

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Tales of Terror
(March 21-22, 2019)

Conference Report by Oliver Rendle

Volume 4 Issue 1 - *After Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-4-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

TALES OF TERROR (MARCH 21-22, 2019)

Conference Report by Oliver Rendle

Tales of Terror: Gothic, Horror, and Weird Short Fiction, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK, 21-22 March 2019.

On March 21st 2019 a coven of Gothic and Horror enthusiasts assembled outside Coventry for the inaugural Tales of Terror conference at the University of Warwick — the ‘Campus Out of Place,’ one might call it. What followed were two days of scholars, writers, and dramaturges interacting with the topic of short and scary forms in a surprising number of weird and wonderful ways. Though this relatively small conference was allegedly focusing on under-appreciated short forms – age-old yarns, lost stories, forgotten excerpts, fragments, and snippets – I was gratified to find that Tales of Terror actually covered a wide array of niche mediums without neglecting the various giants in the field.

The first panel I attended explored dualities within the topic of “Periodicals, Publishing and the Gothic Market.” Sarah Sharpe (University College Dublin, Ireland) demonstrated how the infamously-morbid execution narratives in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1817-1980) both satisfied and satirised their own readership by implicitly condoning while explicitly condemning the nineteenth century ‘connoisseur of violence.’ A similar contrariness also became clear through the next paper by Manon Labrande (University of Vienna, Austria). This multimodal analysis of the massively popular and massively derided Penny Blood series from the mid-nineteenth century revealed how exploitative their production and subject-matters were, while also pointing out their revolutionary significance among the newly-literate working classes. The inherent duality of the short form was then explicitly highlighted by James Machin (Royal College of Art, UK) whose discussion of the Decadent roots of twentieth century Weird fiction ended with a bold assertion that short forms will always draw the reader’s attention to both the profound significance of the subject-matter and the absence of meaning or satisfactory explanation.

From a panel promoting overlooked forms I proceeded to an insightful re-evaluation of a writer who receives far more critical attention than most in the twenty-first century – perhaps more than he deserves or even wanted. This panel consisted of an informal discussion with Simon Maeder and Dominic Allen, the masterminds behind and performers of the theatrical anthology/biopic *Providence: The Shadow Over Lovecraft* (2018). This panel was a surprise favourite for me, and, after my scepticism over the theatrical effectiveness of Weird horror was dispelled in the first few minutes, what followed was a far more nuanced portrayal of H. P. Lovecraft himself than I had ever previously encountered. Far from relying on familiar portrayals of Lovecraft as a two-dimensional, white-supremacist, Maeder and Allen’s research led them to depict him as a living contradiction; a xenophobic, poison-spitting, hypocritical font of generosity and paranoid vulnerability – the

playwrights using this to neither excuse their subject's views nor shy away from them. With such profoundly ridiculous and laughably morbid themes, this Horror/Comedy presentation of Lovecraft's life seemed to perfectly depict the duality inherent in Lovecraft's deanthropocentric/personally revealing stories themselves.

Following the theatre discussion was a roundtable panel, where Jonny Davidson from The British Library, Hannah Kate of Hic Dragones, and Maria Giakaniki of Ars Nocturna discussed the trials and tribulations of publishing, preserving, and translating short-form Horror and Gothic fiction in the twenty-first century. Attendees took the opportunity to ask how the panellists had come to occupy their current places in publishing, and while it is always hard not to become a little dispirited when hearing writers and their work reduced to marketing potential and profit margins, all three of these speakers were interesting and insightful as they explained their roles within the industry.

Next came the "Disturbed and Diseased Imaginations" panel, comprised of Camilla Schroeder (Kingston University, UK), Daria Denisova (Shevchenko Institute of Literature, Ukraine), and yours truly (University of Glasgow, UK). This panel discussed how and why various writers twist existing forms into terrifying versions of themselves. Through the history of Heinrich Hoffman's controversial picture book, *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), Schroeder demonstrated how fearful illustrations can be used for both control and freedom, scaring young readers into acting 'appropriately' and helping the same readers overcome these fears. Through close readings of *Looking for Jake* (2005), Denisova explored how China Miéville's personification of 'The City' simultaneously literalises a desire to change the sociocultural status quo and a weird anxiety surrounding the potential that such an 'apocalypse' might actually happen. My own paper interpreted Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos as self-consciously 'corrupted' fairytales, highlighting both Lovecraft's scorn towards those who mislead themselves away from the pessimistic truth about the universe, and the psychological necessity to do exactly this. These papers, together, left me wondering whether Weird fiction has the same paradoxical function as Hoffman's picture book does; terrifying us into conformity and ignorance even as it encourages us to confront these fears, preparing us for the inevitable revelations that lie in wait for us – whether we are ready or not.

