This is the published version of a paper published in *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Introduction: Gothic and Uncanny Explorations.
https://doi.org/10.18261

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kau:diva-54957
Introduction

Gothic and Uncanny Explorations

Maria Holmgren Troy
Sofia Wijkmek

This special issue engages with two closely related and much debated concepts: the Gothic and the uncanny. Both are notoriously difficult to define and have undergone considerable changes in the process of conceptualization. The Gothic, originally defining a delimited period in literary history, today encompasses a variety of meanings and cultural expressions from the mid-eighteenth century and onwards, while the uncanny, since the publication of Sigmund Freud's key text “Das Unheimliche” (1919), has developed into a conceptual mixture of “psychological and aesthetic estrangement, political and social alienation” (Masschelein 2011, 147). Accordingly, the different types of uncanny manifestations examined here are, most often, at least as much cultural – aesthetic, political, social – as they can be said to be psychological, pertaining to the inner mental and emotional life of an individual.

In September 2014, Karlstad University, Sweden, hosted the international interdisciplinary conference 'Gothic and Uncanny Explorations.' The participants came from 13 different countries – Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Serbia, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Mexico, the USA, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand – and from fields such as Comparative Literature, English, Intercultural Studies, Media Studies, Art and Architecture. The articles of this issue have their origin in this conference. Individually, they cover explorations that engage with the Gothic, or the uncanny, or both, in different ways. Thus, as a whole, this selection of articles investigates aspects that connect the concept of the uncanny with the Gothic, and show how the uncanny can serve as a link between the Gothic and other related genres and aesthetic expressions. More specifically, this special issue is part of a project on Nordic Gothic that was an important outcome of the conference in Karlstad. In the following, we will introduce the context of this project and present a survey of previous research in the field, as well as a brief overview of the relationship between the Gothic and the uncanny.

1. We would like to thank Riksbankejubilietsfond for its generous support of the conference and Magnus Bergvall’s Stiftelse for the travel grant for a joint research trip to the British Library in 2015.
2. The participants in this project are, in addition to the editors of this special issue, Johan Höglund and Yvonne Leffler. The four of us are currently at work on a book with the title Nordic Gothic, which focuses on contemporary Nordic Gothic fiction in the form of novels, short stories, films, TV series, and electronic games.
As indicated above, early research defined the Gothic as a period in literary history and a delimited novelistic genre, ruled by rather strict conventions. The early literary Gothic movement comprises the period 1764 to the 1820s and consists of a number of suspenseful texts about death and decay set in a haunted medieval past (Birkhead 1921; Varma 1957). The genre was initially understood as part of the Romantic reaction against an uncritical faith in Enlightenment and modernity (Railo 1927; Kiely 1973), but since then the notion of the Gothic has evolved, and today it is generally conceived as a wider transhistorical and transmedial generic concept tied to contemporary cultural fears and anxieties. Indeed, Jerrold E. Hogle has pertinently described the Gothic as a hybrid genre, characterized by its “essentially betwixt-and-between nature” (Hogle 2002, 17). The first seminal work to deal with the Gothic as a genre not confined to a certain period or to literature was David Punter’s The Literature of Terror (1980). Since then the Gothic has gained attention from scholars working with different media and art forms, and it has been studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives. For example, the inter- or transmedial nature of the Gothic has been explored by Noël Carroll (1990), Linda Badley (1995) and Yvonne Leffler (2000), while scholars such as William Patrick Day (1985), Manuel Aguirre (1990) and Fred Botting (1996) have investigated the Gothic from a psychological angle. Many have also combined psychological and feminist approaches, for instance, Eugenia C. DeLamotte (1990) and Anne Williams (1995). The close relationship between fears and the emergence of new scientific fields has been explored by scholars such as Kelly Hurly (1996) and Mathias Clasen (2012), using evolutionary or biocultural perspectives, while studies by Patrick Brantlinger (1988), Teresa Goddu (1997) and Johan Höglund (2014) have stressed the Gothic as intimately connected to the formation of nations and the expansion of Western imperialism.

