Thresholds to Infinity: Towards a Typology of Haunted House Narratives

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Abstract. Stories of houses that are somehow wrong have a long history across languages, cultures, and time. Broadly speaking, a haunted house requires two primary characteristics: a distinct atmosphere of unease and a historical context. The latter of these, as might be expected, changes over time, meaning that at different points, some types of haunted house narrative are more prevalent than others. Moreover, the haunted house narrative has not been limited by media or genre: extant examples range from comedy films to science fiction novels to walking simulator video games. Because of this, the existing body of work which can be viewed as the haunted house narrative consists of a great number of texts, with more appearing every year. This paper argues that, in order to approach the haunted house narrative productively, particularly in broad-scope studies, an organisational method is required. I argue that contemporary haunted house narratives can be categorised based on their storytelling mode, drawing from their transtextual interactions with the existing body of haunted house fiction. In this I identify the gothic mode, the weird mode, and the horror mode, all of which I contend to be present in contemporary haunted house fiction through recognisable shared formal and thematic characteristics.

Keywords: haunted house fiction; haunted house narrative; typology; trans-textuality

In their respective overviews of the haunted house in 20th century American literature, both Dale Bailey (1999) and Rebecca Janicker (2015) argue that the way the haunted house motif is expressed adapts to its context – in essence, different periods call for different haunted houses. While this is true of pre-21st century haunted house narratives to varying extent, the idea of cultural and temporal specificity becomes more difficult to sustain when considering the socio-cultural and economic landscape of the 21st century. In *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), Mark Fisher argues that the 21st century is a timeless period because

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it is always-already nostalgic for that which never came to pass, linking it to what Fredric Jameson (1991) referred to as 'nostalgia mode', a longing for a non-specific past that never was. Because of this, Fisher contends, the 21st century prioritises reproduction over innovation, particularly in the production of fiction under neoliberal capitalism. This, I would argue, forms the framework for the sheer variety and diverse forms in the haunted house narrative of the 21st century. In lieu of a singular, definitive and novel approach, these narratives draw on the existing body of work produced earlier, imitating (both in parody and pastiche) those which came before. Furthermore, with the sheer volume of texts published each year, this corpus is increasing exponentially with each addition, each of which will in turn become subject to reproduction.

With the massive proliferation of haunted house narratives, it is untenable to approach the considerable body of material without the help of organisational tools. Yet, there does not appear to be a categorisation method beyond listing texts chronologically: this is the case, for example, with both Bailey (1999) and Janicker's (2015) studies, where the texts are presented in publication order. Currently, the approach that has come closest to a functional typology for the haunted house narrative not based on chronology appears to be that of Freeman (2018: 329), who places such narratives loosely into three thematic categories: haunted houses, haunting houses, and haunted subjects. However, I would argue that a typology based on narrative atmosphere, in addition to thematic content, would be more useful in systematic overviews of haunted house fiction. Using Gérard Genette's (1997) concept of transtextuality, this article aims to suggest one such possible tool.

The typology I propose is based on the observation that the haunted house can serve a variety of functions, some of which reoccur consistently across narratives and different periods. Based on this, I suggest three common variations of haunted house narratives, all of which present distinct atmospheres that correspond to an architextual storytelling mode[2] and invoke a certain mood[3]. As it has become increasingly difficult to boldly distinguish related genres because of the high degree of genre crossovers and hybridity present in the texts and true consensus of genre canon is impossible to achieve, the typology I propose is intended to circumvent arguments over genre classification. Instead, I suggest broadly dividing haunted house narratives

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[2] What I define as a storytelling mode here has nothing to do with Northrop Frye's (1957) approach to modes as a historical progression through literary epochs nor to the broader view of three classical tripartite modes of epic, lyric, and drama. This choice will be discussed further in the next section.

[3] Used here to denote the way the discourse plane of a narrative relays its content plane (see Prince 2003: 21).

into gothic, weird, and horror narratives based on what I consider to be their primary storytelling mode. This approach acknowledges that modes co-occur in real texts – indeed, most of the texts examined in this article exhibit characteristics of multiple storytelling modes. Thus, as modes, the gothic, the weird, and horror can be viewed as loose collections of conventions in service of creating distinctive atmospheres: this forms the architextual structures in which these narratives operate.

