking about her daughter. She has heavy bags under her eyes, which at first look like a sign of fatigue. A closer inspection, however, reveals that they are not weary, but bruised; they carry the signs of a beating, and both her actions and her thoughts support that fact. The rest of the sequence shows the woman doing laborious and repetitive work for her abusive husband: "still I patched his clothes", "I cooked his meals", "I cleaned his house".

Besides prolonging the main character's suffering, this sequence also establishes the domestic space as another kind of *locus horribilis*. It is a poor, dreary, and remote place. It traps the woman inside, functioning as a prison for the institution of marriage. It was supposed to be a safe, familiar place; instead, it has been invaded by a monstrous creature. It carries painful memories of sickness and assault, and it has witnessed a lot of death. It is a cursed place.

Figure 40 - A monstrous speech balloon

Source: Carroll (2011b)

The last panels of the sequence approximate it to the fictive present. They show the woman opening the window in Margot's bedroom; it starts to rain and readers can see that the moon is in the sky, just like in the root page. Darkness blurs the borders of the panels and they become more irregularly placed, indicating possible dangers and threats to physical integrity. The narrator reminds readers of the driving question behind the whole narrative and adds a final intriguing touch to it: "what happened in Margot's room happened because my husband changed". Changed how? As she says these words, something approaches her from behind. Readers cannot see who or what it is yet, but its text balloons are already visible. Its words are jumbled and completely illegible, representing uncanny, monstrous

sounds (Figure 40). The story is coming full circle and curiosity is aroused to its peak. Readers return home one last time and click on the blood stain shapes.

5.4.2.1.3 The last sequence

The last sequence, or the 'blood sequence' (page 1.5), reveals the character of the monster and closes the last narrative gaps. It also explores the infinite canvas and the scrolling movement to create a dizzying user interface and another example of a digital *locus horribilis*.

This sequence begins exactly where the previous one ended. A series of three panels shows a monstrous creature at the door, drawing nearer. The monster is a black mass of smudge, barely visible but for its eyes, fangs, and claws. It is an intimidating presence, made more so by its heavy obscurity. Something shadowed or half-concealed is interpreted as something more than representation can encompass (KAVKA, 2002, p. 227). He is crossing the frame of the door, threatening the woman's safety and intimacy. Panels narrow in for a very close shot of their faces, and their eyes look like full moons in the night sky (Figure 41). Readers cannot tell if the woman is surprised or not, but she says the monster's name out loud ("Gilles"), so they know that it is her husband.

Figure 41 - The woman and her monstrous husband
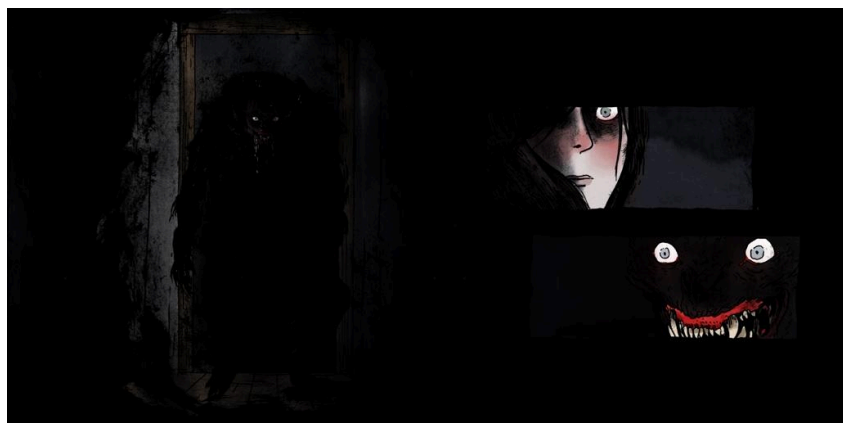
Source: Caroll (2011b)

A peak panel shows the creature attacking the woman viciously and breaking a window pane in the process. She survives the strike, but is covered in blood and looks terribly hurt. Her balloons change from transparent to bright red and become

severely distorted, with irregular shapes, twisted tails, and scribbled text. After the attack, the page layout itself is changed, and both the readers and the woman have to reorient themselves. From this moment on, the page assumes a distorted quality: panels become scattered and more loosely shaped, background space grows larger, and visual perspective shifts constantly (Figure 42). The excess of style is almost overwhelming, but the woman's cries and moans help guide readers through the page like a breadcrumb trail in a gothic forest.

Figure 42 - Scattered panels on a chaotic page layout

Source: Carroll (2011b)

The last page becomes another example of the digital *locus horribilis*, albeit in a different way from the root page. Instead of the point and click, readers have to resort once again to the scrolling movement. They have to move in a way that explores the entire volume of the page, downwards or to the right, hoping to find, amidst the darkness, the unsteady elements that connect the narrative and make it unfold. At the same time, they have to witness a woman being tortured by a monstrous creature and wait as the panels sadistically prolong her suffering. This format intensifies feelings of anxiety, entrapment, and disorientation, reinforcing the horrible natures of Margot's blood-soaked bedroom and the uncanny digital realm that hosts it.

After being attacked, the woman loses control of herself and strikes back violently against her assailant. Physical threat is a provocation to anger, and anger is a dangerous emotion. It makes you more likely to lose control and hurt others back (EKMAN; FRIESEN, 2003, p. 78-9). Similar to fear, anger is accompanied by

changes in the whole body, but it is even more apparent in the face, specifically in the eyes (EKMAN; FRIESEN, 2003, p. 80). Like the bulging, wild, raging eyes of the woman as she grabs a piece of broken glass from the floor. Her retribution comes in the form of a series of highly warped action star panels. Her stabs are shown in vivid red brushstrokes, as if the page itself is being painted with blood (Figure 43). Shapes and lines become muddled and attention units get more difficult to discern, but one thing is certain: it is the husband's time to suffer.

Figure 43 - Action star panels painting the page with blood red

Source: Carroll (2011b)

"I didn't stop when he cried out", she confesses. "I held onto his hair and I didn't stop". "I looked into his eyes and I didn't stop". "I didn't stop until he looked once more like the man I loved". As the woman bends herself down to embrace her husband's bloody corpse, a gap is closed. What happened in Margot's room? A woman killed her own husband, who was not only abusive but monstrous. Readers click on the text and are sent back to the root page one final time. They are home, after all.

5.4.2.2 *The Three Snake Leaves*

The Three Snake Leaves tells the story of the tragic love between a prince and a princess. The princess has only one condition for marrying: when one of them dies, the other one has to be sealed inside the crypt with the deceased. "Do you still want to marry the princess?" the prince is asked. He does. And she dies. Locked with the corpse and waiting for his death, the prince sees a small green snake creeping in through the cracks in the wall. He takes out a small sword and kills it.

Another snake comes in, a blue one this time, carrying three leaves in its mouth. It places the leaves carefully on the green snake's wounds… and the dead serpent comes back to life. So the prince places the leaves on the princess's eyes and mouth, and she too comes back to life. They bang and cry at the door and are released. Soon after the princess's resurrection, the prince's father becomes ill. The couple boards a ship and races to be by his side. During the trip, however, the princess falls in love with the ship's captain. One night, they tear the prince from his bed and fling him into the sea. A loyal servant, who had been given the three magical snake leaves, finds the prince's corpse and resurrects him too. Back in the kingdom, the prince arrives just in time to find the princess telling the court that he has died from a fever. She is sentenced to death along with the ship's captain, and they are sent away to perish in the sea.

There are only two sequences in *The Three Snake Leaves*, and an intermediary page that signals the transition from the root page to the branching ones. The first sequence is the 'crypt sequence' (page 1), and the second can be either the 'prince sequence' or the 'princess sequence' (page 3), depending on whose perspective readers choose to follow. The *locus horribilis* is the crypt that gives the sequence its name, and the monsters are the characters of the prince and the princess themselves after they have been resurrected. The haunting is motivated by the prince's impulsive acts of love, which disregard the princess's wishes and put them both in mortal danger.

The story is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator and follows the perspective of two different characters. A root panel at the end of the first sequence offers readers the possibility of accessing two different branching pages. Unlike *Margot's Room*, readers do not have to access all of them in order to have a complete picture of the events. What they get instead is a different focalizer. Carroll lets readers choose between two paths and follow the events through the eyes of the prince or the princess. By doing that, Carroll develops and expands on the narrative capabilities of the hypertext, presenting readers with a multilinear narrative. She also gives readers a chance to empathize with the character of the princess. *The Three Snake Leaves* is based on a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, who were famous for their cautionary tales of women and/or children being punished for behaving badly. In Carroll's version, the 'princess sequence' adds complexity to the title character and to the trope of the ill-behaved female.

5.4.2.2.1 The crypt sequence

As the first sequence of the comic, the 'crypt sequence' fulfills many functions. It introduces the characters of the prince and the princess, sets up the crypt as a kind of *locus horribilis*, and inspires a narrative response by generating surprise and suspense.

