Sins of the Genre:
Science Fiction’s Inheritance of the American Gothic

The American Gothic genre, if it can truly be labeled as such, has itself often been labeled as sensationalist, inhabiting, often for entertainment value, the dark undercurrents of society. Engaging with fiction, horror, Romanticism, and the supernatural, among other elements, the American Gothic’s sensationalist tendencies have served to accentuate the tensions and anxieties that nonetheless reside in the greater American culture. At its height, so to speak, the American Gothic tradition frequently, and often liberally, engaged, among other notions, anxieties of slavery, race, and perversity that threatened the carefully crafted national identity of the United States. And while historical circumstances may have changed significantly, gothic conventions have continued to engage with American cultural tensions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rather than persisting through strictly gothic narratives, however, the conventions — rather, the functions — of American gothic have persisted, in part, through science fiction. Evolving, in part, from the tradition of gothic romances that preceded it, science fiction as a literary form displays a similar aptitude for accentuating the cultural and national tensions of its time. This literary evolution, consequently, establishes science fiction as an inheritor of the American Gothic tradition.

The gothic as a genre is something that seems to inherently defy absolutes. It is less a distinctive literary mode, determined categorically by technique, content, tone, or theme, and more a nebulous semi-genre characterized by some general patterns or conventions. That is to say, it is characterized, rather than strictly defined, by a set of general literary conventions and tropes: intruders, supernatural houses, demonic possession, issues of race, paranormal occurrences, religion, the retreat of reason, persecuted heroines, ghosts, mysticism, horror, romanticism, an imminent fallen world, corrupted dreams, so on and so forth. That these tropes can be found in
any number of gothic narratives, that they are in some way indicative of the gothic is all well and good, but a question yet remains. What does the gothic do?

Though indicative of the form, it is not these aforementioned tropes that necessarily establish a narrative as gothic. Rather, the aforementioned tropes are symptomatic of the gothic’s function—they are devices of its operation. For, there are plenty of narratives that are replete with gothically indicative tropes but that are nonetheless not gothic, they do not function in the same way. In what amounts to a “definition” that is both overly reductive and expansive, then, the gothic can be identified by its function. At least insofar as the American gothic goes, the gothic functions as and voices the dark undercurrents of American culture. Whether culture is taken broadly or narrowly to indicate the society or the individual, the function remains the same. The gothic operates as that contradictory force that underlies all political, sociological, and psychological questions. It expresses the contradictions and ambiguities that are “concealed” by the thin veneer of overlaying substance, be it national or singularly subjective narrative. It is that unacknowledged reflection of the supposedly rational world. It serves as a clandestine, esoteric netherworld where the contradictory underside of rationality is expressed and in which those repressed, taboo anxieties that haunt individuals and nations alike can be articulated.

This description is by no means a definitive, exhaustive, or comprehensive definition of the gothic. The gothic is, more or less, a semi-genre that resists the imposition of absolutes. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to “define” the gothic by this general function of what can loosely be called subversion. For, to call the gothic subversive is to touch upon its peculiar skill for displacing the anxieties that lie at the heart of American culture. Indeed, as Eric Savoy says of the gothic’s function:
Important [...] is the adaptability and innovative energy of the American gothic. Nowhere is this more evident than in the strange tropes, figures, and rhetorical techniques so strikingly central in American gothic narratives, that express a profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse desires that cast their shadow over what many would like to be the sunny American republic. (168)