The body of the article is divided into four sections. In the first, I examine the notions of architext, modes, and genres, suggesting possible positions for the haunted house narrative in the broader context of speculative fiction and explaining the terminological shortfalls in the discourse about the phenomenon. The second, third, and fourth sections discuss the Gothic, the weird, and horror modes, illustrating their salient features with examples and suggesting potential connections between the earlier corpus and contemporary texts. The article is then concluded with a few remarks on the implications of the proposed typology.

On architext, modes, and genres

In *Introduction à l'architexte* (*The Architext* ([1979] 1992), Gérard Genette argues that, within a system of genres a proliferation of subgenres always exists, each of which is recognisable as part of a greater whole. According to Genette, "tragedy is … a thematically defined category within high drama, just as … vaudeville is a thematically defined category within comedy, or the detective novel a thematically defined category within the novel" (Genette 1992: 21). In this view, then, the haunted house narrative constitutes a thematically defined category within a genre, which Genette refers to as a subgenre. This, however, introduces a question of critical importance: what is its genre? Speaking in the broadest terms possible, the supergenre[4] of the subgenre here would be speculative fiction, which contains the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Of these, the haunted house narrative appears most prolific in the horror genre;[5] however, the horror genre also encompasses innumerable subgenres, most of which have little to do with haunted houses. When one imagines a typical haunted house, the image of a dilapidated Victorian mansion filled with the restless spirits of the dead tends to be the most common. This dramatic image

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4   Used here in the sense of something a step above genre, i.e., supergenre > genre > subgenre.

5   There are examples of haunted houses in fantasy and science fiction as well, though they are rarely the central topic of the narrative.

appears at first more closely related to the Gothic than it is to horror: indeed, for Punter (2013), the Gothic as a term appears to encompass most supernatural and horror fiction. As will be shown later in this article, however, a Gothic haunted house is markedly different from a haunted house seen in horror. A concrete definition of what a haunted house narrative actually *is* remains elusive as well: in Janicker (2015), for example, the term 'haunted house motif' is broader than one might expect and not limited to houses[6]. In Bailey (1999), on the other hand, the 'haunted house formula'[7] is applicable only to a small selection of haunted house narratives and not the entire subgenre.

Certainly, the introduction of genre classification to the haunted house subgenre is problematic at best because of a lack of consensus in terminology. To put it bluntly, as Morgan (2002: 37) did: "Criticism addressing the literature of horror is notoriously lacking in an established terminology". Indeed, it appears that scholars cannot seem to agree on concrete distinctions between the Gothic, weird fiction, and horror fiction, with each drawing borders in different moments and between different works. For example, S. T. Joshi (1990: 3) points out that the term 'Gothic' has been and continues to be used in such a broad way as to be meaningless beyond describing works of high Gothic in the late 18th and early 19th century; for him, the appropriate catch-all term is 'weird tale'[8]. Similarly, a coherent canon of works to be considered weird fiction is impossible to compose because weird fiction is, by definition, fiction inhabiting the margins and borderlines of other genres (e.g., Luckhurst 2017; Alder 2020). And yet, haunted house narratives which exhibit potential characteristics of the Gothic, the weird, and horror abound. A possible genre for the haunted house could then be supernatural (horror) fiction, but this is accompanied by its own problem: not all haunted house narratives are supernatural in nature[9]. To address this, let us return to architextuality.

Generic categorisation is only a small part of architextuality, which in Genette's approach more or less includes literary theory (and linguistics) as

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[6]   Specifically, the corpus of texts examined in the book includes Stephen King's *Christine* (1983), a novel about a haunted vehicle.

[7]   This will be discussed in depth later on.

[8]   This, in turn, is a reference to H. P. Lovecraft's 1927 essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" in which Lovecraft uses it as an umbrella term to discuss supernatural horror fiction.