The sequence begins with a cluster of four wordless panels. They show the character of the prince as he waits for death next to the corpse of his wife, the princess. The panels are small and narrow, evoking a claustrophobic feeling from the start. Panel frames are loose and irregular, like they could collapse on top of the characters at any time. The color palette is very somber, with a mix of gray tones and a pale yellow light that emanates from a candle. There is also white, which in Carroll's work usually symbolizes death. The lifeless body of the princess is white, as is the background which engulfs the panels. Death is all around and characters are surrounded by it.

Figure 44 - Expositional panels show the couple's backstory

Source: Carroll (2013a)

A floral border framing marks a temporal shift that functions as exposition. In five panels, readers are shown the story of the couple's short-lived love, from their courting to the princess's death. Two horizontal panels establish a powerful graphic contrast between her living and lifeless states: in the first panel, she is in love and alive as she engages in sexual intercourse; in the second, she is already sick and dying as she undergoes a bloodletting treatment (Figure 44). As always, moments of

joy and happiness are swift, and Carroll opts for focusing on her characters' suffering. Through text, readers are also made aware of the absurd prerequisite for their union. "When she dies", reads the caption, "you will be sealed inside the crypt with her". "Just as she will be sealed inside if you are the first to perish". This preposterous condition has a fairy tale-like logic to it, and readers adjust their expectations accordingly.

Back to the narrative present, a suspense gap is opened. What will become of the prince? Will he die as well, inside the crypt? As readers ponder these questions, they are surprised by the sound and the image of a small green snake creeping in through the wall. The snake approaches the princess's corpse with a mysterious determination, but the prince cuts its movement short by slashing it three times with his sword. The peak panel itself is cut to pieces by the prince's sweeping strokes.

The surprises keep coming, for another snake slithers into the crypt. It is a blue one this time, and it is carrying three small leaves in its mouth. It places the leaves carefully on the green snake's wounds, who magically and instantly comes back to life. A curiosity gap opens as to the nature of the snakes. What kind of animal is this? They are obviously magical creatures, and their presence reinforces the fantastic tone of the story. "Because of animal's liminal state as creatures less than human but more than mere objects, they have been frequently associated with the supernatural" (COLAVITO, 2008, p. 139). The prince places the leaves on the princess's eyes and mouth, and she is resurrected in three close shots. The signs of life are clear: her hands move, her eyes open, and her cheeks and fingers acquire a pinkish complexion (Figure 45).

Figure 45 - Signs of death and signs of life

Source: Carroll (2013a)

The sequence ends with the prince and the princess standing at the crypt's door, and their desperate bangs and shouts are represented by red jagged graphic lines. Thanks to its dark, oppressive, and claustrophobic nature, the crypt serves as a classic manifestation of the *locus horribilis*. It is morbid and decrepit, with cracks on the wall and blood stains on the floor. It is an uncanny place where strange creatures can materialize and fantastic things can happen. And it traps the living alongside the dead.

The two final panels show the white silhouettes of the princess and the prince still banging at the door. They are decorated with the same floral border framing of the expositional panels, but with an added element. Two arrows are detached from each side of the frame, one pointing to the princess and the other to the prince. By using the frame itself as a vector, Carroll gives a subtle indication that the shapes can and should be clicked on. If readers hover the mouse over the panels, the signals accumulate: panels become saturated with red, stained with blood, and invaded by text. "Let me out!!!", they say, each in their own space. To let them out, readers have to click on one of them (Figure 46). This time, however, the "choice of roads" (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 268) is a little more complex than in *Margot's Room*. Readers can only choose one path, but nothing prevents them from coming back later on and choosing another. In stories with alternative plot strands both courses of action are 'real', and the consequences of these actions come to exist alongside each other (FLUDERNIK, 2009, p. 30). In any case, the alarming red-hued and blood-stained graphic features of the activated panels foreshadow a grisly future for both. When readers click on their chosen path, they are already expecting the worst.

Figure 46 - Who do you choose, the princess or the prince?

Source: Carroll (2013a)

5.4.2.2.2 The multilinear sequences

An intermediary page marks the transition from a linear to a multilinear structure. It shows the crypt door opening to release the couple back to the outside world. If readers take time to investigate this page before clicking on the door, they might realize that it contains small pieces of hidden text. On the prince's intermediary page, the title tag reads "they heard us shouting…"; if readers hover the cursor over the panel, a tooltip complements the sentence with "... and let me back into the world". On the princess's page, however, the second part of the sentence changes. The title tag is the same, but the tooltip displays "... and forced me back out into the world". It is a subtle difference that adds an intriguing nuance to the princess's characterization.

The two sequences elaborate on the nature of the princess as a monstrous character, but each of them presents her in a different lens. The role of the ship's captain also changes: he can be either an antagonist or a love interest. Both sequences rely on the manipulation of suspense and end on an ambiguous note. And both tell the same tragic story, but one is a tragic love story whereas the other is a tragic revenge story.

The two multilinear sequences begin the same way. The couple is on its way to visit the prince's father, who has become ill. A large panel shows a ship at sea under an overcast sky, and a series of four wordless panels signals that the prince and the princess have grown apart. They are on different levels of spatial composition, and the lack of text suggests that they have nothing to say to each other. Readers start wondering about the future of their relationship when the narrator steps in. "During the voyage", says the narrator, "the princess fell in love with the ship's captain". A tilted oval panel complements the information by showing the princess and the ship's captain together. In the prince's version, they look lustful and carefree, and are colored in red and magenta, the colors of violence, murder, jealousy, and betrayal. In the princess's version, however, they look sorrowful and careworn, and are colored mostly in gray, the color of sadness.

The distinct versions are clear indicators of how each character perceives the event. The prince's perspective follows the classic representation of ill-behaved women in popular folk tales, who are depicted as irresponsible and downright evil.

The princess's perspective, however, complicates this portrayal by infusing her actions with a melancholic quality. A three-panel strip of the princess and the ship's captain kissing reinforces this idea. In the 'prince sequence', the characters have an incomplete shape and readers cannot see their faces; in the 'princess sequence', readers can see that the princess actually looks sad and weary (Figure 47). Why is that? Maybe she is just worried about her future. Or maybe she is tired of playing the role of traitorous bitch, over and over again, to appease traditional male fantasies of discipline and punishment.

Figure 47 - One action, two distinct perspectives
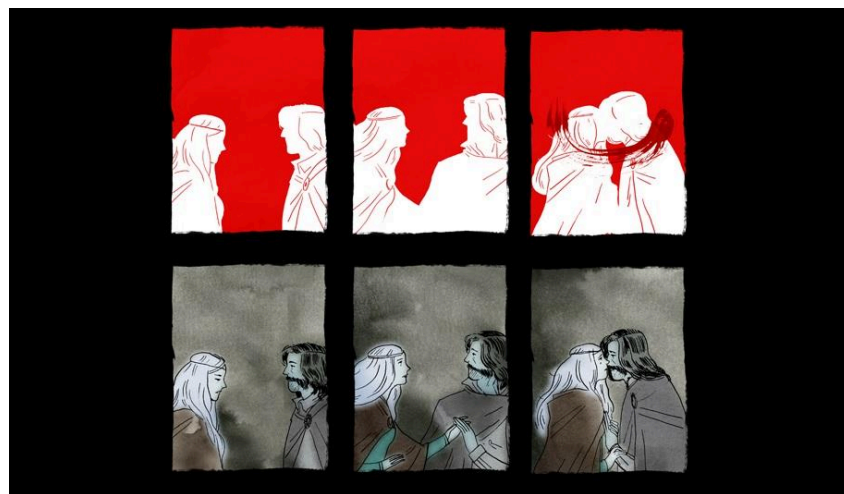
Source: Carroll (2013a)

Surprisingly or not, the two lovers decide to resort to murder. "One night", tells the narrator, "after the prince had fallen asleep… the lovers tore him from his bed… and flung him to the sea". The murder panels are the same in both sequences: there is a peak panel followed by a pair of release panels separated by a long gutter. In the peak panel, Carroll uses a chiaroscuro effect to obscure the action and disorient the readers' gaze. The image is dominated by the violent black shapes of characters' hands and arms. The release panels depict the lovers standing on the ship's deck as the prince's body sinks deep into the ocean. The black of the page itself fills the gutter between the two panels and drowns the prince in its depths.

The prince's servant finds his body and brings him back to life with the three snake leaves. The narrator yields to the focalizer's perspective and chooses words accordingly. In the prince's version, the caption starts with "fortunately he had given

the three snake leaves to a servant"; in the princess's version, it is written "unfortunately" instead. In both versions, the prince is resurrected and returns to the kingdom to confront the princess. Her crime is exposed, and she is sentenced to death along with the ship's captain. "His murderers / The princess and the captain", says the narrator in each sequence, "were tied together, and sent out in a boat run through with holes".