As Savoy implies, then, the tropes that are often symptomatic of a gothic narrative are employed by the gothic to give “life” to these anxieties. These devices give life to abstract allusions and ideas. A spectral ghost reveals the looming burden of a historical murder; a demonic possession reveals anxiety over the retreat of rationality and power of the irrational; a Kristevian “abject,” or unplaceable threat residing in an ancestral manor reveals anxiety over the unknown and the return of the repressed out of a darker, more horrifying American past. Whatever the case may be, this function of the gothic largely remains the same. Gothic literature rather obsessively circles around unspoken anxieties, alluding to “themes and events that are rarely susceptible to direct exposition” (Savoy 169). In alluding to these anxieties by masquerading them through its traditional tropes, however, the gothic essentially conceals to reveal. The gothic, at least typically, does not outright address anxieties. Its function is not to provide coherent resolution, either negative or positive. Rather, the gothic exaggerates prevalent anxieties instead of managing them. It serves to reveal national and individual apprehensions, returning obsessively to the past to “complicate rather than clarify them, but [also] to implicate the individual in a deep morass of American desires and needs that allow no final escape from or transcendence of them” (169).

Within this revelatory function, we may place science fiction’s inheritance of the gothic tradition. For, as the “golden age,” so to speak, of the gothic, which lasted roughly from 1787 to
1916, came to a close, numerous other sub-genres began to rise, science fiction included. That is not to suggest, however, that what we might today classify as science fiction had not appeared prior to that date—one need only look at Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or any number of works of Edgar Allan Poe to see that it had. Rather, what this beginning to science fiction’s rise in prominence suggests is that temporally, in addition to literarily, science fiction’s inheritance of the gothic, and the fact that the gothic’s “decline” coincides with the beginning of science fiction’s rise, lends credence to the idea that the gothic is not the only means by which cultural anxieties can be exaggerated and revealed through literature. Consequently, the notion that science fiction is able to incorporate this revelatory function into its own becomes all the more plausible. Indeed, science fiction, like the gothic, displays an ability to displace cultural and national anxieties of the respective time, functioning as a space wherein these anxieties can be freely, if nebulously, expressed.

With roots in utopian romances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and with derivatives in the gothic novels from the eighteenth century forward, science fiction eventually began to flourish in the “scientific romances and *voyages extraordinaires*” of the nineteenth century (Milburn 560). Beginning, as Brian Aldiss suggests, with Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which itself can be considered a gothic romance, the first writers to express awareness of producing a new genre were Jules Verne in the 1870’s and H.G. Wells in the 1890’s (Brantlinger 32). However, what we recognize as science fiction today largely emerged within the last century. Nonetheless, science fiction, criticism generally seems to agree, appears as “violation of categories, a [...] joining of radically different domains” (Milburn 560). It is, at the most basic level, a marriage of genre fiction, along with speculative fiction, to science, becoming a “branch of fantastic literature that claims plausibility against the background of science” (Rabkin 459).
Much like the gothic, science fiction extends beyond an absolutist genre, becoming a “system,” an assemblage of conventions that can associate or interdepend to form a complex coalition. It is a cultural system that can “coordinate a set of typical dramatic situations, recurring elements, even themes and styles, as science fiction does by including, for example, the encounter with the alien, time machines, [and] wonderment about the definition of human” (Rabkin 462). Like the gothic, it has its own tropes: futuristic speculation, “high” technology, future societies, utopias, dystopias, sex and gender, alien encounters, space travel, clones, technology “backfiring,” interactive technology, androids, starships, and so on. Too, like the gothic, science fiction seems obsessed with the fantastic, that which is familiar enough to understand but which transcends the everyday. It is a literary form of prophesy that concurrently defies realism. In other words, the conventions of science fiction work against realism even as they depict it. Science fiction makes “loose prophecies of general trends,” using its particular literary conventions to exaggerate and reflect national and cultural anxieties. Similarly to the gothic, then, science fiction uses its conventions topically, “for the purposes of conscious psychological exploration and social criticism” (Brantlinger 41).

