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Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety*

Camille Patru

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Iconomorphoses : appropriation, éthique et partage - Représentations du monde hispanique actuel dans les séries télévisées

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Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2023, 240 p., ISBN: 9781531503413.

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- 1 In *Gothic Things*, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s main argument is that the Gothic, regardless of the medium, is the dark counterpart of Thing Theory or “non-human turn”—a term coined by Richard Grusin in 2015¹. What Thing Theory proposes is a new approach to objects, especially their interactions with humans. It includes such theories as Object-Oriented-Ontology, New Materialism, Speculative Realism, and Ecocriticism, which share a critical view of anthropocentrism. For Thing Theorists, objects are more than their intended function. This claim disrupts the relationship between humans/subjects and objects. Thus, scholars of the non-human turn aim to acknowledge the agency of matter and avoid correlationalism—an idea that consists of thinking “objects and their qualities in their specificity, outside of their particular meaning and use for human beings” (Weinstock: 11). This leads to a decentering of the human subject, as well as a flat ontology that constructs human beings as objects among objects. For Weinstock, the Gothic rather focuses on what Thing Theory has ignored, such as the deep anxieties linked to such decentering.

While the non-human turn tries to reach a more equal relationship between human beings and objects, the Gothic does not refrain from objectifying humans or endowing objects with uncanny life. Both theoretical approaches therefore focus on the same phenomenon but portray different emotional responses: while Thing Theory is hopeful, the Gothic highlights the horror and anxiety of the situation.

- 2 In the preface, Weinstock explains that his book took seed in his mind in 2011, after he attended a panel at George Washington University. That is when he was first introduced to the various theories gathered under the term “Thing Theory,” and wished to familiarize himself with them. However, while studying those approaches, he noted that many concepts and tropes were also present in the Gothic since its beginnings as a genre in the eighteenth century. His book therefore explores the different manifestations of Gothic Materialism. According to him, the Gothic has always been preoccupied with the material world, its agency, and questioning the distinctions between human and non-human matter.
- 3 The title and subtitle of his book summarize what, to him, are the main characteristics of materiality in the Gothic genre. Relying on the work of Jane Bennett who, as a thing theorist, considers objects as having “thing-power,”² that is, an ability to animate and exist independently of human beings. Encountering this aspect of objects is a sort of “revelatory experience” (Weinstock: 9) that can elicit an “enchantment,” or “wonder.” In the case of the Gothic, Weinstock argues, “dark enchantment” is “a second-order uncanny sensation of extended duration” that is “provoked by ontological confusion” (42). Indeed, “dark enchantment” is part of what Weinstock refers to as “Anthropocene anxiety”—the “fear of losing control, of not being in charge, of being reduced to the status of a thing among other things, of the world ceasing to exist only for us, of the world ceasing to exist at all” (8). One of the arguments in Weinstock’s book is that this anxiety is at the center of Gothic materialism. Indeed, its representations of the relationship between the human and the non-human are always amplifications of our real-life interactions with the material world and of the power we attribute to objects.
- 4 The introduction, “Ominous Matter,” as well as the first two chapters —“Gothic Thing Theory” and “Dark Enchantment and Gothic Materia-

lism”—serve to define the principal notions used in the book. Weinstock relies on the theoretical works of Fred Botting³, Nick Groom⁴, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick⁵, and Ann Radcliffe⁶ to define what the Gothic genre is. The Gothic is a genre “preoccupied with locating and overstepping cultural expectations and boundaries” (1), especially, in the context of Weinstock’s study, those between the human and non-human that result in horror. Weinstock also links Donna Haraway’s definition of the Chthulucene⁷ with Timothy Morton’s hyperobjects⁸. He establishes that “Cthulhu works surprisingly well as an avatar for climate change—a massively dispersed threat to human survival that can’t really be fought directly” (6). Indeed, H.P. Lovecraft’s extraterrestrial deity and his Cosmicism concur with Anthropocene anxiety.

5 According to Weinstock, Gothic discourse centers around three main tropes—spectrality, monstrosity, and apocalypse—and eventually tells “a Gothic tale of a haunted planet, filled with monsters, framed against the backdrop of apocalypse” (34). Most of the first chapter, “Gothic Thing Theory,” is dedicated to going over those three tropes. Weinstock argues that 20th- and 21st-century critical and cultural theory was marked by a “spectral turn” following the publication of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in 1993, and a “monster turn” triggered by Cohen’s *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), as well as an “extinctionist turn,” although “there is not as far as [he is] aware a single foundational text catalyzing” this last one (32). Ghosts and haunting are central to critical discourse, including Thing Theory, because they act as an intermediary between humans and “the inaccessible real” (26). *Monster Theory* allows both “explications of how monsters function as metaphors for particular anxieties and desires in specific contexts, and appropriation/deconstructions of monstrosity in the name of social and, more recently, ecological justice” (27). The recurring theme of the apocalypse comes from the awareness of our own mortality and the slow destruction of the earth, which results in strong anxiety when faced with the impossibility of imagining a future deprived of human beings.

6 When defining “ominous matter” as “mysterious objects that exceed their intended purposes” (44), Weinstock classifies Gothic objects into three categories: cursed objects, conduits, and inspired objects. Cursed objects are “invested with an intrinsic power to bring misfortune and tragedy” (45), and are often found in cautionary tales some-

times criticizing colonialism, though this subtext tends to be ambiguous. Weinstock provides various examples of cursed objects, such as the mummified monkey's paw in W. W. Jacobs' 1902 short story (46-7). Conduits are "channels or portals to another dimension or plane of existence" (49) because they are interfaces that allow for various forms of transgression, the "most familiar" one being the Ouija Board (49). The last category covers objects that seem alive and possess their own agency, whether they are anthropomorphic or not, as is the case with the car called Christine in Stephen King's eponymous 1983 novel (55).