Each sequence ends differently but equally mysterious. In the prince's ending, he stands alone as a puzzling "sssssssssssssss" sound emanates from the image. In the princess's ending, she says something to the ship's captain but her balloon is cropped near the tail. What did that sound mean? What did the princess say to her lover? The story ends and readers are left with an ambiguous taste in their mouths, trapped with their choices in a dead-end page.

5.4.3 Animation

In *Out of Skin*, Emily Carroll started experimenting with yet another digital affordance: animation. In comics, the use of animation is transgressive in itself. It is startling and disorienting, and it feels out of place. It crosses the borders between different media and tests their limits and configurations. Aware of that, Carroll uses animation to create a more immersive reading experience while adding a sense of unfamiliarity to the reading process. In *Out of Skin* and *When the Darkness Presses*, she employs animation to confuse and surprise readers, turning the ordinary into something uncanny and the screen into a digital *locus horribilis*.

5.4.3.1 *Out of Skin*

Out of Skin tells the story of a ghastly supernatural revenge. A woman lives alone in a small cottage in the middle of a forest. Sometimes, she is visited by a traveling salesman who works at the nearby towns, but most of the time she is alone. One day, after a heavy rain, the woman comes across a dark pit she had never seen before. The pit is full of dead girls, with wet skin and decaying cloth. "Who could have done this?", asks the woman to herself as she fills up the pit again. That night, it rains a second time, and the next day there is a tree growing from the pit. A tree with a bark that feels like… skin. The woman tries to cut it down but gives up shortly.

"The work is just too gruesome," she thinks, for the tree has started bleeding. During the night, the girls rise from the pit, and their sounds from outside do not let the woman sleep. They want to come inside and say that they will find a way in. Little by little, they take over the woman's cottage, and soon they are everywhere: in the walls, in the furniture, in all the household items. The woman drinks out of their skin, eats out of their breasts, and sleeps with spools of their hair for her pillow. Until the day the salesman returns. He is famished and goes into her house. The woman tells him that she knows about the girls and what he has done to them. He will never be seen again.

Out of Skin can be divided into three main sequences: the 'dead girls sequence' (pages 1-3), the 'invasion sequence' (page 4), and the 'revenge sequence' (page 6). The monsters are the dead girls, who become undead and take over the woman's cottage. The *locus horribilis* is the cottage itself, which also becomes monstrous. The haunting is motivated by the serial killings of the girls and symbolized by their uncanny return.

The character of the woman is both the narrator and the focalizer of the story. She tells the story *in medias res*, starting with the moment she finds the dead girls in the pit near her house. On account of that, exposition is delayed and distributed, with snippets of information about the woman's life presented sparsely throughout the whole narrative. By constantly interrupting the progression of the action, Carroll prolongs and intensifies suspense and curiosity. She also calls readers' attention to the main character's inner life. Exposition is mostly motivated by the woman's thoughts and feelings; by persistently making readers aware of them, Carroll signals their importance in the process of narrative reconstruction.

5.4.3.1.1 The dead girls sequence

The first sequence of *Out of Skin* fulfills many narrative purposes. It introduces the characters of the woman and the dead girls, contrasting their previous and current states. It establishes the setting and the atmosphere, and sets the stage for the development of the *locus horribilis* in the next sequence. It also provokes feelings related to fear and disgust and narrative effects of curiosity and suspense, most of them connected to the gruesome nature and mysterious intent of the undead girls.

The sequence starts by fragmenting the reader's gaze. A long vertical panel forces readers to scroll down the page in order to visualize its content. The scrolling movement also activates the panel's narrative phase, from the initial "it was the rain" caption text to the peak image of the dead girls in the pit (Figure 48). The final image complements the text, which ends in "it wasn't until the morning after the storm that I found them", evoking surprise and opening a curiosity gap. Who are these girls and what happened to them? Readers' feelings match those of the character, who stands just as surprised and just as intrigued at the pit. Her pale colored shape parallels that of the sky and contrasts with the black and white tones of the corpses and the trees around her.

Figure 48 - A fractured panel for fractured bodies
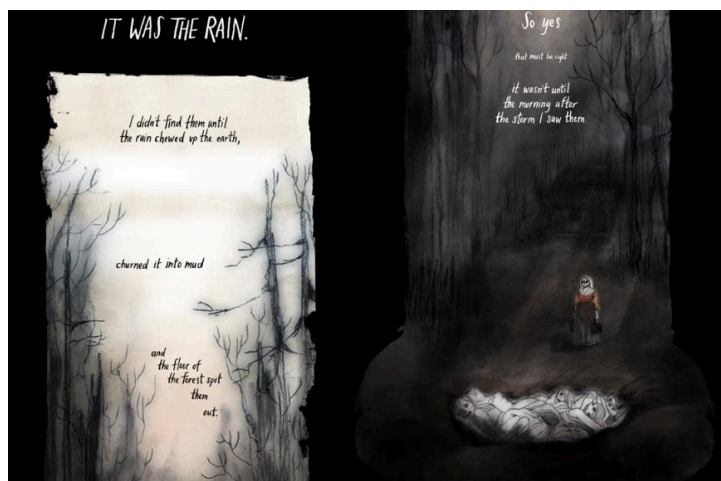
Source: Carroll (2013b)

Throughout the comic, Carroll employs a series of close shots to interrupt the action and intensify feelings of disgust. This technique can be seen in the trio of refiner panels showing the corpses in the pit and the group of prolongation panels depicting the woman's reaction to them. The refiner panels focus on the mass of body pieces, twisted limbs, and deathly visages of the girls; the prolongation panels fixate on the woman's centers of emotion and action, that is, her hands, eyes, and mouth, and her shocked and disgusted reaction cues a similar response in the readers (Figure 49).

Who could have done this?", thinks the woman, moving from surprise to curiosity along with the readers. As the woman starts forming hypotheses in her head, readers get their first bits of expositional information. A three-panel cluster

illustrates her thoughts and depicts her mother, father, and cousin, "all as dead as the greying girls in the mud". They are followed by a pair of oval-shaped panels with details about her home, "a tiny cottage that no one visits". However, she comes to a realization just as she thinks these words. The pale tones of the previous panels give way to bright red, indicating an emotional shift. Her mind is invaded by the image of a traveling merchant with a creepy smile, and readers comprehend that this man, whoever he is, must be the girls' killer. While readers wonder about their connection, the woman stands completely dumbfounded. Her narration stops for a moment, and the gutters expand around her small, solitary panel. The dark space of the screen envelops her, casting a shadow of danger and despair. She gets a shovel and starts filling up the pit. It is already dark when she finishes it, and she goes to sleep "wretched, damp and dirty" just like the girls.

Figure 49 - Very close (and disgusting) shots of corpses
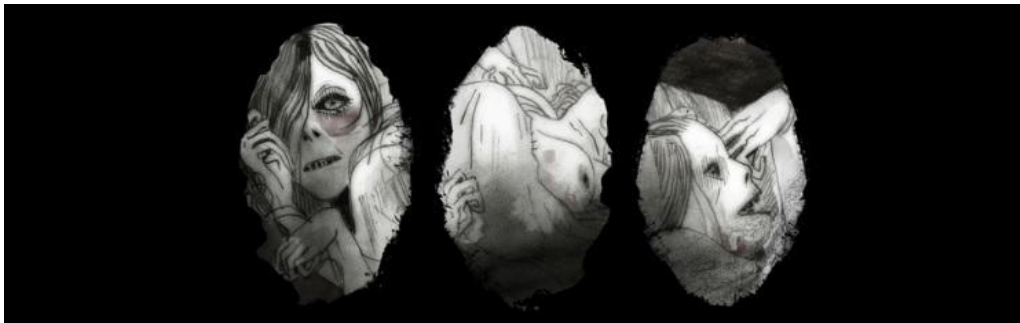
Source: Carroll (2013b)

When the woman wakes up, she sees that a tree has grown from the pit overnight. It is a long vertical panel that follows the rhythms of the first one, fracturing the reader's gaze and condensing a whole narrative phase in itself. The tree is an uncanny sighting that registers as a supernatural element, and readers adjust their expectations accordingly. Once again, a series of close shots interrupts the action and elicits feelings of disgust. As the woman touches the surface of the tree, a set of five panels communicates her mental processes to the readers. She calls her dead family to mind and remembers what it felt like to touch them, kiss them, and hold their hands (Figure 50). There is also a glimpse of the woman embracing the red-robed merchant in a moment of passion. A wordless peak panel shows her hand

moving away from the tree and leaving a faint handprint on the trunk, and readers do not need any text to understand that the tree's bark feels like skin.

