

The Architecture of the Self

Zsuzsanna Nagy-Szalóki

Ng, Andrew Hock Soon. *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject*. Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xiii + 246 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-53681-5. Hb. \$90.

Part of the series Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies, Andrew Hock Soon Ng's monograph *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* is a truly interdisciplinary venture highlighting the intricate relationship of space, place, and literature. Focusing on the intimate connection between the female subject and domestic space in contemporary Gothic narratives, he aims to explore the physical and sensual aspect of this connection. Thereby, he sets out to follow a relatively untrodden path within Gothic studies. Instead of emphasizing the metaphorical quality of space, he looks at the Gothic house, first and foremost, as a palpable, lived space which interacts with the dwelling subject, influencing and being influenced by its inhabitants' psychic state. The narratives analyzed in his volume are selected from among literary and filmic texts to represent a wide variety of narrative approaches to the subject of the house. The first two chapters discuss Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Love* (1971) as well as Valerie Martin's *Property* (2003) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988). The last two chapters focus on filmic representations of the house: William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1977), Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), and Juan A. Bayona's *The Orphanage* (2007). The concluding chapter also introduces two other novels, Janice Galloway's *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006).

The theoretical framework of Ng's analysis is a daring mixture incorporating theories of psychology and architecture as well as literary, cultural, and gender studies with the aim of exploring the Gothic house and the female subject at the intersection of these fields. His overall theoretical focus is that of psychology and architecture, which is suggested in the chapter titles, for instance, "Housing Treachery" and "Housing the Unspeakable," all referring to the reciprocal connection between the inhabitants' unconscious contents and the architecture of the house. While an abundant discussion of theoretical texts runs through the entire book, Ng's basic objective is to show, through a series of insightful close analyses, how these theories interact with

the selected literary and filmic texts. In this way, a fruitful dialogue is established between theory and the primary texts, showing how the domestic interior of Gothic homes is constructed through its occupants' ambiguous desires, and vice versa, how this construction is an active agent in structuring the inhabitants' unconscious.

The discussion of Angela Carter's two novels in "Housing Treachery" brings together theories of space and gender as well as of architectural and utopian space. Relying on Mark Wigley's and Beatriz Colomina's postulations, Ng argues that the domestic space functions as props or a stage which are designed for performance and which are, therefore, used by different inhabitants to assert their patriarchal and often utopian ideas of gendered subjectivity. Yet, the certainty of these subject positions is undermined by a sense of ambiguity which is inalienable from the house and is traced back by the author to Foucault's idea of heterotopia. Subjectivity, therefore, is not only a controlling presence in these novels, but is also marked by the ambiguous, heterotopic architecture of the domestic interior.

The second chapter, "Housing the Unspeakable," reads two contemporary American slave narratives, Valerie Martin's *Property* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. What brings the two novels together in this analysis, apart from the shared cultural background, is the house which, in both novels, "at once extends from, and exceeds, its occupant's unconscious" (63). In *Property*, Ng emphasizes the transsexual quality of lived domestic space, which both reflects and motivates its female inhabitant's unconscious (her unspeakable transsexual desire) undermining the gendered division of space within the nineteenth-century middle-class home. Similarly, in *Beloved*, the apparent "aliveness" of the house is not only reflective of the past and still unspeakable trauma of Sethe, the protagonist, but also confronts the inhabitants with their past. A merit of this chapter is that, apart from the individual traumas represented in the two novels, it highlights the possibility of a social-historical reading, whereby the gothic interior is also an agent of "rememory," a notion used in *Beloved* referring to past memories emerging in the present related to the collective trauma of slavery still haunting the American psyche.

The second half of the monograph concentrates on films. The author grounds this decision on the fact that in film the palpability of architectural space is much more evident. However, at several points in his analyses of the films, he makes connections to the novels discussed in the first half of the book, thereby fruitfully linking the two media. The third chapter, "Housing Secret Selves," discusses William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* and Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*. He creatively combines Deleuze's architectural term of

the *pli* (fold) and the Lacanian notion of the *extimate*, which, instead of following a binary logic, emphasizes the dialectical relationship of self and other. He argues that gothic spaces in the two films have the tendency of “folding” into themselves disturbing the everyday structure of inside and outside, which entails the erasure of the boundaries between self and other. Bearing in mind the technical aspects of film, he points out that the camera, with close-ups and extreme close-ups, highlights how space both reflects and motivates the psychological breakdown of the two female protagonists.

The final chapter, which discusses Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* and Juan A. Bayona’s *The Orphanage*, focuses on how the architecture of the house embodies melancholia, a perpetual state of mourning, which is the result of its occupants’ disavowal of loss. In his interpretation, both films complicate the reading of the haunted house as they depict “architecture *as haunting*” (143). In this sense, the house is both a melancholic object as well as a Gothic double of the self, which is especially conspicuous in the case of Grace, the protagonist of *The Others*. The unspeakable and unconscious loss of her children is embodied in the house, which manifests itself in the form of haunting, while she is unable to recognize that it is she herself who haunts the house.

The four chapters of the book analyze texts presenting the subject-space dialectics in terms of distress and destruction as the house tends to unveil and subvert the unconscious desires of the inhabitants. In the conclusion, instead of a summary, Ng offers a different reading of the Gothic home represented in Janice Galloway’s *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, which, although not classified as Gothic texts in the strictest sense of the word, incorporate some elements of the genre. The home, which is closely connected to the embodiment of the inhabitants’ traumas, is an agent of redemption in these novels. Relying on James Krasner’s argument on the tactility of homes, Ng points out how Joy’s (the female protagonist’s) relationship to the object world of the house in *The Trick* grounds her in her subjectivity even in the state of psychic distress. In Bechdel’s autobiographical text, the home, although a place of childhood trauma, is read by Ng as a source of reconciliation enabling the author’s future aesthetic development, which can be mapped only in retrospect.

One of the greatest achievements of Andrew Hock Soon Ng’s volume is the combination of different fields of study in order to investigate the palpable connection between self and space in the texts. The ambiguity of this connection, explored in detail throughout the book, is emphasized in all of the chapters. Although at some points the discussion of theory

threatens to burst the seams of the close analyses, on the whole the study enhances a productive dialogue between the various theories as well as the narratives discussed. It is a valuable contribution to both literary and film studies and a useful reading for scholars interested in the bordering fields of psychology, spatial and gender studies.

University of Debrecen

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