- 7 The four following chapters go over the "privileged categories of Gothic things" (44), namely the body, books, and architecture or landscape. Because he argues that the body is "the Gothic thing par excellence" (72), Weinstock dedicates two chapters to this category of things: "Body-as-Thing" and "Thing-as-Body". Both types of bodily matter have to do with inversions of the traditional human-object opposition, what Stacey Alaimo calls "trans-corporeality,"⁹ and consist of objectification or personification. The body-as-object is related to Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection."¹⁰ The reification of human bodies can occur through fetishization, demonic possession, mind control, or madness. To illustrate the Gothic theme of "the human body treated as a thing available from fragmentation and even consumption," Weinstock focuses on Poe's 1835 short story "Berenice," along with Clive Barker's 1984 "The Midnight Meat Train." According to Weinstock, the mask serves as a transition between the body-as-object and the thing-as-body because it "enacts both transformations" (87). The thing-as-body is then inanimate matter that suddenly seems imbued with life and agency. Anthropomorphic objects are the most likely to come to life, as is the case with corpses that become zombies (*Night of the Living Dead*, George Romero, 1968), portraits ("The Oval Portrait," Edgar Allan Poe, 1842), photographs ("The Mezzotint," M. R. James, 1904), or living dolls (such as Chucky, golems, or voodoo dolls).
- 8 When it comes to books, or rather "all forms of written communication" (115), Weinstock relies on J. L. Austin's definition of performative utterances¹¹ Once again, Gothic books are amplifications of real-life "clichés and understandings" (116) about written language, especially by literalizing common metaphors. According to Weinstock, the per-

formative power of books is even stronger than the original definition because Gothic books don't require the social dimension described by Austin. He then goes on to describe various types of Gothic books, starting with found manuscripts that present the book as a "reality manipulator" and "affect generator" (118). There are also corrupting books that become like possessing entities (such as the yellow book in Wilde's 1890 *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), as well as portals that literalize "the familiar metaphor of books as doorways to other worlds" (130). The category that "offers the clearest illustration of the performativity of Gothic books" is the grimoire, "as reading the spell aloud—sometimes in conjunction with other rituals—holds the potential to alter reality" (122). To illustrate this category, Weinstock mostly relies on the example of Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* which appeared in various works of his. Lastly, the living book is "the form demonstrating the most agency" (132), as in Margaret Irwin's 1930 short story entitled "The Book."

- 9 Finally, the last Gothic thing that Weinstock explores in his book is built structures, more especially "the human experiences of place and architecture" (137). He starts by developing Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between space and place,¹² in which space becomes place when human beings ascribe meaning to it, objectifying it. Yet, Weinstock argues that this theory omits "the qualities of the place itself" (138) and how they influence humans' interpretation of space, following Barthes' notion of punctum¹³. In this chapter, Weinstock's "argument is that not only is there no haunted house without the house, but that room or building is as important to the haunting as the ghost" (145). Haunted spaces have been part of the Gothic tradition since its beginning with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The association between the ghost and the house creates what he calls "architectural dread" (146). This dread can either occur in interstitial spaces (as defined by Roger Luckhurst¹⁴), especially corridors, or when space is subjected to manipulation and distortion. One interesting example is Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves* whose "convoluted narrative" matches its presentation of a house that is "disturbingly bigger on the inside than on the outside" (165). Once again, Gothic objects seem to center around the notion of boundaries and their dissolution. Weinstock argues that the basic formula for the haunted house is "building + tragic past" (153). Moreover, according to the examples

he uses, their main characteristic seems to be sentience or agency. Once again, haunted Gothic spaces are “simply exaggerations of the norm” (169).

- 10 Overall, Weinstock’s Gothic materialism is, to some extent, a criticism of Thing Theory. Indeed, Gothic objects are deeply tied to human beings, so human-object interactions cannot be ignored, as argued by thing theorists when they advocate avoiding correlationalism. Trying to think of objects as independent of human influence is impossible because it would neglect the various sociological, political, and historical factors that contributed to the shaping of human-object interactions: “Thing Theory has been criticized as a kind of backdoor idealism that ironically fetishizes objects at the expense of their material histories” (39). Weinstock also questions the principle of flat ontology on several occasions, arguing that thinking that “all things are equal in existing can license rather than diminish exploitation” (30).
- 11 Weinstock’s book is a valuable contribution to Gothic studies and catalyzes various theories and notions surrounding the study of Gothic materialism. His work borrows concepts from various fields, ranging from psychology/psychoanalysis to architecture (when he mentions Shi and Feng Shui for instance). Weinstock distinguishes numerous categories among Gothic objects, which demonstrates a clear attempt to organize complex ideas and concepts. Those categories are a helpful stepping stone for further analysis. However, while the distinctions between some categories are evident, there are instances where the differences seem subtle, leading to potential redundancy in the classification system. It is the case with the distinction Weinstock makes between inspirited dolls, magic dolls, technological dolls, or killer robots. Those are sub-categories of the “living dolls” (107) based on what makes them alive, but the line is sometimes thin. Despite this limitation, Weinstock’s argument is easy to follow thanks to repetitions and rephrasing. Moreover, the list of works cited and the index of terms and names, along with his classification system, provide effective tools to conduct further research. Another major strength of this work is its constant reliance on detailed examples. Indeed, several sub-parts within the chapters are dedicated to a specific medium, illustrating Weinstock’s argument and putting it into context.

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