Figure 50 - Color contrasts emphasize moments of intimacy
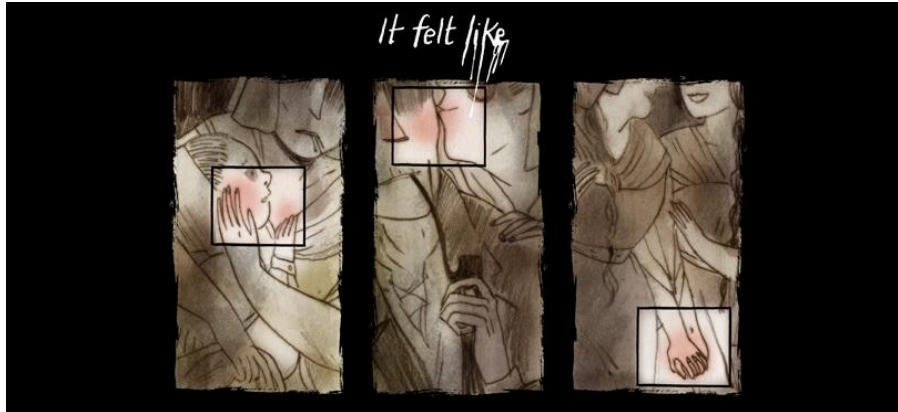
Source: Carroll (2013b)

The repulsive nature of the tree goes beyond its skin-textured bark: its leaves look like human hands[23] and its sap spills like human blood. The woman learns that the hard way, by grabbing an axe and swinging it at the tree. An action star panel shows readers a large bloody wound that looks like it was made on the page itself. She gives up after the first cut and goes back to her cottage with a blood-splattered face.

As symbols of rebirth, trees are a recurring trope in popular folk narratives (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 464). A specific trope is that of the transformation into a tree, which usually involves "dead lovers whose relationship was thwarted in life, but from whose graves arise plants or trees that twine together" (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 468). In *Out of Skin*, Carroll subverts this trope by making a tree out of dead girls who were murdered by the same man.

The sequence ends with the undead girls surrounding the woman's cottage and demanding to come inside. They are performing the role of monsters and are depicted as such. They are completely white (Carroll's color of death), with glassy eyes and crooked teeth. They have moist skin, wear moldering cloth, and speak with voices that sound like the crackle of the fire and the wind in the trees. They have

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[23] Is this the tree that the two brothers from *His Face All Red* encounter in the woods? The big brother says it is just "a common oak", but the little brother describes it as "a tree with leaves that looked like ladies' hands".

ghastly supernatural powers: they can change sizes, meld with each other, and take over structures. They come from a dark pit and return from the dead to seek revenge on the one who killed them.

A rectangular panel shows the girls at a window, clamoring to be let in. The frames of the panel are dictated by the frames of the window, and the girls' text balloons insinuate themselves into the cottage. As the woman covers her ears and turns her back to them, a couple of narrative gaps are opened. Why do they want to come inside? And will they find a way in? The fear of invasion is intensified by the use of contrasting colors: the left side of a long shot panel (where the girls stand) is dominated by gray tones and shadows; the right side (where the woman sits) is filled by a pale firelight, with shades of yellow, orange, and pink. The color conflict establishes a visual and metaphorical border between life and death, warm and cold, safety and danger, increasing feelings of anxiety related to the possibility of breaking that border (Figure 51). "We'll find a way in", say the girls. "We are already inside".

Figure 51 - The proximity of monsters opens suspense gaps

Source: Carroll (2013b)

5.4.3.1.2 The invasion sequence

In just one page, the second sequence accomplishes several narrative goals. It turns the cottage into a monster and a source of haunting, and establishes its role as a *locus horribilis*. It also arouses and increases feelings of disgust by focusing on the loathsome details of the setting and the woman's interaction with them. Most importantly, it introduces the use of animation as a digital affordance, destabilizing and enriching reading experience at the same time.

The sequence starts with a close distance shot of the window and no sign of the girls. The woman looks outside and foolishly believes that they are gone. "But then it started", she says, as readers are startled by the sight of an animated shape. A rectangular panel shows the inside of the cottage with a few basic utensils and pieces of furniture. Suddenly, a wooden chair in the background flashes as if it was made out of human limbs. It flickers on and off in a loop animation pattern, both hurting and attracting the readers' gaze (figure 52).

Figure 52 - Two versions of the same animated panel
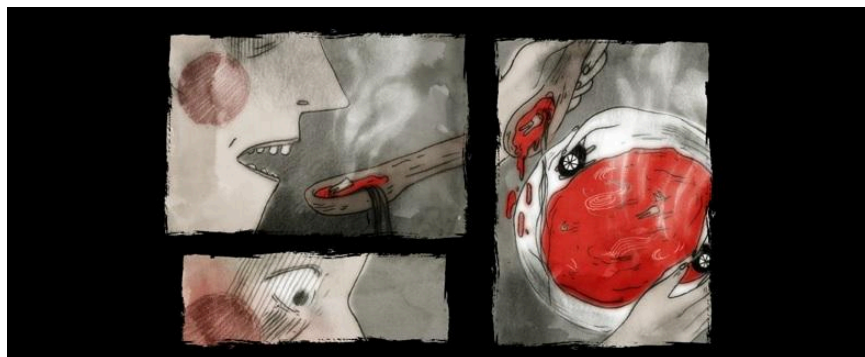

Source: Carroll (2013b)

It is a subtle use of a powerful technique that produces many interesting effects. First of all, it is used to evoke surprise, like a low-key, soundless version of the jump scare gimmick commonly found in horror movies and video games. "Much of the art of horror lies in catching the spectatorial eye unawares - penetrating it before it has a chance to close its lid" (CLOVER, 1987, p. 203). That is more or less what happens in *Out of Skin*, but the static nature of comics adds a few twists to the matter. By using animation, Carroll surprises readers not only with strange and unexpected thematic elements, but also and more significantly with formal ones. The moving image is inaccessible to print comics and a controversial feature of digital comics. It is an uncanny sight which generates an aesthetic estrangement in relation to the conventions of the comics medium and redefines its paradigms, creating another expression of the digital *locus horribilis*.

In Carroll, the use of animation is also connected to the technique of narrative ambiguity. In *Out of Skin*, for instance, it is used as a means of suggesting and/or reinforcing the woman's troubled mental state, opening doubts about her role as focalizer. Thanks to its erratic nature, loop animation indicates that things might not be what they seem; if it flickers on and off, a wooden chair might not be made out of

human limbs after all. The woman might be just imagining things, and she herself admits that. "I told myself that it was all in my mind... a trick of the light... but I knew. I knew". After the character and the readers consider this possibility, every other supernatural element becomes tainted by doubt. Narrative ambiguity is sustained even after the story ends, placing the comic into the "equivocal gothic" or "the fantastic" subgenres (CARROLL, 1990, p. 4/145). There is a vacillation between supernatural and realistic explanations, and the origin of events is left ambiguous by means of a psychologically disturbed focalizer.

Little by little, the undead girls start to corrupt the other shapes around the cottage. A particularly repugnant series of panels evokes strong feelings of disgust by showing the woman ready to eat a soup of blood, hair, and teeth in a bowl made of hands and eyes (Figure 53). She sits on the wooden/monstrous chair and brings the spoon closer to her mouth, unaware of its contents. Readers cringe at the prospect of seeing the woman swallow a spoonful of bodily substances, but she stops at the last moment and drops the grisly bowl on the floor.

Figure 53 - A soup made of blood, hair, and teeth

Source: Carroll (2013b)

These panels arouse visceral responses both in the character and in the readers, and there is a good reason for that. Disgust is a subjective emotion which varies greatly from culture to culture, but it has a few identifiable universals (EKMAN; FRIESEN, 2003, p. 66). Many of them are related to eating and drinking taboos, such as eating your own species (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 227). Food loathing is the most elementary and archaic form of abjection (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 2), and the eating of human flesh by people, i.e., human cannibalism, is one of the most repellent events imaginable, whether it is done on purpose or unwittingly (GARRY;

EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 227). Adding insult to injury, the character of the woman was about to violate another taboo, which is also a popular folk narrative trope: eating the food of the dead (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 103-4). Behind this taboo, there exists a fear of contagion, or the fear of pollution by the dead (GARRY; EL-SHAMY, 2005, p. 106). In this comic, the two taboos are combined into one, and eating the food of the dead means eating their undead flesh.

The next panels continue to incite disgust through the process of the cottage's mutation. "When I woke", says the woman, "they were everywhere". "They" are the undead girls, who have inexorably and completely taken over the house. A narrative gap is closed, but another is kept open. They got inside, but what do they want? A large panel surprises readers with a shocking panorama of the now monstrous domestic space, and three oval-shaped panels give them details of this disturbing transformation: a broom made of hands, furniture made of bones, cups made of skin, a cooking pot made of breasts, bedding made of lips, a pillow made of hair, etc (Figure 54). The woman is not only haunted by the girls, but utterly consumed by them. She resigns herself to the situation and resumes her life the best way she can. "What could I do?", she asks. "I couldn't leave. So I drank out of their skin… and I ate out of their breasts… and I fell asleep inside their mouth, with spools of their hair for my pillow".