[9]   More precisely, not in all haunted house narratives is the haunting diegetically genuine: for example, the novel *Home Before Dark* (2020) by Riley Sager is a partial pastiche of *The Amityville Horror* (1977) by Jay Anson, but at the end of Sager's novel, it is revealed that what seemed to be a haunting was actually a home invasion by a living, breathing person. This will be discussed further later on.

such: "theory of genres, … theory of modes, … theory of figures, … theory of styles, … theory of forms, … theory of themes", as he puts it. Architext, then, describes the "relationship of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourse it belongs to" (Genette 1992: 82–85). Indeed, in *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré* (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* [1982] 1997), Genette states that "genre is only one aspect of the architext", clarifying that the relationship between a text and its architext is often "completely silent" and thus inferable rather than explicit; at the same time, it is also often "constituted by way of imitation" and thus hypertextual, i.e., involving a hypo- and a hypertext[10]. Despite this perceived silence, however, a text's architext directly affects what its readers expect and how they react to it (Genette 1997: 4–7). In connection to the haunted house narrative, then, the architext is the existing corpus of the haunted house subgenre irrespective of its possible or potential parent genres.

Nevertheless, similarities between specific narratives still require some overarching terminology. In this context, I propose the use of the word 'mode' as a metonym for what forms the architext of a given haunted house narrative. It covers the generic conventions which it appears closest to and yet which it does not necessarily fully abide by. This approach to the term is not unprecedented: both the Gothic and the weird have been described as modes of fiction rather than genres (see Punter 2013; Joshi 1990; Botting 1996). As modes, I argue, the gothic, the weird, and horror all create specific atmospheres that can be seen in specific haunted house narratives through transtextual mechanisms, primarily through hypertextuality. However, it should be noted that these modes are not mutually exclusive: as will be seen, there are texts wherein multiple modes are present.

The gothic mode

As a genre, the Gothic began to emerge in the second half of the 18th century but did not achieve its peak until the 1780s (Botting 1996: 3) and has gone through multiple revivals and reinventions since (see Spooner 2006: 11). It follows then that a concrete, universal definition of the Gothic remains elusive despite the term's wide use. For example, Baldick (1992: xiii) requires a Gothic narrative to present "a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space", where the two are "reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration". Baldick's definition thus

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10 I.e., there is an earlier text A as the hypotext and a later text B as the hypertext (see Genette 1997: 5).

focuses on the thematic content rather than the formal aspects of the narrative. Similarly, in Punter's (2013) view, for a narrative to be considered Gothic, it must give prominence to fear and present conflicting discourses. In Cooper's (2010) approach, an additional characteristic is the use of Gothic conventions such as the return of the past to encroach on the present, a historicised/historical setting, archetypical characters, heightened emotion, and supernatural events. Another aspect of the Gothic is the interplay between horror and terror, where terror allows for expansion and horror confines, showing its object to be internal rather than external (Botting 1996: 6) – in essence, anticipation *versus* reaction. Earlier Gothic fiction, in particular, tended towards the prior[11] in order to create its charged atmosphere, juxtaposing the (seemingly) supernatural with the sublime and prioritising intensity in all respects. This is, as might be expected, also often the case in haunted house narratives in the gothic mode, creating the architextual framework for the gothic mode by establishing a loose, malleable corpus of hypotexts for new works to draw from.

Indeed, a characteristic of the gothic mode seems to be a dramatic irruption of the past into the present, which can take many forms – hauntings are only one possibility for the problematisation of past and present. In Gothic fiction, one of two approaches to the supernatural is generally taken: either the supernatural is treated as diegetically genuine, i.e., real in the context of the storyworld, or it is over the course of the narrative proven to have a rational explanation within the storyworld.[12] Though there is much to be said about the latter, I will focus on the former here. The Gothic haunted castle and, later, the Gothic haunted house function as repositories of time, of both family history and personal histories. It is this accumulation which manifests in the form of a haunting, with the haunting representing a troubled past that can no longer be ignored. These hauntings, moreover, generally appear to take a very traditional form: spectral presences, mysterious sounds and unexplained phenomena that invoke feelings of dread and doubt in those who encounter them.

An example of a haunted house narrative in the gothic mode depicting diegetically genuine supernatural events is what is often considered the foundational Gothic text, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole.