Continuing the discussion of fairytales, the last panel of day one – "Monstrous Fairytales" – addressed the 'refashioned,' 'reworked,' and 'reimagined' fairytales of such writers as Angela Carter, Sarah Pinborough, Emma Donoghue, and Robin McKinley. Silvia Storti (Kingston University, UK) gave a fascinating paper exploring the curse of flawlessness and feminine beauty as represented in folkloric revisitations. Storti demonstrated how such re-worked tales question the contradictory values promoted through the 'original' texts – how they emphasise the element of terror in the sublime – and concluded that for a female character to have or attain physical perfection is for them to risk becoming unnatural and threatening: paradoxically imperfect. Following this, Chien-hui Hsu (National Chengchi University, Taiwan) demonstrated how female sexuality was treated as sinful by Charles Perrault in *Little Red Riding Hood* (1697) and as animalistic and organic in Angela Carter's *Wolf-Alice* (1979). This paper started with a fascinating history of werewolves in folklore – Chien-hui Hsu dissecting their traditional role as representative of lust to then better demonstrate Carter's sympathetic challenge towards outdated attitudes concerning female sexuality.

Laying day one of the conference to rest was the first keynote, “Terra/Terror Incognita: Women Writers and the Colonial Gothic Short Story,” delivered by Melissa Edmundson of Clemson University (USA). This paper took listeners on a fascinating tour through the lives of three criminally underrated female writers and their forgotten works of colonialist short fiction. By noting which of their works survived through to posterity – those filled with two-dimensional, amiable, female characters and domestic compliance – and comparing them to their forgotten stories – the ones featuring empowered heroines and white males being made culpable for their crimes – Edmundson demonstrated how writers like Margery Lawrence, Alice Perrin, and Mary Fortune were overlooked for daring to challenge the assumptions typically made in male works of colonialist fiction.

After some spirited conversation at the conference meal, day two kicked off bright and early with the “Disembodiment” panel. Here the caffeine and sleep deprived among us were confronted with lively discussions of fetishised limbs, existential dread, corporeal grotesqueries, anorexia, and cannibalism – a tale of terror indeed. Shona McEvoy (Oxford University, UK) presented on spectral hands in ghost stories, demonstrating how the Victorian obsession with the white, upper-class, female hand led to a stream of ghost stories featuring such hands resisting their objectification, invading ‘male’ social spaces, and exacting revenge for the wrongs committed against them in life. From paranormal ghosts we moved on to social ghosts with a paper by Louise Benson James (University of Bristol, UK). James argued that in self-consciously playing with genre-specific expectations and presenting undeniably physical, female characters – which refuse to be easily read or typecast – Rhoda Broughton’s ghostless ‘ghost stories’ were actually haunted by the Victorian woman’s own spectrality. Following this, the first panel of the day ended with a frankly harrowing exploration of the subjective experience of mental illness and fatal predestination in Michel Faber’s chaotic illness narrative “Miss Fatt and Miss Thinne” (1998), as presented by Heather Ballantyne (University of Surrey, UK).