Figure 54 - The girls have taken over the woman's house

Source: Carroll (2013b)

When the girls take over the cottage, the domestic space turns into a monstrous *locus horribilis*, a fascinating combination of the two tropes, or of the horror and the gothic (Figure 55). By itself, the cottage is already an unpleasant place. It is remote and isolated, surrounded by dark and strange woods. And it has

witnessed many deaths and/or brutal crimes: the woman's whole family (mother, father, and cousin) and several girls. After its mutation, the cottage becomes exponentially horrible. It grows into something grotesque, which is "characterized by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features" (BALDICK, 2001, p. 108). It not only breeds monsters but (d)evolves into one, a collective bundle of corpses with vengeful intentions. Thanks to that, it assumes person-like qualities and starts to behave like a character. "What distinguishes characters from things and other entities is that the reader can attribute to characters anthropomorphic and anthropoid qualities, such as thoughts and emotions" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 179). That is exactly the case of the monstrous cottage, who develops sentience and the abilities to speak, move, and influence other characters' actions.

Figure 55 - The house as a monster and a *locus horribilis*

Source: Carroll (2013b)

5.4.3.1.3 The revenge sequence

The last sequence also serves many narrative purposes in just one page. It elaborates on the role of animation in the development of a digital gothic storyworld, sustains feelings of disgust and suspense through the use of graphic shapes and panel arrangement, and presents readers with the culmination of events.

It begins with a series of establisher panels and nine lines of text, all of which set the tone for the merchant's arrival and his eventual demise. A couple of panels show the character halting his cart right in front of the woman's cottage, in the

woods. "A very fine evening to you!", he says, looking straight at the woman and at the readers. Suddenly, the two panels change from brownish to bright red and back to brownish again, flashing on and off in another loop animation pattern. His facial expression also shifts, going from weary to wicked. Once again, animation functions as a cue for the woman's mental state. She recognizes his true nature, and sees him for what he truly is: a violent, murderous man. And just like the other digital affordances employed by Carroll, animation activates different narrative roles within the same panel. In this case, it burns across the panel like an action shooting star and turns an initial into a peak (Figure 56).

Figure 56 - Animation turning an initial into a peak
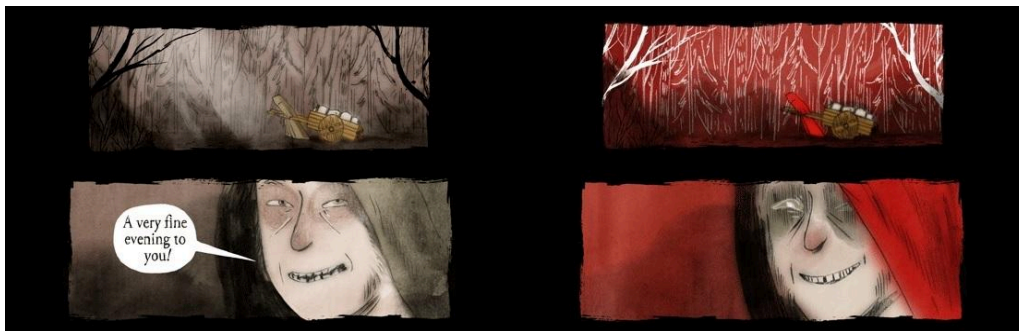
Source: Carroll (2013b)

The merchant approaches the cottage and tells the woman that he is famished. The house is stinking like soggy flesh and old blood and he is sitting on the many-limbed chair, but he does not seem to notice at all. He grabs a bowl of human stew and actually eats it, drooling blood from his mouth in a series of very disgusting close shots. His presence and behavior inspire feelings of suspense and curiosity. What will become of him? And why does he not sense anything unusual about the house? Is the cottage truly monstrous or just a product of the woman's imagination? As the man keeps on eating, his speech balloons become obscured by the woman's captions. She is in control now, and he will soon be silenced.

The woman tells the merchant that she knows about the girls. He becomes very pale and says that he has to leave. As he tries to do so, the house sticks to him like slimy mucus and the dead girls' limbs follow him outside. It is as if the woman and the girls are acting together and she has given them the signal to act. They start burrowing into the merchant's body through his skin, mouth, and eyes with hundreds

of tiny hands and fingers (Figure 57). He is gradually and irrevocably overwhelmed by the girls, and his suffering is prolonged for many panels. At last, he is reduced to a helpless mass engulfed by the earth and the darkness of the page.

Figure 57 - The slow, painful death of the merchant

Source: Carroll (2013b)

The last panels show the woman observing the scene from a distance, at her door. She stands silently with glassy eyes, and readers realize that they look just like the dead girls' eyes. Across the comic, there are many hints at the similarities between the woman and the girls, usually in the form of graphic parallels such as crooked teeth and very pale skin. In the last pages, even their speech balloons look the same, with tiny human hands escaping from the edges. They become more and more alike up until the end, peaking at the close shot of the woman's gaze. Readers meet her eyes and remain intrigued after the story ends. Were the supernatural events real? Did the girls really rise from the ground to exact their revenge? Or did the woman kill the merchant herself to avenge the girls' deaths? The answers are lost in the depths of the woman's cryptic stare.

5.4.3.2 *When the Darkness Presses*

When the Darkness Presses tells the story of a girl with troubled dreams. Apparently, the girl works as a sitter and is looking after a house while its owners are away. She sleeps in a spare room in the basement, and she has been having a disturbing dream: that another door materializes in the middle of the night and someone tries to open it from the outside. They try the doorknob, then bang on the

door and start screaming, shrieking, and howling until the morning. When the girl's friend comes to visit, she tells her about the dream. She also shows her the house: the living room, the sunroom, the couple's bedroom with its gorgeous bedspread; all rooms except for little Lauren's room. "We'll let her keep her privacy," she says. Her friend suggests a sleepover, and they have a fun evening. In the middle of the night, however, the girl has another dream: that her friend, who is sleeping in the spare room with her, opens that mysterious, phantom door just slightly and starts speaking with someone from the other side. "You are sooooo bad…," she whispers and giggles. "Hee hee wait shhhhhh." The next morning, her friend goes away, and the girl is alone again. Her boyfriend calls her and invites her to go out, but she lies to him and says that she is busy. That night, she has the dream again, but this time she gets up and opens the door. She sees herself in the middle of an otherworldly garden or forest and walks toward another door. As she tries the doorknob, a monstrous hand grabs her from behind. She bangs at the door and starts screaming, shrieking, and howling until the morning.

The analysis of *When the Darkness Presses* is divided into three parts, each revolving around a different dream: the 'first dream sequence' (pages 1-5), the 'second dream sequence' (pages 6-10), and the 'third dream sequence' (pages 11-16). The *loci horribiles* are the domestic space and the girl's dreamscape, and the monster is the nightmare creature who dwells in the latter. The motivation behind the haunting is not readily apparent, but it is symbolized by the recurring nightmares that torment the protagonist's sleep.

The story has no narrators and follows the girl's perspective of the events. The comic is styled in the form of a traditional webcomic, with a regular panel grid and conventional navigation buttons, such as 'next', 'previous', 'first', and 'home'. It displays the title at the top of the page and three fake advertising banners around the panels functioning as hyperframe. To understand why Carroll builds such a sophisticated layout, it is important to consider this comic within the context of her body of work. *When the Darkness Presses* is part of Carroll's Keeping cycle, a series of comics that take place in the modern-time fictional town of Keeping. They are grayscale comics with pencil, crayon, and charcoal line qualities, and were made between 2014 and 2016. They follow a psychological gothic approach and tell of monstrous creatures that seep into the 'real' world, that is, the world of the human characters, through dreams, mirrors, and cracks in the fabric of reality. Carroll

constructs a webcomic-like layout to help readers visualize the different planes of existence within the story. The fake banners and navigation buttons act as boundaries between worlds, and the changes in layout throughout the comic indicate that these barriers are being transgressed.

5.4.3.2.1 The first dream sequence

The first sequence corresponds to the events surrounding the first dream and serves many narrative purposes. It introduces the leading characters and two of the main gothic tropes, the *loci horribiles* and the haunting. It generates narrative interest through different aspects of artistic expression, such as page layout, panel arrangement, use of color, and use of moving images. Above all, it explores the narrative potentialities of animation in the creation of a gothic storyworld and a digital *locus horribilis* in comics.

The first page contains a single panel in the shape of a door against a black background. By clicking on it, readers are transported to the webcomic-styled page of banners and buttons (Figure 58). It is Carroll's way of creating an atmosphere of mystery from the start, and of showing readers that they too are now crossing into another world, i.e., the world of the story. Just like the monsters, the readers belong to another layer of reality, and can access the digital world of the characters through a specific gateway: the screen itself.