Take, for instance, Ray Bradbury’s short story “The Veldt.” First published in 1950, “The Veldt” is a remarkable and appropriate example of science fiction’s gothic inheritance. Within this short narrative alone, science fiction shows the ability to utilize gothic conventions while updating and varying them to meet its own ends. Indeed, “The Veldt” displays an aptitude for the gothic’s function of displacing anxieties while also utilizing several traditional gothic tropes. The story surrounds the outwardly pleasant Hadley family, who happen to reside in the soundproof, technologically astounding “Happylife Home.” Within their home, every need is met instantly and by way of technology. The dining-room table produces food, beds rock the family to sleep,
robotic arms bathe the children, brush their teeth, and comb their hair. The house cleans itself, repairs itself, and with the availability of “air closets,” the house whisks the Hadleys off to any area of the house, making even walking all but unnecessary. Herein, a familiar gothic platitude is evident—the supernatural, or otherwise threatening home. Needless to say, this familiar gothic element is dragged into modernity, transposed from a haunted, ancestral mansion to a suburban home that is inundated with technology. Replacing the looming supernatural force with excessive technology, Bradbury has replaced the concern with an irrational unknown with a rational known in the extreme. Irrationality is no longer the enemy that dogs the heels of a false national narrative. Rather, it is rationality and science that run the risk of undoing the ostensibly archetypal American family.

Rationality and science are the progenitors of all that surrounds the Hadleys in their home, and as a result, rationality and science are the accidental engineers of the complacency that results in the death of the Hadley adults, George and Lydia. So complacent have George and Lydia become as a result of their technologically-run lifestyle, that they are unable to control their spoiled, obsessive children Peter and Wendy, both of whom cannot imagine functioning without the central technological antagonism of the story, the so-called “nursery.” This threat that looms throughout the narrative, however, is not a room belonging to an infant; instead, it is a rather Star Trekian holodeck-like room that hyper-simulates reality through the use of multidimensional, reactionary color and “mental tape film” in addition to “odorophonics” (simulated scent). As George thinks of the nursery: images appear in multiple “dimensions, on all sides, in color reproduced to the final pebble and a bit of straw” (Bradbury 1). The nursery responds purely to thought and desire, recreating any scenario imaginable: “Wonderland, Alice, the Mock Turtle, or Aladdin and his Magical Lamp, or Jack Pumpkinhead of Oz, or Dr.
Doolittle, or the cow jumping over a very real-appearing moon—all the delightful contraptions of a make-believe world” (4). Originally intended for research and recreational use, the nursery has become a way for Peter and Wendy to make any whim or fantasy tangible. Possessed and seduced by the simulated realism, the novelty-deprived children have grown reliant on the nursery, throwing tantrums when they are denied access even for a few hours.

In the veldt, gothically conventional demonic possession has become technological obsession and reliance, on the part of the Hadley children and adults alike. Where rationality in the extreme can be seen as the root cause of the their problems, any genuine rationality on the part of the family themselves has gone out the window. George and Lydia have substituted technology for parenting, technology for work, technology for basic living, and, only naturally, Peter and Wendy have followed suit. Living has been swapped out for life conducted and every whim met by technology. So much so that any time George and Lydia attempt to exert any control over their children, they ultimately retreat or concede, both because they do not know how to do anything else and because they do not want to deal with their children’s behavior. Their complacency has allowed the ironically titled “Happylife Home” to replace them. Even Lydia, in one of her few moments of astute deduction, says to George:

I feel like I don't belong here. The house is wife and mother now, and nursemaid. Can I compete with an African veldt? Can I give a bath and scrub the children as efficiently or quickly as the automatic scrub bath can? I cannot. And it isn't just me. It's you [...] You look as if you didn't know what to do with yourself in this house, either. You smoke a little more every morning and drink a little more every afternoon and need a little more sedative every night. You're beginning to feel unnecessary too. (Bradbury 3)
It is this scientifically fostered inessentially that finally leads to George and Lydia imminent demise, corrupting the post-World War II American dream of a happy family, white picket fences, and a suburban home.