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[11] Though not always: famously, Matthew Lewis's Gothic novels tended to invoke horror, as can be seen in texts such as *The Monk* (1796) which "describes in lurid detail the spectres that Gothic fiction had previously left to the superstitious imagination or explained away" (Botting 1996: 49).

[12] The latter of these is what Spooner and McEvoy (2007: 128) refer to as the "Radcliffean 'explained supernatural'" after Ann Radcliffe's classic Gothic novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) which often depicted at first seemingly genuine supernatural events that were later revealed have a fully rational explanation.

Set sometime in the medieval period, "approximately in the twelfth century" (Punter 2013: 44), the novel can be characterised as a pastiche of the medieval romance tradition. It is in *The Castle of Otranto* where some of the characteristics now viewed as integral to the Gothic first appeared, putting together supernatural events in the form of restless spirits, complicated family relationships, heightened emotion, and a historical setting. Similarities, understandably, can be seen in haunted house novels working in the gothic mode today. For example, the novel *The Hacienda* (2022) by Isabel Cañas is set in the year 1823 and follows Beatriz, the newlywed daughter of a disgraced general, who moves from the city to her new family's ancestral country estate, hoping to make a home there, only to be confronted with the family's dark past that will not allow itself to be ignored. While *The Hacienda* subverts some Gothic conventions – the novel is, after all, set in Mexico rather than in Europe, and its murderer is not Beatriz's husband[13] but her sister-in-law instead – it still affirms others. Its main character is a classical Gothic heroine and the haunting depicted in the novel turns out to be the restless spirit of her husband's murdered first wife. This spirit typically manifests as unsettling visuals and unexplained noises, often invoking a heightened emotional reaction from the heroine who struggles with accepting that the haunting is real. Once the restless spirit is appeased at the climax of the novel, the malevolent haunting is resolved. Clearly, then, here the haunting is diegetically genuine.

On the other hand, there are also examples of haunted house narratives in the gothic mode which do not create a clear distinction between the explained and the unexplained. An example of this can be seen in *Mexican Gothic* (2020) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia. Generally, the novel adheres to Gothic conventions: set in the 1950s, the plot follows Noemí, a young woman arriving at a remote estate in search of her cousin who has recently married the heir of the English emigrant Doyle family. Once there, however, she quickly discovers that neither the house nor the family are what they seem. In *Mexican Gothic*, the haunting is at first depicted in line with traditional hauntings insofar as it involves apparitions, unexplained noises and feelings, and so on. Over the course of the narrative, however, the haunting is revealed to be the result of a fungus infesting the house's walls and the bodies of its inhabitants. This fungus, nevertheless, is still depicted as possessing supernatural qualities, such as the ability to retain and reproduce afterimages/memories of people it has come into contact with. Such is the case with the specter Noemí encounters most often, the deceased Ruth Doyle. The haunting thus both is and is not diegetically

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[13] As was famously the case in *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne Du Maurier, another celebrated Gothic classic.

genuinely supernatural: it is not a restless spirit, per se, but rather a restless memory made manifest.

Certainly, while hauntings in the gothic mode often begin in traditional ways, they can also incorporate a troubling of the spectral and the corporeal, particularly in newer narratives. This, I would argue, is connected to shifting views of spectrality in culture at large, particularly to the occultist movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As Bann (2009) contends, the rise and popularity of Spiritualism in the 19th century meant its ideas, such as the belief that the spectral could become material, gradually made their way into fiction. An echo of this can be seen in *The Death of Jane Lawrence* (2021) by Caitlin Starling, set in a fictionalised Victorian England, where an at first traditionally ethereal haunting eventually evolves into an interplay between the spectral and the material, with the spectral finally becoming material and vice versa. Although the narrative revolves around a mystery similar to that in *The Hacienda* and which earlier appeared in *Rebecca*[14] (what happened to the deceased first wife of the protagonist's husband), its resolution is different in the absence of a body that needs to be properly interred and a past that can be appeased. Indeed, even *Mexican Gothic*, which has a fungus as the origin point of the haunting rather than the remains of a person, still resolves its haunting. In contrast, *The Death of Jane Lawrence* eventually reveals that the apparition which has been plaguing Jane throughout the novel is herself, merely shifted in time and place, and that the husband who has returned to her is not the same as the one accidentally entombed in the basement. Crucially, however, all three contemporary narratives discussed in this section depict a haunting which can, one way or another, be solved. Often, the solution lies in the provenance of the haunting and/or in the history of the haunted house and the family who owns it: this is the case in all three novels here.