The next panel focused on “Liminal States” and the blurring of the division between death and life in the writing of three authors of Weird fiction, and with them the theme of contradiction was revived – somewhat appropriately. Henry Bartholomew (University of Exeter, UK) presented the counterintuitive tangibility of the spectres and ghosts in the works of M. R. James, an analysis focused through the lens of object-oriented ontology. Following him, independent scholar Daniel Pietersen demonstrated the proto-Weird themes and progressive elements in a largely forgotten writer of Gothic/Decadent short stories, R. Murray Gilchrist. By studying Gilchrist’s portrayals of living deaths and the living dead, Pietersen showed how Gilchrist reverses the structure of the traditional ghost story, marginalising the horror of a supernatural Other in favour of a proto-Weird uncanniness brought on by the reader introspecting their own human condition. This topic of the human condition was then explored again by Agnieszka Łowczanin (University of Łódź, Poland), in her paper on Olga Tokarczuk’s *Bizarre Stories* (2018). Tokarczuk’s stories, Łowczanin argued, are the linguistic embodiment of all that confuses, amuses, and terrifies us in life; they are contradictory narratives stripped of sociocultural specificities in order to offer readers a raw dose of universally-relatable subjective experience.

From universality to locality, onwards I proceeded to the “Regional Horrors” panel, which kicked off with the University of Warwick’s Martha McGill. McGill’s paper on the relationship between Scottish Gothic Horror stories and ‘real’ Scottish folklore brought up interesting points about the simultaneous cultural exploitation and ethnographic validation made possible by the work of Walter Scott, James Hogg, and Robert Louis Stevenson. These same points were brought up in the next paper by Joan Passey (Universities of Exeter, Bristol, and Bath Spa, UK). Passey gave a detailed account of the explosion of Cornish ghost stories at the end of the nineteenth century, and through it demonstrated how writers embraced the sudden popularity of Cornish ghost tourism — exploited it even — in lieu of their declining mining industry. Finally, Helena Bacon (University of East Anglia, UK) delivered her own paper on Gothic East Anglia. This fascinating paper shed light on the impermanent landscape and ethereal atmosphere of this region, showing how East Anglia’s shifting geographical state became the ideal setting for ghost stories and surreal Horror films alike.

My final panel was “Gothic Ephemera and The Digital Age.” Though postcards, video games, and viral internet narratives appear a strange combination, they complimented each other remarkably well. Carys Crossen (University of Manchester, UK) began with her paper on postcards and their surprising relationship to the Gothic; highlighting their naturally conservative form, the secrets they implicitly keep, and their technological regressiveness. Next, Caitlin Jauncey (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) guided listeners through a ludo-narratological explanation of various small-budget Horror computer games, arguing that such works operate in much the same way as Gothic short stories do. Finally, independent scholar Conny Lippert rounded out the panel with her paper on contemporary Gothic fragments on the internet. Lippert’s paper highlighted the dual nature of the internet — both the abundance of information and artistic forms available, and the vast amount of unknown, un-regulated, and potentially threatening cyberspace lurking on the fringes of our social media websites and search engines. In doing so Lippert demonstrated how the internet is an ideal place for the cultivation of terrifying short forms.

Ending the conference was the second keynote, “On Incompleteness: The Fragment, the Dash, the Broken Form,” by Roger Luckhurst of Birkbeck, the University of London. I can safely assure you I have never been so entertained by a discussion of punctuation before. Luckhurst’s paper started with a theoretical discussion of the Gothic/Horror short form as born from fragments and snippets, and, through this, demonstrated how many writers of such works very deliberately take advantage of the broken form even still. Focusing on ever more specific uses of diaspora, diasparaction, and aposiopesis, Luckhurst concluded his paper — and the conference — on an appropriately anticipatory ‘Or More—,’ questioning, as we all were I am sure, what will come next in the academic study of Gothic and Horror short forms.

The short story, particularly those designed to elicit fear, may be one of the oldest forms of literature that we know of. It has stood the test of time and flourished into countless mediums and subgenres since mankind first sat beside their campfire and speculated as to what lay beyond the light. This conference demonstrated these facts brilliantly. The Tales of Terror conference was planned, pieced together and, indeed, animated by the University of Warwick’s own Jennifer Baker,

who single-handedly organised the event and ran it with the gracious help of a group of Lancaster MA student volunteers. A massive thank you to her and her team.

BIONOTE

Oliver Rendle is currently undertaking his PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University's Centre for Gothic Studies, UK, where he researches nihilistic satire, philosophically cynical humour, and their relationship to sociopolitical disillusion in contemporary culture. He is a graduate of the University of Glasgow's Fantasy MLitt program, where he specialised in humour theory and existential horror, and he has presented papers on these topics at Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations, Fantastika, and Tales of Terror.