Unsurprisingly, Peter and Wendy, by way of the nursery, are the final, physical authors of George and Lydia’s death. Lydia had become excessively concerned with the images in the nursery. The once innocent, fairytale landscapes had, for some time, increasingly begun to be replaced by dangerous portrayals of Africa, most particularly an expansive African veldt, filled with all that one might expect of that wilderness: tigers, giraffes, zebras, vultures, and so on. The landscape is accompanied by the gruesome violence of the animal kingdom, with one scene in particular reoccurring, that of vultures circling above a group of lions ripping flesh from their recent prey. Even when George and Lydia are not physically present in the nursery, they can tell when their children have recreated this image, for it is always accompanied by screams that sound familiar, but that they cannot place. Eventually, they realize that the screams are their own. So concerned has Lydia become in regards to the violent imagery, that she forces George to lock the door to the nursery so that the children cannot access it. Infuriated over the perceived punishment, Peter and Wendy break into the room. And the following day, after conceding to their children’s desires, George and Lydia are investigating the nursery when the door slams shut behind them, Peter yelling “Don’t let them shut off the nursery and the house” (10). The nursery, now under the control of the children, refuses to respond to the Hadley parents’ commands. And so the couple screams as lions surround them from all sides, crouching and ready to pounce.

So inessential have their parents become that Peter and Wendy are willing to murder them in order to preserve the technologically enhanced life on which they rely. All at once then, the American dream falls apart—at least for the Hadley’s. It is corrupted beyond repair,
destroyed, in part, by the rationality that was ostensibly intended to enhance it. The turn of events is fittingly gothic in nature, obsessively envisioning disaster. And while the gothic may often defy a cogent denouement, “The Veldt” makes no such pretense, carrying disaster out to an apparently logical end. Lack of a cogent resolution notwithstanding, parallels between deep concerns with the imminence of disaster — the imminence of a fallen world — are clear, the difference being that a strictly gothic narrative would have likely been concerned with a fallen world as the consequence of the retreat of rationality, and thus the triumph of irrationality. “The Veldt,” however, displays a clear anxiety over an extreme scientific rationality that either renders human subjects “unnecessary” or forces upon them an equally extreme, and appropriately gothic, lack of rationality. The subtle difference in concern, however, is, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant. For science fiction to be an inheritor of the gothic, their respective preoccupations do not have to be one and the same. The only relatively requisite element is that science fiction display a capacity to adopt the gothic’s ability to exaggerate and reveal anxieties that may exist.

It is through this general function that science fiction has become the inheritor of the gothic tradition. However, just as the gothic tradition itself has largely defied absolutes, so too has science fiction’s inheritance of it. Again, while science fiction has been handed down conventions of the gothic, that should not be taken to indicate that it has inherited it totally in form and focus alike. Science fiction is not unconditionally some updated, neo-gothic genre. To operate under the assumption that it should be is to inevitably arrive at the conclusion that science fiction has not inherited the gothic. And in spite of his claims otherwise, this is precisely the assumption that critic Thomas H. Keeling makes. Though Keeling implies that he has not operated under the notion that any genre has an absolute form, he reduces the gothic tradition to three essential elements that he further contends that science fiction does not display: the
presence of demonic agents, pandeterminism, and an immutable moral perspective. Without going into burdensome detail, in essence, in each of these cases, Keeling fails to realize that the elements he discusses are not inherently essential to the gothic, and also that if and when science fiction uses them, it merely updates them to align with its specific ends. Indeed, Keeling seems oddly oblivious to the fact that science fiction, in inheriting the gothic, has updated its conventions for a different time. “The Veldt,” for example, modernizes and remolds traditional gothic tropes like the threatening home, corrupted dream, and the irrational unknown. Nonetheless, these tropes serve to exaggerate and reflect anxiety over the potential dangers of excessive technological reliance, rapid modernization, and the fragility of the American dream that is a part of the United States’ national narrative. These tropes in question have not ceased to be reminiscent of the gothic just because they’ve been renovated to reflect years of technological and societal progress, nor do they defy a use similar to that of the gothic’s reflective function.