The weird mode

Similarly to the Gothic, concrete definitions of weird fiction are difficult – but not entirely impossible – to find. As a genre, weird fiction began to emerge sometime around the turn of the 20th century. Precisely *which* texts constitute this genre, however, remains a matter of debate. Indeed, as Luckhurst (2017: 1053) states: "To begin to grasp weird fiction is to orient away from the [Freudian] uncanny, … to disorient it in the twist of the abcanny and the other

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[14] It also appears in the 2015 film *Crimson Peak*, which presents another example of a Gothic haunted house narrative and also uses the disturbance of spectral/material in its depiction of the haunting.

distorted affects that lie beyond." This abcanny, in Miéville's (2012: 381) definition, signals that which eludes meaning, that which is not what it seems, and that which cannot be understood or interpreted through the lines of reasoning available to us. While the uncanny pertains to the strange within the familiar (Freud 1956: 224), where "the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse" (Punter 2007: 130), the abcanny signifies that which has *never* been familiar. As Alder (2020: 143) puts it, "material and immaterial forces combine to make and embody the weird monster." In the weird, the spectral functions in much the same way, eroding the line between tangible and intangible.

One of the key features of the weird in its nascence at the turn of the 20th century is its engagement with contemporaneous science and scientific developments (Alder 2020: 27). In contrast to science fiction, though, the focus of weird fiction is not necessarily on science but its effects. Indeed, Joshi (2012: VII para. 1) suggests that the move from uncanny Gothic monsters to abcanny horrors occurred, at least in the case of some writers, *because* of the scientific advances at the end of the 19th century. Certainly, while the Gothic treats the supernatural as precisely that, as it is connected to folkloric tradition and uncanny, but not entirely unknown, in weird fiction, the supernatural is better described as something natural which is not yet – and perhaps can never be – understood (Alder 2020: 10). Thus, even when familiar monsters such as vampires and ghosts appear in weird fiction, they are rendered divergently from their traditional folkloric forms and left open to multiple interpretations.[15]

One of the earliest examples of a haunted house narrative in the weird mode is *The House on the Borderland* (1908) by William Hope Hodgson, which showed that the haunted house could be used to explore metaphysical and even ontological questions. Crucially, the primary focus of the narrative is on what the possibility of the depicted phenomena might imply about the storyworld and how that knowledge affects a person. The haunted house in *The House on the Borderland* is connected to the concept of the *omphalos*[16], which Jones (2009: 32) describes as a "locus of the convergence of occult forces, a singularity of spiritual creation or force", that is, a threshold or gateway to new states of being and knowledge. The *omphalos* in the novel is the titular house which functions as a diegetically genuine gateway between states of being, between physical embodiment and spectrality. At the centre of the story is thus

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[15] An example of this can be seen in M. R. James' short story "Count Magnus" (1904), where the titular entity's true nature continues to be debated by readers to this day.

[16] The term is derived from the Ancient Greek word ὀμφᾰλός ('navel') and originally used to refer to Delphi which, at the time, was believed to be the centre of the world. It is the latter, rather than the literal meaning of the word, that Jones is invoking.

a house where the normal rules for space, time, and corporeality do not apply. Indeed, the haunted houses depicted in the weird mode often function as an *omphalos*, producing the weird mode atmosphere. If the gothic mode tends to evoke the presence of ghosts to be appeased, diegetically genuine or not, the weird mode does not do so. For example, while H. P. Lovecraft's "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1933) hints at a ghostly presence, it is revealed to be a still-living person capable of stepping outside linear time.[17] Similarly, in *Episode Thirteen* (2023) by Craig DiLouie, the 'ghosts' in the narrative are more akin to interdimensional entities than spirits of the deceased. On the other hand, houses such as those in *The House on the Borderland* as well as *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski contain no ghosts at all. These houses, then, tend to be 'haunted' only in a broad sense and rarely by traditional ghosts.

