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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Tropicalizing Gothic by Justin D Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos

Chapter 1: 'Mapping Tropical Gothic in the Americas' by Justin D Edwards

Chapter 2: 'The Zombie Tropicocalypse: Entropic (Digital) Disaster in the Hot Zone' by Rune Graulund

Chapter 3: "'The Head-Quarters of Death": 19th Century New Orleans as Gothic Nexus' by Owen Robinson

Chapter 4: 'A "litany seeking a text": The Specter of Conjure in the Sub-tropical Southern Gothic' by Rodriguez Fielder

Chapter 5: "'They are not Men, Monsieur... They are zombies...": The Construction of Haitian Identity and the Work of the Left Hand' by Kelly Gardner

Chapter 6: 'Consuming the Tropics: The Tropical Zombie Re-eviscerated in *Dead Island*' by Johan Höglund

Chapter 7: 'Environmental Apocalypse and Uncanny Technology: Gothic Visions of the Future in Three Mexican Literary Dystopias' by Inés Ordiz Alonso-Collada

Chapter 8: 'Gothic Re-Constructions: Mayan Ruins and Tourist Horror in *The Ruins*' by Enrique Ajuria Ibarra.

Chapter 9: 'The Raw and the Cooked: Fate and Mexico' by David Punter

Chapter 10: "'I want to escape these walls, but I can't exist outside them": Spaces and Characters in Carlos Fuentes's Gothic Fiction' by Antonio Alcalá

Chapter 11: 'Casas Tomadas: Haunting and Homes in Latin American Stories' by Ilse Büssing

Chapter 12: 'Sepulchral Beauty in Brazilian Romanticism' by Cilaine Alves Cunha

Chapter 13: 'Tropical Gothic: José de Alencar and the Foundation of the Brazilian Novel' by Sandra G. T. Vasconcelos

Chapter 14: 'Difference and Subversion: Gothic Migrations in 19th Century Latin American Novels' by Rita Terezinha Schmidt

Chapter 15: 'The Strange Case of Brazilian Gothic Cinema' by Daniel Serravalle de Sá

Introduction: Tropicalizing Gothic

Justin D Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos

In the Mexican film *Cronos* (1993), a mysterious device designed to provide its owner with eternal life resurfaces after four hundred years, leaving a trail of destruction in its path. When opened, the device stabs the handler and the incision stimulates youthful vigour and a vampire's need for blood. Directed by Guillermo del Toro, who would go on to make the Gothic horror films *Devil's Backbone* (2001), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and the American mainstream vampire superhero action movie *Blade II* (2002), *Cronos* is part of a tradition of vampire narratives in the American tropics that stretches from the civatateo of Aztec mythology to the tale of the azeman in Surinam to the oral stories of the peuchen in Chile to the lobisomem of Brazilian folklore to the soucouyant and volant in the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean. But *Cronos* is also part of a significant Gothic cinematic tradition in the tropics of the Americas that includes, among many others, vampire films such as *Vampiros* (2004) by the Puerto Rican director Eduardo Ortíz, *Sangre eternal* (*Eternal Blood*, 2002) by Jorge Olguin from Chile, as well as the Columbian films *Pura sangre* (*Pure Blood*, 1982) by Luis Ospina and *Carne de tu carne* (*Flesh of Your Flesh*, 1983) by Carlos Mayolo. In fact, Mayolo refers to his vampire movie and his haunting work *La mansión de Araucaíma* (*The Manor of Araucaíma* 1986) as 'Gótico tropical' (tropical Gothic) films that revolve around 'la estructura del gótico', a gothic structure in a tropical setting (9).

In the American tropics, these Gothic figures adapt to their social, cultural and political context: *Cronos* includes a sixteenth-century alchemist in Veracruz, a reference to the Spanish search for gold in the region; in *Pura sangre*, the literal vampire is placed alongside a metaphoric vampire who owns a Columbian sugar plantation and who sucks the life out of his workers; and in *Vampiros* the urban setting of San Juan foregrounds a tropical Gothic cityscape in Puerto Rico. This process might be categorized as what Fernando Ortiz, Ángel Rama and Mary Louise Pratt call transculturation, which merges the acquisition of another culture (acculturation) with the uprooting of a previous culture (deculturation) to engender new cultural phenomena. Indeed, transculturation often arises out of colonial conquest and subjugation, particularly in a postcolonial era when indigenous cultures articulate historical and political injustices while also struggling to regain a sense of cultural identity. This gives the power of transformative cultural agency to the colonized subject by transforming, appropriating, adapting and 're-writing' the modes and genres from the North Atlantic, sometimes engendering texts of resistance by revising models for articulating local experience and culture in the American tropics.