“The Veldt,” though published in 1950, establishes science fiction’s ability to adopt the gothic’s knack for revealing the anxieties with which American culture is fraught. In and of itself, the story rather handily controverts Keeling’s implication that for science fiction to act as an inheritor of the gothic it must display certain essential structural preconditions and thematic apprehensions. The narrative illustrates, as has been implied several times now, that narratively and thematically speaking, there is no necessary “constant” that the gothic tradition must display. Moreover, “The Veldt” indicates that science fiction, like the gothic, is symptomatic of its time. In other words, just as gothic and science fiction’s respective — and shared — conventions and tropes are symptomatic of their function, so too are the two “genres” symptomatic of their respective temporal locations. As functionally reflective narrative forms, they are representative of time, place, and manner, inherently linked to “features of the real world” (Brantlinger 41), be
that feature an anxiety over an imposing historical crime or a preoccupation with a futuristic technological disaster. It is rather a forgone conclusion, then, that as typically gothic anxieties faded, that some updated tradition was bound to evolve so as to reflect the chancing social, cultural, and technological landscape. This is not to deny that there are differences between the gothic and science fiction, clearly there are. However, it is, to a greater degree, function rather than form that connects the two. But regardless of those differences in form, focus, and tropes, this similarity of function still makes greater critical sense than any attempt to discover a potentiality in science fiction that is rigidly distinct from the gothic.

What is more, even if the elements that Keeling indicates are necessary genuinely were, that does not preclude science fiction from being an heir to the gothic tradition. Science fiction is replete with modified forms of the elements that Keeling deems essential to the gothic. For instance, pandeterminism — abstractly, “the limit between the physical and the mental, between matter and spirit, between word and thing” (Keeling 4) — Keeling suggests, is responsible for the gothic’s supernatural elements. He contends that a pandeterministic world is one in which discrete categories — self v. not self, animate v. inanimate, dream v. reality, etc. — become penetrable (Keeling 4). In this, he is correct. A staple of the gothic is indeed the transgression of boundaries, but these transgressions are no less possible within science fiction. While in gothic narratives these transgressions tend to lie outside the rational, transcending empirical cause and effect, in science fiction it seems that trope is simply reversed—transgression extends from cause and effect. Ursula Le Guin’s novelette Nine Lives, for example, first published in Playboy in 1968, uses the concept of experiments in cloning to explore selfhood, paranoia, and disaster. A fairly self evident trope of science fiction, cloning clearly presents a transgression of the boundaries of selfhood.
“The Veldt,” too, deals in transgressive events, or at the very least it blurs the boundaries between inanimativeness and animativeness with the nursery and its depiction of supposedly inanimate environments that have a very animate role in George and Lydia Hadley’s demise. As for Keeling’s other essentials, demonic agents and a defined moral axis, “The Veldt” again shows how science fiction can update these tropes for its own ends. Rather than supernatural possession, demonic agency becomes obsession — e.g. Peter and Wendy’s obsession with the nursery. And as for an established moral perspective that pits good against evil, “The Veldt” once more acts as a modifier of the typical gothic narrative, inverting it to focus on the external society rather than on the individualized self. Rather than irrationality or some subversive “nightmare” being the evil “other” against which morality is pitted, it is a rational known that often becomes evil—i.e. excessive technology and reliance upon it.

In acting as a modifier of gothic conventions, “The Veldt” is indicative of more than science fiction’s aptitude for modifying gothic tropes to conform to whatever purpose it may possess. Indeed, if “The Veldt” is taken as representative of what we recognize as science fiction today, whether or not its particular anxieties are as well, then the narrative illustrates what critic Patrick Brantlinger has called science fiction’s and the gothic’s obsession with and “imagination of disaster.” It becomes unsurprising that so many “nightmare conventions” (Brantlinger 41) of the gothic appear in “The Veldt,” as well as in science fiction’s canon at large, for disaster is the logical consequence of the anxieties that both science fiction and the gothic engage with. And though gothic narratives may not typically express particular anxieties bluntly, carry disaster out to a coherent end, or provide a cogent resolution to disaster, the fact that both literary forms engage with disaster further identifies science fiction’s gothic inheritance. “The Veldt’s” incidental work, then, is to again show the oblique survival of the gothic tradition. Though the
focus of disaster in the gothic and science fiction may differ — individual and inward in the former, external and social, if not cosmic, in the latter — their function as literary forms of revelation remains essentially the same (Brantlinger 41).