Another potential feature of the weird mode is its relationship with fictionality and narrative levels. For example, in *The House on the Borderland*, the narrative operates on two levels: the novel opens with an account of two hikers who have found a strange journal near the ruins of a once-magnificent house. The majority of the novel then follows the narrative within this journal, concerning a man known only as The Recluse and his experiences in what is implied to be the house now in ruins, leaving it ambiguous whether the journal's events – such as the Recluse's astral projection journey through space and time to the heat death of the Sun at the novel's climax – are supposed to be diegetically genuine or not. In "The Dreams in the Witch House", on the other hand, the impetus for the narrative that unfolds is the protagonist's interest in the *Necronomicon*[18], which has led him to rent a room rumoured to be haunted and thus creates the narrative depicted in the short story. In the case of *House of Leaves*, narrative layering is taken to an extreme as the novel, depending on one's reading, consists of at least four narrative levels, with the Editors' notes forming the exterior first layer, Johnny Truant's commentary the second, Zampanò's manuscript the third, and the potentially storyworld-internally fictional film *The Navidson Record* the fourth. This layering, moreover, is relayed in an epistolary fashion similar to that seen in *The House on the*

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[17] This is revealed in the strange geometry of the rented attic room – within this story-world, the secret to interdimensional travel and, by extension, to immortality, can be found in mathematical formulae and non-Euclidean geometry.

[18] A fictional grimoire often seen in Lovecraft's work as well as elsewhere; according to Luckhurst (2017: 1048), intertextual references to fictional texts were common in the works of early American weird fiction writers as a "sort of in-joke" since most authors were at least familiar, if not friends, with one another. This practice would, over time, aid in the creation of the Cthulhu mythos, a shared fictional universe within weird fiction both then and today.

Borderland: ultimately, there are frame narratives and narratives in frame, with the Editors and Zampanò taking the role of the former in *House of Leaves.* This could be considered a form of intradiegetic metatextuality[19], showing that a different type of textual transference can be used in addition to hypertextuality in engaging with the architextual framework of the haunted house narrative. Similarly, in *Episode Thirteen*, the haunted house narrative is conveyed through a series of video transcripts, journal and blog entries, emails, and text messages, with a frame narrative of a storyworld-internal editor ultimately producing the narrative presented in the novel.

As can be inferred from the above, the plot of these narratives concerns an unravelling of the focal character(s) as they attempt to solve the mystery of the haunted house. Yet, the focus is not on the hidden history of the house but rather an empirical confrontation with the reality of the house and attempts to understand it. These attempts, however, are often doomed to fail, creating narrative atmospheres which often engage with the insignificance of the individual and the horror that comes from trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. Thus, the core of these haunted houses is often more about whether the central narratives in these texts are diegetically genuine than whether the house is actually haunted. As Joshi (1990: 11) suggests, the weird should be conceived of as "an inherently philosophical mode". Indeed, as we have seen, weird mode haunted house narratives concern topics that range from ontology and existentialism to epistemology and the unattainability of true, objective knowledge. In the weird mode, then, the haunted house is not a repository of the traumatic past but instead an *omphalos*, operating on the borders of fact and fiction both within the storyworld and without, questioning the limits of knowledge and even reality. Crucially, the haunted house narrative in the weird mode does not present a haunting that can be solved or appeased.

The horror mode

The horror genre from the mid-20th century onwards appears to be primarily characterised by two features: first, that it is hybridised with other genres and, second, that it can create genre-internal hybrids due to the sheer number of subgenres that have developed. This, in turn, means that the horror mode is perhaps the vaguest of the modes addressed in this article because its characteristics depend primarily on identifying recognisable subject matter (things

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[19] As Genette (1997: 4) defines it, metatextuality signifies commentary as critical engagement of a text with another. Although Genette gives an extradiegetic example of this, I would argue that the same mechanism can be seen here in the storyworld construction.

which frighten), intent (to frighten), and effect (being frightened). Because these are also present in the gothic and the weird, however, it becomes necessary for additional criteria to be invoked. In this case, it is the atmosphere of the narrative. I would argue that the atmosphere of haunted house narratives in the horror mode generally aims for verisimilitude, excepting supernatural elements. These, in contrast to the previous modes addressed, are generally treated as diegetically genuine supernatural events.