An extension of transculturation is what some cultural and literary critics call tropicalization, a process of troping and infusing a particular space, place, region or nation with an assortment of qualities, metaphors, ideas and principles that are disseminated and maintained through literary texts, historical narratives, film and media (Aparicio 2-4). This form of tropicalization is a reversal of North Atlantic discourses that tropicalize the southern Other through fixed definitions and stereotypes; instead, it includes self-identified tropicalization that resists the discourses of exoticization that are externally driven. In his work on early Latin

American Gothic writing, Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez argues that Gothic can be understood in relation to transculturation and tropicalization. He writes,

The *tropicalization* of the Gothic works in a similar manner as the process of *transculturation* [...], an intercultural and bidirectional dynamic, a two-way flow of information, knowledge, and cultural products. The mechanism revives Gothic images and themes, while at the same time employing images and imaginaries that are related to the colonial and postcolonial relationship of Europe and the United States with Latin America (and vice versa), ideas that situate extreme otherness and monstrosity in the southern part of the continent. (14)

In this context, Gothic adapts to a new geography through a process of appropriation to engender autochthonous texts that do not simply abandon North Atlantic Gothic but problematize and alter it to fit a unique location. Gothic thrives off of local popular cultures and, through its adaptations, it re-emerges to underscore politically-charged ghosts and monsters that return the colonial Other to the centre of Empire and foreground the unease and complications of Gothic figures. Thus the seemingly contradictory expression ‘tropical Gothic’ thrives in regions ostensibly untouched by the dark tropes of the North Atlantic Gothic tradition. Sunlit and humid conditions form a hotbed where Gothic figures – ghosts, zombies, vampires – move freely through plantations, houses and tropical cities, haunting the bright landscape and forming the basis for tropical chills.

The uniqueness of Gothic in the American tropics arises out of the social, cultural, economic and geographical complexities of the region. The indigenous cultures that existed long before European invasion include their own ghosts, just as the violence of colonization engendered a haunted history that is often incorporated into the tropical Gothic text. For the colonist, the ‘settling’ of the ‘unsettled’ land brings with it a sense of the uncanny wherein the homely blurs into the unhomely, an unstable ground that, for a colonial culture, is intensified in the 20th century political assertions of independence. The region also comprises countries and nations grouped together under geographical or linguistic labels such as the Caribbean, Anglo-America, Latin America, as well as North, Central and South America. This is further complicated by regional diasporas that have led to hyphenated expressions of identity – such as Haitian-Quebécois or Mexican-American – which gesture to affiliations with at least two national territories.

While these double or multiple identities underscore the linguistic and cultural variety which characterizes this vast territory, the countries and nations comprehended within the idea of the ‘tropics’ share the common experience of having been forged from various European colonial and imperial projects. In their history, in the shared experience of extermination of indigenous peoples, slavery, and exploitation of their riches and natural resources lies a past that needs surfacing, revisiting, confronting, and critiquing. The ghosts from this violent past were often silenced, or driven to the margins, in the texts that have helped to construct the national literatures in the nineteenth-century, or have taken new forms in the treatment of a troubled and troubling present, riddled with *coups d'état*, military dictatorships, persecution, and torture. And they keep returning from those margins or still loiter in contemporary

cultural productions as a strategy to excavate what has been concealed or repressed. This common history, however, does not obliterate the specific nature of each historical experience and context throughout the American tropics. Representations of the tropical and subtropical world encompass a complex geography, topography and historical process, with substantial differences from region to region. These representations have been shaped through time in travel writing, iconography, literary texts, and the cinema. The appropriation of Gothic tropes by travellers, filmmakers and writers to address the cultural and historical experience of life in the tropics, far from being misplaced in this environment and context, plays an important role in the construction of an idea of the tropics and needs to be interrogated as to its different meanings, a challenge met by each of the essays in this collection.