Figure 58 - The webcomic-like layout of *When the Darkness Presses*

Source: Carroll (2014)

In the world of the characters, the protagonist is giving a tour of the house to her friend. She shows her the living room and the sun room, and mentions little Lauren's room, alluding to the family who lives there and whose absence will be felt during the entire comic. Panels are arranged in a two-by-two grid and, as already mentioned, encircled by fake ads, which function as hyperframe and also panels themselves. They are all animated in a loop, and promote products that do not really exist: a job opening "in the great outdoors", a hand lotion called "Aloe-Glo", an online game, and two comics, "Magenta" and "Wytcheria Chronicles".

The general effect of this page is totally mesmerizing. The conventional panel arrangement presents readers with an illusion of normalcy while the incessant blinking of the hyperframe assaults their senses with intrusive information. It is an excess of graphic stimuli and style that disorients readers and generates narrative interest by making them speculate about the purpose of each element on the page. The banners are especially intriguing, for they lack the essential feature of a true ad: they cannot be clicked on. During the course of the narrative, they will function as symbols for the main character's mental states and give clues about the interpretation of events. They will also become more sinister and mysterious, as if they are being contaminated by gothic imagery. The Gothic has a history of insinuating itself into other genres and media, and this is Carroll's playful way of showing what happens to innocent webcomics that are exposed to it.

The next page introduces another intriguing shape in the form of the couple's bedspread. As the girl continues to show the house to her friend, she takes her to the couple's bedroom, and says that they have asked her to take care of the house while they are away. "Gasp! Oh my God…", exclaims her friend. "That bedspread is gorgeous!". Indeed it is, with an elaborate and delicate floral-avian pattern and a vibrant magenta hue, in striking contrast with the grayscale tones of the comic as a whole. The graphic shift from grayscale to color turns the panel into a peak and indicates narrative salience (Figure 59). "It's beautiful…", adds her friend. "It's almost like it moves…". It is also worth remembering that, in Carroll, magenta usually conveys jealousy and/or betrayal. As her friend keeps praising the bedspread, the girl lets her feelings slip and says that "they've got the nicest things…". It is a casual remark which might hide some very negative sentiments, as we will see. "So do you sleep here?", asks her friend. "No", answers the girl. "It'd be too weird". She tells her

that she sleeps in a spare room in the basement, and that she has been having a dream. The page ends in an initial panel, and a curiosity gap is opened. What dream?

Figure 59 - The narrative salience of the bedspread shape

Source: Carroll (2014)

The first dream page is presented in a completely different layout. The background color changes from white to black, communicating a shift from daytime to nighttime and from safety to danger (darkness is pressing). Panels become stacked in a long vertical line, and readers have to scroll down to navigate through the page. There are no banners or traditional navigation buttons, only a door-shaped icon at the bottom. Also, the speech balloons give way to captions as the girl takes on the role of embedded narrator.

An establisher panel shows the girl in bed, sleeping in a small, sparsely furnished room. "It gets really quiet", she says, "and dark, and I fall asleep so easily". And then she has the dream. First, she starts hearing strange and persistent clicking sounds. She turns her head and sees that they are coming from a mysterious door that has materialized on the wall opposite her bed. A small close distance panel shows its doorknob moving, animated in a loop. Bright red sound effects float around it, "clck clk clk klck clkc clk", also moving. The girl realizes that someone is trying to open the door from the other side and starts to panic. "I pretend I don't hear it", she says, "but the screaming begins not long after". Another animated panel shows the whole door shaking violently, as if it is about to collapse (Figure 60). The clicking sounds are replaced by loud banging noises, "BANG BANG BANG", which move around the panel and escape from its frame. The girl's feelings are represented by

an action star panel of highly chaotic graphic lines followed by an animated caption with the words "I am shuddering" and "my sweat is cold and sharp". Then suddenly it is morning again, and the nightmare ends. It ends in a peak, as nightmares often do. There is no door on the opposite wall and no sounds coming from anywhere. The girl is safe. A curiosity gap has been closed, but a new one is opened: who or what was behind that door?

Figure 60 - Animated shapes indicate the borders between worlds

Source: Carroll (2014)

The spare room is a locus *horribilis* in itself, but the girl's dream makes it even more so. To start with, it has all the characteristics of a tomb: it is small, bare, dark, quiet, and underground. It inspires disturbing dreams and traps the girl into a recurring nightmare full of disorienting sounds. The dream terrorizes her with the possibility of invasion through the shape of the phantom door. It is a dubious threshold, protecting and threatening at the same time, which inspires both curiosity and suspense. The door's significance and otherworldly nature is evidenced by the use of animation. The door is a gateway to another world, a place full of unnatural things that escape the comprehension of static images and text.

5.4.3.2.2 The second dream sequence

The second sequence is organized around the protagonist's second dream. It elaborates on the girl's relationship with her friend and intensifies narrative interest by presenting different versions of her recurring nightmare and the animated ad banners.

After the girl finishes recounting her dream, her friend suggests a sleepover. "You're just not used to sleeping alone", she says. She also asks about the girl's boyfriend, Scotty, and seems disappointed to hear that he is not in town. That night, the two have a fun time together, with music, pizza, and a movie, but it lasts only four panels. In the middle of the night, the girl has another dream.

A large panel shows them asleep in the spare room. The girl is in bed and her friend is on the floor, covered by the gorgeous magenta bedspread. Page layout is once again dream-like, with a black background and a vertical orientation. The graphic parallels with the first dream page make readers expect a similar resolution. This time, however, the girl's friend gets up and opens the door just slightly. Readers cannot see what is on the other side, but she is clearly speaking with someone. "Ha ha", she laughs, "you are soooooo bad… hee hee wait shhhhhh". She smiles in a malicious way, and her face is partially covered in shadows. Her speech balloons are loosely formed and look like they are melting or dissolving. The protagonist looks uncomfortable and afraid, and pretends to be asleep. As for the readers, they are getting more and more intrigued. Who is she talking to? And is this really just a dream (Figure 61)?

Figure 61 - Is it just a dream?
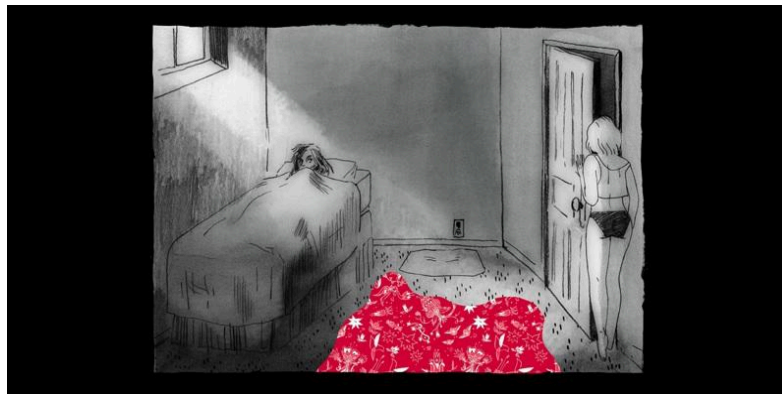
Source: Carroll (2014)

The next day, the girl looks really annoyed. "God you are so grumpy this morning", says her friend. She also mentions Scotty, the girl's boyfriend, one more time, and says that she misses him. As she keeps talking, readers are surprised to see that two of the banners have changed. It is a pair of very subtle changes, but animation calls readers' attention to them. In the banner on the left, which promotes

the fake comic "Magenta", the character's expression has changed from neutral to malicious. In the banner on the right, which promotes an online game, the character's hands and head have been removed. These changes contribute to an atmosphere of mystery and creepiness, but might also serve as cues for the protagonist's mental state. For instance: the malicious smile in the Magenta banner resembles her friend's expression in the second dream, suggesting feelings of jealousy and/or betrayal towards her. As for the second banner, it seems to indicate that the girl's mind is filled with images of mutilated bodies (Figure 62). In both cases, readers will start forming hypotheses as to what could have motivated such thoughts and reconstruct the narrative in their own particular ways.

Figure 62 - The different versions of the ad banners

Source: Carroll (2014)

5.4.3.2.3 The third dream sequence

The last sequence focuses on the events related to the protagonist's third and final dream. Its narrative purposes include developing the girl's dreamscape as a manifestation of the *locus horribilis*, reinforcing the role of animation in the construction of a digital gothic storyworld, and bringing a resolution to the incidents portrayed in the narrative.

From this point on, the girl is alone in the big family house. Her friend has left and the banners are back to their normal states, no longer tinted by jealousy or thoughts of dismemberment. She goes into little Lauren's room and picks up a doll. When her friend was around, she did not want to open this door. Was she hiding something in there? She takes the doll to the spare room and sits on the floor. She

has no one to talk to, and looks lost in her thoughts. What could she be thinking of? The banners around the page have changed once again and are now dominated by the floral-avian bedspread pattern. If they are any indication of her mental state, then she is clearly obsessed with something that reminds her of the bedspread. When her boyfriend calls, the banners stop moving and become locked into the bedspread pattern (Figure 63). She lies to him, saying that the Dolans, the owners of the house, have come back early and got her running around a lot. Readers click on the 'next' button thirsty for answers, and fully aware that the girl cannot be trusted.