In the 1970s, horror fiction began to prominently incorporate economic anxieties (Lukić 2022: 99), and the haunted house narrative was no exception. This, among other factors, led to the emergence of what Bailey (1999) in *American Nightmares* calls the haunted house formula: a list of elements relating to the setting, characters, plot, and themes of haunted house narratives which proliferated in American horror fiction of the 1970s.[20] Generally, these narratives centre on a middle-class family or family surrogate who get access (either full ownership or a right to temporary residence) to a large, historical house in a deal that seems too good to be true. Indeed, as harrowing supernatural events escalate, the family becomes more and more isolated, increasingly desperate to escape the circumstances they have found themselves in. The narrative eventually resolves in either the end of the haunting, generally through the destruction of the house, or the destruction of the family. Often, the thematic focus of these narratives is on socioeconomic troubles, such as limited upward mobility, as well as the classical juxtaposition of good and evil. Rather than being the blueprint for all haunted house narratives since, however, I contend that the formula outlined by Bailey contributes to the architext of but is not equivalent to what I term the haunted house narrative articulated in the horror mode, and has little bearing on narratives in the gothic or weird modes.

In haunted house narratives of the horror mode, the setting is customarily a large, old house with a (secretly) disreputable past, often the site of violence and crime, which turns out to be already inhabited by malicious spectral forces when the main characters move in. These spectral forces can manifest in both intangible and visceral ways, such as the omnipresent, unnatural host of flies in Jay Anson's 1977 book *The Amityville Horror*[21] and Jack Torrance's slow descent

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[20]   Specifically, Bailey discusses *Burnt Offerings* (1973) by Robert Marasco, *The Shining* (1977) by Stephen King, *The Amityville Horror* (1977) by Jay Anson, and *The House Next Door* (1978) by Ann Rivers Siddons as either examples or subversions of the haunted house formula he outlines.

[21]   Note that *The Amityville Horror* was pitched and marketed as nonfiction. However, it is relevant for the present study, primarily because it presents a narrativised account of its subject matter and has since spawned almost a subgenre of its own both in horror and nonfiction categories.

into madness induced by the spectral forces inhabiting the Overlook Hotel in Stephen King's 1977 novel *The Shining*. In contrast to the gothic and the weird, however, these supernatural events are not the result of restless human ghosts or unsolvable cosmic mysteries: instead, they often appear to be the result of malevolent, sometimes demonic, inhuman entities that can be undefeatable. Such is the case in, for example, *Incidents Around the House* (2024) by Josh Malerman, where the spectral entity that accosts the protagonist and her family does not appear to have *ever* been human and, ultimately, cannot be stopped. Additionally, despite the hauntings depicted in *The September House* (2022) by Carissa Orlando and *Diavola* (2024) by Jennifer Thorne being relatively traditional as they involve the spirit of a deceased person, there is a degree of malice in the central ghosts of both novels which is described as inhuman, indicating some degree of a postmortem metaphysical transformation.

As indicated above, the families in the haunted house of the horror mode are increasingly isolated because they have, in one way or another, failed to achieve the neoliberal middle-class ideal. For example, in *The Shining*, the Overlook Hotel functions both as a place for the Torrance family to escape from their day-to-day troubles, and, as the narrative develops, a prison which they have willingly entered. As the winter progresses, the family becomes not only increasingly isolated from one another, but also, simultaneously, as the snow buries the only road to the hotel, they are cut off from society altogether. Similarly, in Robert Marasco's 1973 novel *Burnt Offerings*, the family get a once-in-a-lifetime offer to rent a remote, lavish house for the summer and escape their cramped city apartment. As the haunting escalates, however, they cannot access any outside support: their desire for upward mobility is precisely what traps them in the unfolding nightmare – and keeps them there.