In geographical terms, the American tropics includes that region of the continent within the boundaries of the so-called 'torrid zone' that comprises two parallels of latitude: the Tropic of Cancer (about 23.5° N of the equator) and the Tropic of Capricorn (about 23.5° S of the equator). However, like other parts of the terrestrial globe, the neighbouring regions around the American equator comprise subtropical geographic and climatic zones located roughly between the tropic circle of latitude (the Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn) and the 38th parallel in each hemisphere. Yet what is known as the tropical belt is far from a homogeneous region, from the point of view of its topography and vegetation. Though it is generally associated with heat, eternal summer, a lush flora, torrential rains, and a rich fauna, some of its areas are savannahs, with scattered tree growth and seasonal rainfall, while others are typically affected by long periods of serious droughts, with direct consequences for their economy and Human Development Index (HDI).

Our focus on tropical Gothic in the Americas includes both the tropics and subtropics, extending from the southern region of the mainland US territories through Mexico and the Caribbean into Central and South America. In their literary geography of the American tropics, Fumagalli, Hulme, Robinson and Wylie offer a helpful definition of this region and its significance for literary and cultural critics. They write,

Not a tightly defined geographical designation, American Tropics refers to a kind of extended Caribbean, including the south-eastern USA, the Atlantic littoral of Central America, the Caribbean islands, and north-eastern South America [...]. This area shares a history in which the dominant fact is the arrival of millions of white Europeans and black Africans (with devastating impact for indigenous populations). It shares an environment that is tropical and sub-tropical. And it shares a socio-economic model (the plantation), whose effects lasted at least well into the twentieth century. (2)

Drawing on this general definition, we aim to signpost the various traditions of Gothic in the region by illustrating how North Atlantic Gothic tropes have been transported to these tropical and subtropical zones as a way of addressing the violence and inequality that 'haunts' this part of the Americas. A land of contrasts – economic, political, social, cultural, environmental – a description French sociologist Roger Bastide once offered of Brazil, but easily extended to this whole vast region, the tropical and subtropical Americas are as much what scientific exploration and knowledge have made them as a symbolic construction that allows for the

appropriation of the Gothic, as the literary texts and films discussed in this collection evince.

Traditionally, the tropical world has been synonymous with extravagance and excess; it resonates with sensuality and exoticism, while it is simultaneously riddled with diseases and lurking dangers. In early colonial times, the tropics were seen as an empty and unknown territory, a space not yet filled by colonization and thus a realm of disorder, barbarism, and savagery. It was often described as the land of the devil that needed to be tamed and ordered (Lima 58) by the impact and imprint of European culture and civilization (Bates). From the European colonists and travellers in the past to the contemporary film and media industries, images of both paradise and hell have time and again been associated with the tropics and subtropics (Freyre). Out of the encounter between the Old and the New Worlds, or out of the contrast between the urbanized areas and the hinterland, there arose a vision that could both idealize and demonize those lands that lay beyond and hid secrets and mysteries yet to be unravelled. These ambivalences have continued to permeate the different constructions of the tropical and subtropical zones, both from a local and peripheral point of view, by the different projects of nation-building, national identity, and the foreign gaze.

The construction of Otherness is a textual strategy that has been engaged in as much from within as from without, with Gothic tropes, motifs, and trappings used to deal with this unfamiliar and often indecipherable territory for colonists, settlers, travellers in the past, and for writers and, more recently, filmmakers living in metropolitan centres. The chapters in this book engage with the idea of tropical Gothic in the Americas and represent – as much as fifteen essays can – the rich diversity of Gothic produced within this geographical area. The volume thus offers a survey of Gothic across the region, from New Orleans to Mexico City and Port-au-Prince to São Paulo.

The essays that follow expose the continuities and discontinuities that characterize the appropriations and acclimatization of the Gothic in the tropical and subtropical Americas from the nineteenth-century to the present, and in various genres and cultural forms, from novels and short-stories to films and computer games. In common with classical Gothic texts and settings, they enact the fear of the unknown, the unsettling past with its secrets and ‘ghosts’, as well as the social and political issues of gender, race and identity formation, cultural anxieties involving class and difference, but also memory and nationhood. Empire and colonialism, which lie at the heart of the tropics’ historical experience, now take on new forms and make their appearance in global tourism; spheres of private experience like subjectivity, sexuality, and the body, all of which have haunted Gothic narratives from its early days, and these themes are also appear in the selection of tropical Gothic texts, films and games discussed in this collection. There is continuity between Gothic tropes from other regions and those found in the American tropics. What each one of the essays in this collection claims, however, is that tropical Gothic texts in the Americas have been mobilised in order to deal with the particular nature of the imperial and historical experience in this part of the world. The American tropics has been Gothicised, in Enrique Ajuria Ibarra’s apt formulation, so as to flaunt the violence that has characterised its historical process from the very early days of colonisation. In more recent times, popular revolts, military dictatorships, economic speculation and exploitation have also produced their share of violence and anxiety, which can explain