The Gothic also emerges in the Nordic region in the early nineteenth century, and today Nordic Gothic includes literature, film, TV series and computer games. Like the original Gothic, they are concerned with death, decay, monstrosity and the supernatural, and they also seek to negotiate modernity. The contemporary Nordic Gothic fiction has become increasingly popular both at home and internationally. Sweden, in particular, has experienced a Gothic boom starting with John Ajvide Lindqvist’s successful 2004 debut novel, the vampire novel Låt den rätte komma in (Let the Right One In), but this interest in the Gothic is also obvious in the other Nordic countries. In Norway, for instance, there has been a wave of Gothic horror films in the last decade, and in the internationally acclaimed Danish director Lars von Trier’s recent films there are Gothic elements, most obviously in Antichrist (2009) but also, more implicitly and subtly, in Melancholia (2011). However, while the Gothic has become a vast and increasingly important international research field during the past 35 years, it has received little scholarly attention in the Nordic region. Most of the previous research has been done in Sweden and, with few exceptions, not on contemporary fiction.3 Contemporary Nordic Gothic is thus more or less an unexplored territory, which motivates this special issue and the project as a whole.4

It is common in Gothic studies to make connections between the Gothic and the uncanny. For example, David Punter and Glennis Byron’s The Gothic (2004), The Routledge Companion to the Gothic (2007), edited by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, and The Encyclopedia of the Gothic (2013) include a chapter each on the uncanny and indicate the
central place of the concept in Gothic theory. The same is true for the third volume of *Gothic. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies, Nineteenth Century Gothic* (2004), edited by Fred Botting and Gale Townshend, which opens with an essay about the concept. However, although the connection to the uncanny is often regarded as a central element of the Gothic, as demonstrated by these recent surveys of the field, there are still few studies that clearly focus on this relationship. So even if many, perhaps even most, studies that deal with the Gothic mention the uncanny, few elaborate on how they are related.\(^5\)

Although it is fair to say, with Anneleen Masschelein, that the uncanny did not become a concept until the twentieth century, the view of reality that the secularized uncanny signifies arguably emerged in conjunction with the Enlightenment and modernity (Dolar [1991] 2004; Castle 1995; Hoeveler 2010). In an essay that draws on Lacan, Mladen Dolar highlights this view as "a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity" and suggests that in pre-modern societies this dimension was "largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and untouchable" ([1991] 2004, 14). The uncanny had "a religiously and socially sanctioned place in the symbolic from which the structure of power, as she deals with opera, ballads, chapbooks, drama, and melodrama.

---

\(^3\) Among the most important studies on nineteenth-century Swedish Gothic are three Ph.D. dissertations: Yvonne Leffler’s *I skräckens lustgård. Skräckromantik i svenska 1800-talsromaner* (1991); Henrik Johnsson’s *Strindberg och skräcken* (2009); and Sofia Wijkmark’s *Hemsökelser. Gotiken i sex berättelser av Selma Lagerlöf* (2009). Mattias Fyrh has a certain focus on contemporary Swedish Gothic in his Ph. D. dissertation *De mörka labyrinterna. Gotiken i litteratur, film och rollspel* (2003), mainly on Swedish music but he discusses four novels from the 1980s and 1990s, too, by Inger Edelfeldt, Mare Kandre, Per Hagman and Alexander Ahndoril. A contemporary perspective is also given in Wijkmark’s article “Naturen och det kusliga. Nedslag i samtida svenska skönlitteratur" (2012).

Furthermore, there is one dissertation on Danish Gothic literature with a historical approach: Kirstine Kastbjerg’s *Reading the Surface. The Danish Gothic of B. S. Ingemann, H. C. Andersen, Karen Blixen and Beyond* (2013). It includes a final chapter on contemporary fiction examining Leonore Christine Skov and Peter Hoeg. Kati Launis sketches a history of Finnish Gothic with her article “From Italy to the Finnish Woods. The Rise of Gothic Fiction in Finland” (2013). Two studies on Norwegian fantastic fiction, Thorgeir Haugen’s *Litterære Skygger. Norsk fantastisk litteratur* (1998) and Gerd Karin Omdal’s *Grenseerfaringer. Fantastisk litteratur i Norge og omegn* (2010), include chapters on Gothic fiction from the nineteenth century. Pietari Kääpä’s *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas* (2014) includes a chapter on contemporary Norwegian, Finnish and Icelandic horror films.