As Bailey (1999) points out, chasing an ideal that is ultimately unattainable links these haunted house narratives directly to increasing anxiety about the attainability of the American Dream. There is, by and large, an economic imperative for why the family (surrogate) must inhabit the haunted house and a social imperative, such as perceived prestige, for why they remain despite the haunting. Examples include the house being particularly cheap to purchase or to rent, as well as a profitable job opportunity which requires living in the house. In contemporary narratives, however, it is notable that social prestige is generally not the reason why the family remains in the house. In *The September House*, for example, the reason is the protagonist's love for the house despite the haunting.

Moreover, in the horror mode, although family secrets or discord can affect the course of the haunting and exacerbate it, as is the case in *Incidents Around the House*, the haunting is not inevitably something which the family

have brought upon themselves. Indeed, the haunted house is not always owned by the family. Crucially, they lack ancestral ties either through marriage or birthright to connect them to the haunted house. An example of this can be seen in *Diavola*, which depicts a troubled family dynamic that existed long before the haunting ever happened and which persisted long after, with the haunting resulting from a door being unlocked at their vacation rental house in Italy and accidentally releasing a malevolent spirit rather than from sordid family history. Similarly, in *The September House*, the haunting of the house exists independently of family turmoil even as the two are thematically and narratively paralleled in the novel, with the protagonist's abusive husband and the evil entity haunting her house blurring and blending. Indeed, the broad trend in the haunted house narrative of the horror mode seems to be the precarity of the nuclear family unit. This is the case in all three contemporary novels discussed in this section.

Conclusion

In the 21ˢᵗ century, the sheer amount of content being published means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to undertake large-scale qualitative studies of fiction without the use of organisational tools. I have argued that an example of such a tool could be a typology of the haunted house narrative, created by examining its architextual features through storytelling modes, which are formed in the genres of Gothic, weird, and horror fiction. I propose, however, that a division based on genre is unproductive when it comes to the haunted house narrative simply because there is no definitive consensus of which texts belong to which genre. The typology I have outlined is intended to alleviate this problem and provides an example of an approach to a transtextual motif where categorisation is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The approach I have suggested here is flexible and focuses primarily on narrative content. Thus, it could be useful not only in comparative literary studies but also in examining narratives in other media since it can be easily adapted to suit the particularities of a given medium.

I have shown that the haunted house narrative in the gothic mode is characterised primarily by the presence of Gothic conventions which are either affirmed or subverted but which nevertheless generate a distinctive atmosphere recognisable through its intensity and historicised setting. The secondary but no less important characteristic is its approach to the interplay between the past and the present, with the former encroaching on the latter in this context in the form of a haunting. In contrast, the haunted house narrative in the weird mode aims to engage with philosophical ideas such as ontology, eschatology,

and epistemology in order to create narratives that are deeply existential and engage with science without becoming science fiction. Secondly, it can also problematise the notions of fact and fiction through presenting often multilayered epistolary narratives where the diegetic veracity of the material forming the central narrative is under question. The haunted house narrative in the horror mode, on the other hand, presents a story which, save for its supernatural elements, is as close to realistic and contemporary as possible. Secondly, it often examines the ramifications of socioeconomic concerns such as upward mobility and absolves its characters of responsibility for the haunting depicted through distancing the family's history from the history of the house.

As I have demonstrated, all three storytelling modes outlined here possess specific characteristics and are recognisable both in past and contemporary haunted house narratives. In contrast to previous work on the haunted house narrative, I have shown that a chronological overview will inevitably fail to account for the timeless time of the 21st century, which is characterised by reproduction and reinvention. The sheer variety present in contemporary texts indicates, in my view, the concurrence of multiple storytelling modes. Indeed, strict categorisation inevitably fails because contemporary texts often engage with multiple storytelling modes and draw from the broad architext of the haunted house narrative as a whole. This can be seen even in texts examined in this article such as *The Death of Jane Lawrence*, where gothic and weird elements are intertwined. The approach I have outlined here creates a possible method for sustained engagement with different aspects of the haunted house or similar motifs and helps to systematise the architextual links between narratives. Indeed, the architext of the haunted house narrative more broadly is cumulative in nature, expanding with each new text and calling for further research.

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