and justify the Gothic treatment of materials, settings and plots. Zombies have replaced the spectres of classical Gothic; imperialist and economic interests have assumed less concrete, insidious forms, though they are ever more powerful in their transnational character, rapacity and aggressiveness. As Jeffrey D. Sachs has argued, almost all of the tropical countries in the world remain underdeveloped and rank among the poorest even at the start of the twenty-first century. Each chapter explores the uses of the Gothic in a wide variety of materials in order to confront this disturbing past and present.

The essays in this collection interrogate the various aspects of these reworkings and have been organised in three sections, which bring to the forefront thematic continuities and common perspectives in their treatment of the Gothic. What would then seem to be a geographical dispersal of Gothic appropriations over a large spatial continuum proves to be an evidence of recurrences and overlapping, whose connections and disconnections have more to do with the specificities of the different colonial projects and historical forces that have shaped each of the national traditions in that vast area than with an essentialist identity of destiny. Transplantation and movement are, in this sense, pivotal to all the essays, and offer an overarching approach that does not strictly obey chronology and geography, allowing for their ordering in clusters around common topics and concerns.

The first section, 'Tropical Undead', brings together the essays that deal with zombies, zombieism, and voodoo, as they have migrated from West Africa to haunt the sub-tropical American South and the Caribbean and been mythologised as part of a culture of death and conjure rituals that seek to settle accounts with these regions' black heritage and the haunting history of slavery. It opens with Justin D Edwards's mapping of the Tropical Gothic, wherein he demonstrates how, in its transnational migration, the Gothic has travelled across geography, nation and history and negotiated with local cultural forms and practices like hybridism, cannibalism, and mongrelisation. His essay offers a frame for the whole collection by foregrounding how in different traditions and locales over the vast expanse of the tropics the experience of displacement and dislocation has produced fresh readings of the Gothic to address relevant issues common in, and at the same time specific to, their colonial past or problematic present. As Edwards argues, fundamental to this relocated Gothic are the transfers and cultural translations that the process of concrete and metaphorical circulation of goods (in this case, books and literary works) and ideas have enabled.

In 'The Zombie Tropocalypse: Entropic (Digital) Disaster in the Hot Zone', Rune Graulund's discussion of what zombies have signified over time and how they have been appropriated by contemporary cultural forms suggests that, in spite of 'the incessant repetition and recirculation of the zombie throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries', zombies are marked by difference. Rather than death, they represent a 'figure of excessive life' and have changed from a 'tropical reality' to a 'global monstrosity', adaptable to various contexts and circumstances, as evidenced in their invasion of many different media, fields and cultural manifestations. The entropic and apocalyptic world depicted in films, computer games and TV shows, where these creatures proliferate and spread like an infectious disease, is nothing but the representation of the system we live in, where the reproduction of capital, its colonisation of all spheres of life, and the endless circulation of goods are the

nightmare which is becoming increasingly difficult to escape.

A step back in time, the experience of a nightmarish, but now unfamiliar environment and unhealthy climate, suffuses the accounts by European and American travellers. As Owen Robinson illustrates, the challenge to make sense of a reality and culture related to 'the mythology of death' is pervaded by an impending atmosphere of doom, fear and anxiety. The imaging and imagining of nineteenth-century New Orleans is as much of its own creation as the result of these travellers' confrontation with their unhomely experiences. Likewise, Elizabeth Rodriguez Fielder examines how elements of West African religious and cultural traditions were incorporated into William Faulkner's and Tennessee Williams's representations of life in the South and re-appropriated by the Black Arts Movement of writers of the 1970s and 1980s. This was done in ambivalent ways and in the politicization of these traditional practices, wherein the supernatural is instrumental in a critical reading of cultural nationalism within the circum-Atlantic. Zombification also features as a tool in Haitian culture's negotiation of identity, which moves beyond nationality to become racialised, as Kelly Gardner suggests, by taking on contemporary meanings of zombification as a critique of capitalism, consumerism, and technology.