Figure 63 - The bedspread shape dominates the banners
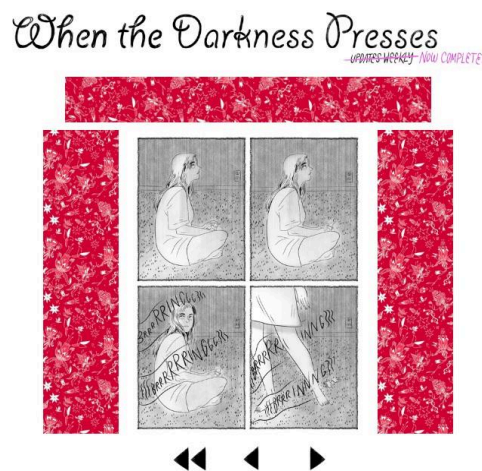
Source: Carroll (2014)

Page layout changes one more time and readers recognize it as the dream layout. In the web address bar, it reads "thirddream.html". This time, the girl gets up from her bed and opens the mysterious door on the wall. An open door icon at the bottom of the page takes readers deeper into her dreamscape, perhaps even into a different world. It is a sublime *locus horribilis*, beautiful and terrible at the same time (Figure 64). It looks like a forest or a garden, with big dark trees and colorful floral shapes that look identical to the ones from the bedspread. In this world, panels become oval-shaped and are arranged in a horizontal configuration. Even the girl's speech balloons and font style have changed, and she looks worried and confused as readers scroll through the page from left to right. She is startled by an exotic bird (which is also shaped like the ones from the bedspread) and comes across another door. "Oh thank god!", she says, but the door is locked and will not budge. As she tries to open the door, a monstrous red arm with long sharp fingers reaches from

behind her. She is unaware of the creature, and suspense grows accordingly. Will she escape before the creature catches her? What does it want with her? To answer these questions, readers have to click on a sound effect, which also functions as an action star panel. It is a text-only panel that represents both the click of the mouse and the click of the door, combining the readers' and the character's actions in a single, meaningful shape.

Figure 64 - The girl's sublime dreamscape
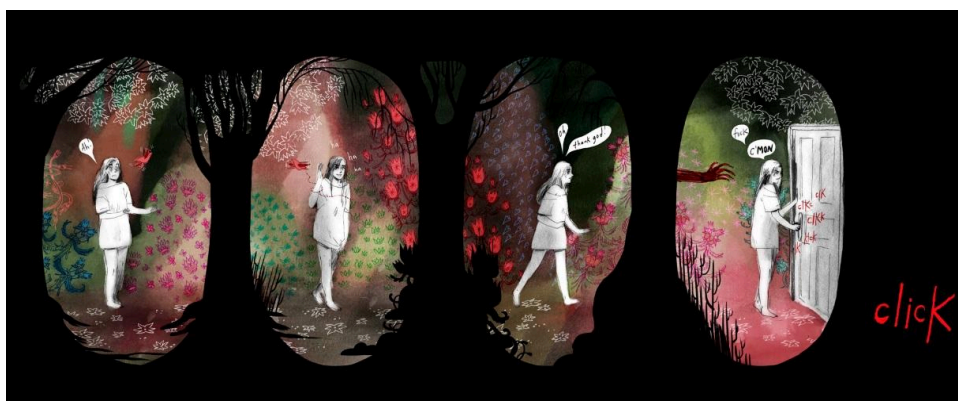
Source: Carroll (2014)

The last page shows the girl back in the spare room, lying in bed and listening to the "clkc" "clkk" "klck" sounds that come from the door. However, readers are surprised to see that it also shows the girl on the other side, trying to open the locked door that stands between the layers of her dreamscape. She is either in two different places at the same time, or there are two of her. Dream logic follows its own rules, and they can rarely be explained by the conscious mind. The sequence alternates between the two sides of the door and focuses on very close shots of the characters' hands and faces. In the spare room, the girl closes her eyes in agony and pretends she does not hear anything; on the other side, the girl bangs on the door in despair as the monstrous hand grabs her by the neck. A large peak panel enclosed by two banners dominates the screen and displays her suffering in vividly animated graphics. The banners frame her shrieks and howls, switching back and forth from the fake ad pieces to images of her face and body as she is being ripped apart. The gothic has crossed into webcomic territory, paying for its entry with blood (Figure 65). "Then suddenly it's morning again", says the girl, "and everything is as it was".

Figure 65 - The Gothic has crossed into webcomic territory

Source: Carroll (2014)

Like in *Out of Skin*, Carroll's use of animation in *When the Darkness Presses* is linked to the technique of narrative ambiguity. Animated shapes and panels are restricted to extradiegetic elements or dream sequences. They are used to suggest and/or reinforce the protagonist's troubled psyche, casting a shadow of suspicion on her role as focalizer. They also contribute to the creation of a general atmosphere of mystery, which is heightened by the many narrative gaps that remain open after the story ends. Why was the girl having such dreams? Were they really just dreams? Was she really taking care of the house for the Dolans? What do the graphic shapes inside the banners mean? And what is the significance of the bedspread shape? Curiosity lingers like a restless ghost in the narrative afterlife of this comic. Luckily, readers have a rich scenario from which to extract the materials for a satisfying narrative reconstruction.

Let us entertain a few options. Option one: the girl is having nightmares because she is afraid of sleeping by herself in a big house. They are nothing but bad dreams inspired by a fanciful imagination. Option two: the girl is having nightmares because she is tormented by envy and jealousy. She envies the couple's house, their possessions, their life, and is annoyed by her friend's comments about her boyfriend, so all these bad feelings come back to haunt her at night. Option three: the girl is having nightmares because she has done something bad to the family. She has killed them and is now tormented by a monstrous guilt. She killed them in their sleep, spilling blood all over their gorgeous bedspread. She hid their bodies in little Lauren's

room, and did not let her friend go inside. She lied to her friend just as she lied to her boyfriend, saying that the Dolans had come back. She sleeps in the spare room because, in her own words, sleeping in the couple's bedroom would be "too weird". Her thoughts and actions are manifested through the banners: her malice (in the smile), her modus operandi (dismemberment), her weapon of choice (an axe), and the crime scene (the bedroom).

Her crime was so hideous that it has turned the house into a *locus horribilis*, a sentient evil one. Monstrous creatures are now attracted to it, and try to cross the barriers between the worlds through the girl's dreams. Why would the couple need a teenage girl to take care of their house while they are away? They have no plants or pets, and the house needs no repairs. She has killed them and is now being tormented by a monstrous guilt.

Or maybe she has not. Maybe options one or two are correct, and there are no murders, no monsters, no *loci horribiles*, no real hauntings. There is just a girl and overly excitable minds, the character's and the readers'. This too is a perfectly possible interpretation and reconstruction. But what is the fun in that?

6 THROUGH THE BACKDOOR

In 2015, I wrote an article for a website called *Graphic Policy* about a digital comics artist I had just recently discovered. I started the article by saying that it took me some time to truly appreciate digital comics. I had been reading print comics for more than twenty years, but used to regard digital comics as kinds of "transplanted organs" removed from paper and grafted into a screen. I described them as "insubstantial pages" made of "immaterial panels", and did not mean it as a compliment. As I explained in the article, though, I had met an artist that made me change my mind. I wrote about how that artist was capable of creating a unique comics digital environment, using the infinite canvas in connection to a subterranean imagery of basements, wells, caves, tombs, "and all kinds of holes in the ground". I wrote about form and content, and about how that kind of work could only be truly appreciated on the web. Thanks to that artist, my organism had finally stopped rejecting the digital organs of the comics medium. The artist in question was, of course, Emily Carroll.

It was a short article and a superficial analysis of Carroll's work. At that time, I did not have the technical vocabulary to discuss it properly. I wrote about narrative rhythm and narrative tropes without ever having studied narrative theory. I wrote about the scrolling down movement without mentioning the infinite canvas, and did not even allude to the use of hypertext and animation. Worst of all, I wrote about horror and fantasy but failed to recognize the Gothic in it. Despite all that, and without my knowing it at the time, that article was the seed of this very dissertation. It served as the inspiration for a research project, which then changed and grew into the work we now have before us.

Many authors still have reservations about digital media, like I did, and some of them actually raise really good points. It can be argued, for instance, that the digital environment is too distracting to allow for a proper reading experience. On the web, "one is never more than a few clicks away from any other site, and so, inevitably, permanently tempted by the attractions of digressing, surfing, zapping" (GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 66). Or that the spatial memory associated with physicality disappears, compromising retention of information and making digital media less suited for large-scale works or lengthy immersions. "When a comic is read on the screen, as each page succeeds the next it also replaces and effaces it, precluding

the mental retention of the arrangements of panels" (GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 67). Also, that reading and interaction are two different modes of attention that compete with each other. Reader's interest shifts from 'what happens next?' to 'what new actions will I be asked to perform next?' (GROENSTEEN, 2013, p. 74-5). These are all valid concerns, and more research should be done to verify such claims.

