



FOR JODEY CASTRICANO,
GOTHIC TEXTS HOLD
INSIGHT INTO THE WAYS
WESTERN SOCIETY
CREATES MEANING
FOR EVENTS AND
EXPERIENCES DISMISSED
BY CLASSICAL SCIENCE

His name has become synonymous with mental manipulation, psychological terror, the supernatural and the undead. His persona occupies an almost hallowed ground deep within our collective psyche, making Dracula perhaps the most famous gothic villain ever produced.

Bram Stoker's classic novel, published only one year after Sigmund Freud introduced the term psychoanalysis, is but one example of the abundance of 19th-century gothic texts that expressed the clash between the new science of the mind and the supernatural.

Even today, the fictional story of Dracula and its gothic counterparts have had the amazing ability to capture the imagination of a public struggling to understand the uncharted recesses of our minds.

"Hardly a month goes by without the release of a film or novel that explores supernatural events, encounters with aliens and characters with mysterious spiritual and psychological powers," says Jodey Castricano, associate professor in UBC Okanagan's Department of Critical Studies. "What this proliferation tells us in literary studies

and in the history of ideas is that the Enlightenment project of psychoanalysis is also haunted by the suppression of these 'gothic' issues."

Castricano knows well the prevalence of gothic narratives and how they have permeated the very fabric of our society. After studying the convergence of philosophy, psychoanalysis and certain gothic stylistic formal and semantic motifs in the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, she became fascinated with the role of narrative in structuring social and cultural reality.

art of darkness

Her current research, the SSHRC-funded book, *Occult Subjects: Literature, Film and Psychoanalysis* (forthcoming from University of Wales Press), examines the relationship between 19th-century debates regarding the validity of the paranormal and the rise and practice of psychoanalysis. Her goal is to develop an understanding of the ways we create meaning for events and experiences dismissed by classical science: “What I’m seeking to do is look at and reflect upon the value of knowledge derived from sources that are often repudiated in Western society such as various ‘occult’ narratives, myths and legends.”

Although the gothic has its roots in the 18th century, 19th-century gothic texts were ubiquitously anxiety-ridden regarding the question of the workings of the mind. Because early psychologists – such as Sigmund Freud, Sandor Ferenczi and Carl Jung – collaborated with mediums, psychoanalysis was already entrenched in debates about the supernatural. In order to establish it as an objective science, Sigmund Freud battled to keep psychoanalysis an occult-free zone because his materialist approach insisted that a physical basis for all mental phenomena could be found.

Freud’s determination to keep supernatural topics out of psychoanalysis shared a striking similarity to gothic texts, which often dramatized the struggles between the status of science as the only admissible foundation of human knowledge and situations that seemed to defy all rationality. By analyzing the prevalence of telepathy, somnambulism, hypnosis and dreaming in 19th-century gothic texts, Castricano hopes to uncover how these literary tropes are used as metaphors to articulate how even today, in post-Enlightenment culture, we resist and simultaneously invite alternative explanations of the world.

“In the last thirty years, theories of reading, writing, interpretation and subjectivity have been increasingly formulated in terms of the paranormal, resulting in what some researchers call ‘a displaced supernaturalism,’” she explains.

“I’m interested in how this ‘displacement’ currently resonates in psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories of reading, writing and interpretation as well as in the fiction, film, and television programming of this century, all of which have conjured up the ‘occult’ as a source of meaning in postmodern culture.”

Castricano is also investigating how the cultural legacy of Freudian psychoanalytical theories in literary studies actually serves as a form of neocolonialism, particularly when it is applied to indigenous writers. She claims that trying to interpret these cultures through the lens of Western thinking, specifically psychoanalysis, is another means to dismiss, revise or discount the beliefs of these cultures. Her aim is to explore similarities between the use of Freudian psychoanalytic theory in gothic studies with the colonial deployment of classical psychoanalytical theories once used to repudiate indigenous cultural narratives.

Issues such as these have prompted Castricano to search for different approaches to understanding the relationship between cultural narratives and the production of knowledge.

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Part of that search has manifested in the goal of setting up a virtual technology centre at UBC Okanagan. By applying her understanding of cultural narratives and the role that perceptions play in shaping culture, Castricano is hoping to create an interdisciplinary research cluster, based on the use of virtual reality (VR) technology, that allows researchers and students from a variety of disciplines to reflect on questions of perception and reality in an

immersive environment. For example, instead of reading about a First Nations’ setting, students will be able to break down the classical subject-object dichotomy by actually immersing themselves in the described environment. Through this, Castricano believes students will be able to address questions of perception and thus learn how alternative sources of knowledge can inform modern society. The project, now in the conceptual phase, has an affinity with UBC’s Trek 2010, which calls for the development of new technologies to aid in the learning and delivery of instruction through a variety of modes and contexts: “We have already acknowledged the crucial role played by discourse studies in understanding social experience and how new digital technology promises to enhance our understanding of how meaning is constructed visually and experientially. If we take the view that cultural narratives (that is, how culture is made into narrative, including oral culture) are a form of visualization, then we can employ new media technology to explore the state of the image as narrative in a postmodern world as well as the relationship the image has to subjectivity and the production of knowledge.”

From studying psychoanalysis and gothic texts to offering new methods of ascribing meaning to situations through virtual reality technology, Castricano sees all of her research endeavours as another extension of her long-term curiosity with ideas: “Ever since I can remember, I’ve always been intrigued by alternative ways of knowing things and what constitutes asking questions about things we take for granted. Personally, I guess I am someone who has a passion for the world of ideas and how those ideas translate into real or material effects in people’s lives.”

Dr. Jodey Castricano is an associate professor at UBC Okanagan’s Department of Critical Studies. Her forthcoming book, *Occult Subjects: Literature, Film and Psychoanalysis*, is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). ■■■