Digital culture has also become a place where questions of identity and otherness may be addressed. In a videogame like *Dead Island*, for instance, the player is invited to adopt an avatar and experience the action through the eyes of a protagonist in the game. Johan Höglund's essay explores how the gamer is transformed into a tourist who is motivated by series of quests and, through role-playing, has the choice of playing as a one-hit US rap star, a vacationing football player, a female Chinese desk clerk/government spy, or an Australian Aboriginal policewoman. Here, Höglund discusses the tropical tourist industry as a type of neo-colonial practice, arguing that the game can be understood as a form of American imperial Gothic in the tropics and, as such, it works in ways similar to both the US and British imperial Gothic of the late nineteenth century.

Character identification in computer and video games allow for a vicarious experience of Otherness and often works as a strategy to simulate the real-life encounter of coloniser and colonised. Predominantly visual and reliant on a different kind of medium, these games mobilise and reinterpret Gothic tropes to create a fictional world wherein one can apprehend contemporary concerns regarding neo-colonialism and Empire. Although they seem to be merely games, intended simply for the entertainment of players, these games can be read metaphorically as enactments of political anxieties and the power dynamics of globalization as an extension of nineteenth-century forms of imperialism.

Gothic as a way of addressing specifically socio-political content is the cornerstone of the essays in the last section of this collection. In order to explore Mexico as a Gothic site, David Punter focuses on Laura Esquivel's two novels *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Malinche*, both of which provide a series of discursive intersections that shed light on the complexity of Mexican history. His main concern in his piece is the tropic and topic rewritings of history, and how to find a discourse that will give an account of those 'distortions' of history with which the Gothic, in many of its modes, so often deals. The processes of identification and distantiation from the forces of Mexico's

'legendary' past are, he asserts, different and put a separate slant on such primary cultural loci as the fatal translational encounter, between ruler/priest and conquistador, which some have seen as at the root of Mexican history.

From the ghosts of the past we move on to Gothic visions of the future. In her reading of three Mexican literary dystopias, Inés Ordiz Allonso-Collada explores how Mexico's terrifying present (ruined urban landscapes, economic crises, social inequality and environmental degradation) is translated into the horrifying, apocalyptic future of a country ruled by the masters of monstrous technology. Science fiction, combined with the motifs and structures of a gothic aesthetic, foreshadows a barbaric time when Mexico City will be the site of environmental destruction, while evoking a past of pre-Hispanic myths and sacred places. In this Cybergothic fiction, the country is a dystopic place where the haunting of history engenders a site of chaos and catastrophe.

The ruins of Mexico's past are the setting of Carter Smith's film adaptation of Scott Smith's novel *The Ruins*, a tourist adventure narrative that features a carnivorous plant capable of mimicking human and technological sound. The film establishes a clear dialectic between civilization and nature, the homely and the unhomely, as young American tourists decide to visit an ancient Mayan archaeological site which, though not inherently Gothic, is reconstructed to heighten the audience's awareness of horror and anxiety. Enrique Ajuria Ibarra explores how the monstrosity of body horror in *The Ruins* is a key factor for illustrating fantasies of perilous danger in a foreign land. The film, he argues, structures Otherness artificially by means of Gothic conventions and rather than creating a form of Mexican gothic, it Gothicises unfamiliar, exotic elements in order to narrate and display a spectacular fascination for foreign Otherness in the form of dark and unknown tropical fears.

Antonio Alcalá's and Ilse Bussing López's essays move beyond the threats lurking in a strange and baffling natural environment into urban settings. Here, large and old buildings are inhabited by ghostly presences, memories, and the secrets of the past. In the heart of Mexico's capital, wherein the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule have not erased the marks of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the fiction of Carlos Fuentes adapts the Gothic mode in order to deal with Mexican national identity. While Alcalá explores how Fuentes makes use of spaces located near the city's downtown neighbourhood in order to tease out the implications of the Gothic uncanny events that his protagonists experience, Ilse Bussing López chooses to compare Fuentes's 'La Buena Compañía' with Julio Cortázar's 'Casa Tomada' to investigate how in these two stories the house is represented as a prison or an uncanny space that destabilises domesticity. The tension between the homely and the unhomely permeates these two stories: traumas in the family resurface as spectres to haunt siblings or close relatives as the characters confront their complicated pasts. Reading the Argentinian writer's short story from this private and personal perspective should not exclude, however, the possibility of a political interpretation of the claustrophobic atmosphere that invades the two characters' family house. For Cortázar published this story in 1969, during the fierce military dictatorship that controlled Argentina for many years; thus, we might read the family relationships in the story as allegories for political and social relations within the homeland. The mysterious noises that progressively invade all areas of the house, imprisoning the brother and sister and forcing them into increasingly confined spaces until they give it up altogether, mirror