\(^4\) Leffler’s essays “The Gothic Topography in Scandinavian Horror Fiction" (2009), “The Devious Landscape in Contemporary Scandinavian Horror" (2013), and “Nature is the Church of Satan. The Gothic Topography in Contemporary Scandinavian Horror Novels and Films” (2014) are the only studies dealing with the Nordic (or rather Scandinavian) region as a whole.

\(^5\) The few studies that actually provide discussions that more extensively draw on and develop the concept of the uncanny in relation to the Gothic typically do so with a narrow focus. In *Victorian Hauntings. Spectrality, Gothic, The Uncanny and Literature* (2002), Julian Wolfreys examines the Gothic in works of four canonical British nineteenth-century authors by employing the concept of the uncanny, but also by using Derrida’s notions of spectrality and haunting. Hilary Grimes, in *The Late Victorian Gothic. Mental Science, the Uncanny and Scenes of Writing* (2011), explores works by a number of other British writers which are usually not placed within the Gothic genre, but nevertheless contain Gothic themes. Grimes argues that a specific Gothicism that is concerned with the uncanny within a text emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. In *The Queer Uncanny. New Perspectives on the Gothic* (2012), Paulina Palmer highlights the connections of queer theory to the uncanny and the Gothic, respectively, and investigates representations of queer sexualities and transgender in a selection of contemporary British, American and Caribbean fiction published 1980–2007. Also including works by writers of other nationalities beside the British, Diane Long Hoeveler examines early European Gothic and its role in the secularization process in *Gothic Riffs. Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary 1780–1820* (2010). Worth noting is that Hoeveler is concerned with popular as well as high culture, and moves across media boundaries as she deals with opera, ballads, chapbooks, drama, and melodrama.
sovereignty, and a hierarchy of values emanated,“ which it lost with the Enlightenment. Dolar connects this homeless, placeless uncanny with the flourishing of Gothic fiction and argues that Gothic figures such as ghosts and vampires are no “leftovers” from an earlier era but actually produced by modernity itself. As he puts it, “Popular culture, always extremely sensitive to the historical shifts, took successful hold of [the uncanny] ...” which resulted in Gothic fictions (Dolar [1991] 2004, 14). Foregrounding Freud’s essay, Terry Castle, too, links what she calls “the invention of the uncanny” to the Enlightenment as well as to enlightenment. In her discussion of the eighteenth-century invention of the uncanny, Freudian repression of the archaic and the infantile is extrapolated as a model for historical change at a particular time. Castle’s assumption is that the “psychic and cultural transformations” and the aggressive rationalism of the eighteenth century produced the uncanniness of modernity (1995, 8–9). The Enlightenment, according to Castle, led to an “internalization of the spectral – the gradual reinterpretation of ghosts and apparitions as hallucinations, or projections of the mind” (1995, 17); she shows how, for instance, Ann Radcliffe’s seminal Gothic novel The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), human psychology is uncannily spectralized in the form of recurring haunting images of dead or absent loved ones, while traditional beliefs in spirits are seen as superstition (Castle 1995, 120–39).

In contrast to Dolar and Castle, Diane Long Hoeveler draws on philosopher Charles Taylor rather than on Lacan and Freud to ground her discussion of the relationship between the Gothic and the uncanny between 1780 and 1820 but, like Dolar and Castle, she identifies a productive area of tension between reason and faith. This productive area, Hoeveler calls the “gothic imaginary.” The transition in subjectivity during the Enlightenment that Taylor traces meant that a new emphasis on the value of earthly life (slowly and unevenly) replaced the all-prevailing interest in an afterlife. Hoeveler suggests that “The gothic secularized the uncanny by making traditional religious beliefs and values both familiar and strange, both immanent and transcendent, both minimal and powerful at the same time” (Hoeveler 2010, 2). She argues that the Gothic should not be seen as “a reaction against the rise of secularism, but as part of the ambivalent secularizing process itself” (2010, 6).