Having said that, it is undeniable that digital media is here to stay and that we have to learn to live with it. Many people now use digital devices as their primary reading media, and more and more comics creators are starting to see digital comics as a commercially viable and creatively satisfying model to work with (MONFRED, 2018). Digital comics have a far greater potential reach than print comics, which have to be physically transported (KLEEFELD, 2020, p. 38). On the web, information is usually stored in a particular location, and anyone with access to the internet can consult it and share it. Add to that a lack of gatekeepers and we have a truly welcoming environment, especially for people who do not normally have the chance to publish their work on their own terms. The same is true for the readers, who can select from a huge variety of genres and themes and engage with issues that they might otherwise not encounter (KEEFELD, 2020, p. 77).

Raising concerns about digital media is absolutely necessary, but we should also know how to work within the medium and create comics that feel at home in this environment, as Carroll does. With the ability to incorporate multimedia, interactivity, and responsive content, digital media can lead to evolutionary leaps in communication and in the way we tell stories. "The comics medium, with its equal emphasis on visual and narrative elements, low bar of entry, and tolerance for experimentation, is ideal to lead the way toward new storytelling paradigms" (DANIELS, 2016).

6.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

I wanted to investigate the architecture of fear in digital comics, that is, some of the ways digital comics can structure their narratives in order to evoke fear as an artistic effect. To do that, it was important to study the interplay of materiality and content, to understand how digital comics use technology and how technology is in turn changing them. Obviously, it is impossible to study every digital comic ever made, or even every digital comic from a single genre or created in a specific mode;

it is simply too much material. To make my task more manageable, I had to make it more specific, so I decided to focus my attention on a single artist. As Emily Carroll was the one who actually inspired all this, she was the obvious, natural choice. To keep things even more grounded, I restricted my analysis to the six comics that better encapsulated both Carroll's use of digital affordances and the features of the gothic mode.

The selected comics are the result of a different conception of sequential narrative; they involve a different type of process and require a digital medium not only for their display but also for the effective integration of the aesthetic experience they provide. Production of meaning is intimately related to the specificities and potentialities of digital media. It is not possible to reproduce them in print without altering their structure and the reading experience itself. By architecting innovative aesthetic experiences in the digital medium, Carroll advances both the art of comics and the Gothic, synthesizing the transgressive aspirations of each field.

For the purposes of this dissertation, comics were regarded as expressions of a visual language, with panels as the essential units of syntax. For that reason, my close reading method of analysis focused on panels and sequences of panels. To account for comics' multimodal nature, I approached the issue from two different but related fronts: the narratological and the semiotic. This equipped me with the necessary tools to perform an analysis that could handle both the narrative and the artistic aspects of the medium.

As we saw, Carroll explores fear in a variety of ways, employing a great number of elements and techniques to this end. Some of these elements and techniques work independently of digital affordances, but many are either facilitated by them or rely on them completely in order to be effective. Even so, digital affordances are used very sparingly. Readers are not overwhelmed by scrolling movements, point and click actions, and animated panels, so narrative interest is never compromised. Furthermore, their relative scarcity has the effect of heightening their impact, making them all the more relevant and striking by contrast.

"Digital affordances augment the meaning-making operations of comics, particularly in the aspect of narrativization" (MONFRED, 2018, p. 123). Together and/or separately, the digital affordances of the infinite canvas, hypertext, and animation are used by Carroll to create a more immersive reading experience even as they add a sense of unfamiliarity to it. They are inherently transgressive and can

sometimes be startling, confusing, or intrusive, but Carroll finds ways to use all that to her own advantage and to fit the overall style of each comic. By the careful application of digital affordances, she turns the reader interface into what I call a digital *locus horribilis*, an uncanny place where readers might feel disoriented, trapped, and/or come across dreadful scenes. In Carroll's work, the actions required in the process of reading mimic those of the characters and make readers engage more directly with the gothic environments they see on the screen. As occupants of these digital *loci horribiles*, readers become both the victims and the accomplices to Carroll's transgressions.

6.2 IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

I believe that my investigation of the architecture of fear in digital comics has a number of practical contributions to the fields of comics research, gothic studies, and narrative theory. "When narratology meets the unexpected, and the singular, the theory has to be adjusted - if not right away, then in time" (MIKKONEN, 2017, p. 277). Current narratological practice tends to be more inclusive to other narrative representations beyond the literary text, but a narratology of digital comics art has yet to carve its own academic space. In that sense, I trust that my approximation of Cohn's visual narrative grammar with Sternberg's functionalist approach has helped advance that goal.

This dissertation also offers a couple of contributions in regard to gothic studies. As I reviewed the scientific literature, I realized that theory dealing specifically with the *locus horribilis* trope was somewhat lacking. To overcome this issue, I tried to structure all the different and disconnected pieces of theory into a more coherent and integrated concept. Finally, it is worth noting that the Gothic is not only a mode of *writing* but also of *drawing*. I hope that my analysis of Carroll's work has provided a framework for gothic studies in the field of visual art.

Future research on these topics could expand on the contributions of this dissertation and also cover some of its limitations. Besides the infinite canvas, hypertext, and animation, comics artists have been experimenting with other digital affordances, such as audio, video, and augmented reality technologies. Comics were not a direct result of a single technological advancement or artistic innovation, but of slow and broad shifts in visual literacy that occurred over centuries among hundreds

of artists from many different parts of the world. The same is true for digital comics and the technologies available to them, which can open up new possibilities of expression. As always, the key is to pay attention to what the artists are doing; it is the artists who have been putting us face to face with the human aspects of technology (SANTAELLA, 2003, p. 27).

Some of these artists have been using digital technologies to transgress the borders between comics and other media. In 2022, I visited the Fiat Cultural Center (Casa Fiat de Cultura) in Belo Horizonte and came across an interactive installation called *Gemini*. *Gemini* is an immersive digital comics experience by Clémence Bourdaud and Rogi Silva in collaboration with Nantes School of Design (École de design Nantes Atlantique). To "read" the comic, readers have to position themselves in front of a projected screen and move their arms to navigate between chapters and activate specific elements on the screen. As I stood there, trying to make sense of the story and learning how to engage with its tools, I could not help thinking about my own research and its future ramifications. Digital comics are intrinsically hybrid, but one of the major questions to be addressed seems to be whether tomorrow's interactive comics can still be defined as such, or whether we are witnessing the genesis of a new medium.

Even though digital comics have additional semiotic modalities and categories at their disposal, such as animation and/or audio, they should never take temporal control away from the reader. "As digital creation and consumption tools obliterate the borders between mediums, we must honor comics' core appeal" (DANIELS, 2016). What sets comics apart from written media is the visual element; what sets comics apart from audiovisual media is the reader's control over the pace of reading.

As for the Gothic, the digital environment offers it a virtually endless space in which to grow. The Gothic has adapted, and continues to adapt, to a process and pace of technological change; it has consistently acted as a pioneer in new evolutions of the production of meaning (PUNTER, 1996, p. 9). The next wave of gothic residents are possibly the vestigial bodies of the internet-users of today; caught online, they "are trying to navigate through the labyrinthine network of hypertexts with never-ending chains of links in the mise en abyme of the World Wide Web" (SENCINDIVER, 2010, p. 30). On the web, elements such as the *locus horribilis* can take shapes as yet unimagined, and digital interfaces can simulate the properties and behaviors of *loci horribiles* themselves. The comics medium and the

gothic mode have done much to earn the cultural respect they deserve. But their potential to reach new audiences, teach them new ways of expressing themselves, and making sense of the world is still highly underestimated.

I can finally see a way out of this place. How long have I been navigating its corridors, stairwells, and rooms, how long have I been peeking at its darkest corners? I have lost track of time. It seems like ages since I crossed through the front door, and I was never able to find it again. I feel like this house does not want me to leave. Maybe it wants me to keep on looking, exploring, studying it. But I should not overstay my welcome. I can see a backdoor, and I am going through. I approach it carefully, holding my breath in expectation. There is a key on the lock. I try it and hear a satisfying click. I am ready to face the outside again.

"Are you really?", asks a familiar voice from behind me. I turn around slowly and cannot believe my eyes. I feel like I am staring into a dark mirror. The familiar figure advances, and I can see no more.

He opens the backdoor and steps outside, locking the door behind him. "I hope you can forgive me", he says, "but it was either you or me". He crosses the overgrown backyard and jumps over the ruined wall at the end. Nobody tries to stop him. He pauses for a moment to catch his breath and take one last look at the house. A half-smile crosses his lips. He has escaped.

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