Even optimistic, utopian science fiction, which “The Veldt” certainly is not, is concerned with disaster, or at least that with that which may destroy utopia. Disaster is a convenient means by which to impart the exaggerated anxieties that science fiction and the gothic engage with. It is the method by way of which the gothic becomes an “analogue for a nightmare or a delirious dream” and the omnipresent threat of irrationality (Brantlinger 35). Likewise, disaster is the method through which “The Veldt” vilifies the obsession with and reliance upon excessive technology that corrupts the American family, and the way in which science fiction may express anxiety over some imminent catastrophe or socially demoralizing influence. Disaster, then, is the basis by which both science fiction and the gothic utilize their anxiety revealing function. And, therefore, a fundamental reason for why science fiction has inherited the gothic tradition.

As equally disaster obsessed forms, then, the connections between science fiction and the gothic seem to fall into place: function, temporal coincidence, similar tropes, science fiction’s aptitude for modifying gothic tropes in addition to using its own, and so on. Science fiction and the gothic are literary forms fraught with anxiety, but as exaggerated as both forms are, they both, in their own way, reflect features of the real. There is a way in which science fiction and the gothic alike, both because of their fantastic nature as well as in spite of it, make room for serious social criticism. “The Veldt,” again, as exaggerated and implausible as it may seem, uses disaster to depict a potentially authentic issue—the corruptive influence of relying on technology in excess and what that may indicate about carefully crafted familial and national identities. Not all gothic or science fiction narratives so heavily engage in revelatory practices, of course, but
their function makes that revelation possible. Both science fiction and the gothic allow us to see not only what social and cultural anxieties existed but also on whose part and for what reasons.

Similarly, science fiction’s inheritance of the gothic, in a temporal sense, reveals not only the anxieties themselves, but the innate historicity of those national and cultural misgivings as well. In other words, within these fantastic, sensationalist literary forms, we can actually locate the evolution of society itself. That is to say, we can see when these exaggerated preoccupations have shifted. For instance, “The Veldt,” conceivably, would not have appeared prior to its conception in 1950, a time on the cusp of rapid cultural modernization and infrastructural change within the United States. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine Shelley’s Frankenstein appearing prior to the Age of Enlightenment and the resulting expansion of interest in and acceptance of science. Through the temporal location of these narratives, we can actually perceive fluctuations in prevalent social apprehensions, fascinations, and even indulgences. Before they are even literary genres, gothic fiction and science fiction alike are cultural symptoms, and the inheritance of the gothic on the part of science fiction is inescapably a symptom of cultural change. The advent of what we appreciate as science fiction indicates growing apprehension over technological modernization, rapid cultural evolution, and the increasing import of scientific innovation. Thus, it was inevitable that science fiction, interested in speculation and the future, would, at least in part, inherit the functionality of the gothic, more often concerned with the looming, omnipresent past than whatever lay ahead.

There is, quite literally, a way in which these two sensationalist literary forms transcend their own sensationalism. Though both science fiction and the gothic may often have a tenuous relationship with the real, their power lies in their ability to reveal very real concerns. Just as frightened of disaster as they are obsessed with it, the gradual evolution in the disaster producing
anxieties that science fiction and the gothic engage with illustrates science fiction’s gothic inheritance. Though science fiction may be different in its specific elements, it functions in the just the same manner as the gothic tradition that has persisted within the form. And insofar as this function extends, science fiction continues to reveal the apprehensions of our lifetime.
Works Cited