The articles in this special issue move roughly from the Gothic to the uncanny, in order to outline, or at least indicate, a spectrum where at one end the Gothic genre fades into something else. In “Revenge of the Trolls. Norwegian (Post) Colonial Gothic,” Johan Höglund demonstrates how two examples of Norwegian Gothic fiction, the films Troll Hunter (2010) and Thale (2012), make use of figures from Nordic folklore. Höglund argues that the troll and hulder of the films represent the Other, ambiguously attractive and abject, as well as the repressed colonial past of the Nordic nations. Also exploring Gothic primary sources, Maria Holmgren Troy focuses on the uncanny agency of vampire children in contemporary Gothic fiction. In “Predator and Prey. The Vampire Child in Novels by S. P. Somtow and John Ajvide Lindqvist,” she highlights the co-emergence of the social and cultural preoccupation with child sexual abuse, often cast in Gothic terms, and the appearance of the child vampire as a central character in novels by Thai-American writer and composer S. P. Somtow and Lindqvist. Dealing with another topical problem in Lindqvist’s fiction, Sofia Wijkmark focuses on eco-Gothic and the ecological uncanny in her article “Ecology, Telepathy and Melancholia in John Ajvide Lindqvist’s Handling the Undead.”
Wijkmark discusses how Lindqvist's novel depicts the ambiguity of the relationship between humanity and the environment in terms of melancholy, and how telepathy – one of the forms of the uncanny to which Freud originally drew attention – can be understood in terms of dark ecology.

Boris Lazic’s article “The Uncanniness of Form. A Reading of C. J. L. Almqvist’s Amorina,” which scrutinizes the uncanniness of literary form, moves even closer towards the other end of the spectrum. The Swedish Romantic author Almqvist's hybrid novel Amorina (1839) is related to the Gothic, both thematically and formally, but in his analysis, Lazic uses Amorina mainly as an example to illustrate how contrasts of form disrupt the interpretative process, thus creating an uncanny and defamiliarizing effect. Lazic focuses on two prominent aspects of Almqvist's novel: the fictitious “publisher’s preface” and the shifts between a dramatic and narrative form.

Finally, Per Bäckström’s article “The Trumpet in the Bottom. Öyvind Fahlström and the Uncanny” demonstrates the importance of the uncanny in Fahlström's avant-gardist concrete poetry, radio plays, and visual art, as Fahlström's disclosure of repressed material, from real life as well as popular culture, in his works can be understood as political statements. Although Bäckström mentions the kinship between the Gothic and the surrealist movement in which Fahlström's art has its roots, his oeuvre cannot be regarded as Gothic and, consequently, the article focuses on the uncanny and represents that “something else” at the end of the spectrum.

To conclude, these five articles highlight diverse Gothic and/or uncanny aspects of various media and art forms – novels, films, poetry, radio plays and visual arts – and these aspects are related to form as well as certain themes, motifs, and figures. They deal with a few of the most well-known representatives of the increasingly popular contemporary Nordic Gothic, as well as with an early Romantic Gothic example and uncanny avant-garde art forms. Whereas the uncanniness of form is at the forefront in the analyses of Almqvist's novel and Fahlström's art, and classic Gothic motifs such as the vampire and the undead, or the up-and-coming Nordic troll in the articles on contemporary fiction – all of the material can be said to use hybrid or in-between forms and/or figures to create uncanny effects.

REFERENCES

6. On the relationship between surrealism, the Gothic and the uncanny, see for example John Herbert Matthews, Surrealism and the Novel (1966); Elisabeth Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism" (1990); and Hal Forster, Compulsive Beauty (1993).