the oppression and suppression of individual freedom imposed by the regime that ruled Argentina during this period.

Gothic tropes and conventions have given, and continue to give, vent to the demonic aspects of individual and collective experiences in the American tropics and configure narrative strategies to articulate national and historical issues that have haunted this region for generations. Imaging and imagining the troubled and troubling process of construction of nations and literatures in the tropics have always entailed the negotiation of endogenous and exogenous tensions and the re-appropriation of foreign suggestions to very specific uses. This relates directly to the Brazilian writer Álvares de Azevedo (described by some as ‘the Brazilian Byron’) who incorporates dark morbidity and ultra-Romanticism in his work. As Cilaine Alves Cunha claims, there is a transgressive model of tormented beauty in Azevedo’s writing, whose demonic heroes embody the processes of degeneration and the violation of limits that represent an evident contrast with any aesthetically uplifting experience. She goes on to suggest that his *A Night in the Tavern* draws on significant Gothic features to raise controversies about the social construction of Brazilian literature and the subsequent rise of literary nationalism. No less meaningful is the role allotted to women in his narrative: they are assaulted by humiliations, indignities and violence. Perverse sexuality also permeates Azevedo’s work and introduces an unprecedented dimension into Brazilian Romanticism.

The body is sometimes the receptacle for an alien organism. We find this in Smith’s *The Ruins* and in Azevedo’s work, wherein the body is represented as a vessel for transgressive sexual practices (necrophilia and incest) and the subjugation of women’s bodies within a patriarchal society. Rita Schmidt’s essay represents a counterpoint to this representation of women in her discussion of the transculturation of the European Gothic mode in four novels by women. She argues that the difference of women’s texts engendered at the nation’s margins – as the nation’s other – lies in a narrative economy that subverts the celebratory collective histories of nationality embedded in canonical texts by men. By appropriating gothic tropes, these women writers offer alternative understandings of history and politics in the countries where these novels were produced. Patriarchal power is at the heart of this strand of female Gothic; in these works of fiction, identity and gender are inscribed in a web of violence, racialization, and sexuality. The body thus becomes a political statement in the work of these four nineteenth-century women writers who subvert the received ideas about nation building and romance.

Two novels by José de Alencar, one of the founders of the Brazilian novel, are discussed in the essay by Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos. She argues that the appropriation of Gothic tropes by Alencar is instrumental in the representation of Brazilian rural life as a space that is prone to violence and excess, and therefore as the Other of the ‘civilised’ and Europeanised capital of the country. Outside the metropole, the history of slavery and miscegenation are pivotal to challenging the dominant discourses of Brazilian identity and of the nation in the novelist’s work as conceptions of nationhood that are devoid of conflict and tension. Alencar’s depiction of Brazil as a sunny, tropical country is tinged by shadows and gloom as his plots enact, if marginally, some of the harsh aspects of Brazilian life in the nineteenth century.

Referring to texts produced more than a century later, Daniel Serravalle de Sá explores Brazilian Gothic cinema and how this medium includes the seemingly irreconcilable imagery of gloominess and sunniness alongside Gothic motifs. The films by Brazilian filmmakers Walter Hugo Khoury and José Mojica Marins (alias Zé do Caixão) are connected here in terms of a protocol of reading that, on the one hand, favours a certain specific aesthetic and iconography of Anglo-American extraction and, on the other hand, understands Gothic as a useful framework to address socio-political contexts, metaphorical connotations and contradictions in the plots of the films. Sexuality and politics emerge once again as pivotal concerns in the works of the two filmmakers, who resort to gothic motifs and tropes to illuminate the violent aspects of recent Brazilian history and convey the horror of the military dictatorship. The metanarrative of the nation is once again challenged as these films address the traumas associated with gender, class, and racial difference.

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