

The Transgressive Bodies of Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* Line

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Abstract: This article explores the strategies employed by Dark Horse Comics to develop the Xenomorph creature and its associated universe across the publisher's *Aliens* line of titles. Through analysis of three *Aliens* miniseries' story arcs that are representative of the line's narrative and structural innovation, my contribution explores how this corpus transgresses the parameters of the movie franchise's Science Fiction and action-horror genres in the following three ways. Firstly, I investigate the *Aliens* comics' introduction of dreams and psychological trauma associated with the literary Gothic past in *Aliens: Sacrifice* (March–June 1993). Secondly, in keeping with the Gothic's comic turn, I examine the humorous, parodic, and self-referential elements of comics in *Aliens: Stronghold* (May–September 1994). Thirdly, I explore Dark Horse Comics' critical understanding of negative nostalgia in preserving and transgressing the narrative structure and aesthetics of *Alien* (1979) in *Aliens: Dead Orbit* (April–December 2017). Ultimately, this article considers these three themes as examples of the paradoxically transgressive and restorative elements of Gothic that are apparent throughout Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* line. It argues that the ways in which the *Aliens* line innovatively reworks these aesthetic and narrative features of the film franchise's visual and thematic origins provide a critical understanding of the productive interactions between comics and literary Gothic traditions.

Keywords: Dark Horse Comics, *Aliens* franchise, Gothic and comics, comic gothic, humour, transgression, body.

The line of *Aliens* miniseries published by Dark Horse Comics (1988–2021), based on the popular Science Fiction film franchise of the same name, offers new opportunities for studying the relations between comics and the Gothic.¹ While defining the Gothic is always a difficult task,² Dark Horse Comics' back catalogue consists of recognisable comics genres.³ Crime, Science Fiction, movie adaptations, and superhero genres have featured frequently in Dark Horse Comics; miniseries such as *Hellboy* (1994–present), *Tarzan* (1996–present), and *Sin City* (1991–2000) are bested in popularity only by those of its *Star Wars* (1991–2015) and *Aliens* (1988–2019) licences.⁴ These works reflect the assumed notion of comics media as a cultural domain primarily for male consumption pervaded by themes of superheroic masculinity and thematic, tonal darkness. Julia Round writes that the 'horror mode and the comics medium [...] have often privileged serious themes and lengthy formats',⁵ while Carolyn Cocca states that 'Superheroes have [...] embodied inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability.'⁶ Nonetheless, Dark Horse Comics' wide range of properties also encompass humour, historical fiction, and Japanese manga, and its limited series publication model of four or six-issue miniseries and special one-shot titles under the Dark Horse Presents label, instead of requiring permanent support of ongoing series, allow for sporadic production of marginal titles without the complexity of definitive cancellations and major relaunches.⁷

In 1988, Dark Horse Comics pioneered its strategy of adapting and evolving the miniseries format in response to market demands with its *Aliens* line. At once building on and distinguishing themselves from James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) film, these comics effected a transmedia and narrative departure from the sequel movie that can be read as a cultural production of Gothic. Following Julia Round's work on the formal properties of comics as an excessive and spectralising visual architecture in adapting the literary Gothic's narrative conventions,⁸ my article analyses Dark Horse Comics' use of the above techniques to develop

the alien Xenomorph aesthetically and culturally across the *Aliens* miniseries line. Dark Horse Comics' first entry in their *Aliens* line, simply titled *Aliens* (July 1988–July 1989),⁹ defines the publisher's standard for Gothic art, body horror, and transgression – a combination that endures throughout the many *Aliens* comics produced in the line's thirty-year history.¹⁰ Through its original black and white pencilling by Mark A. Nelson, *Aliens*' (1988–89) visual identity follows the slower narrative pace and tension of *Alien* (1979) rather than its more action-focused sequel. As Foley, McRobert, and Stephanou suggest, the 'difficulty of establishing a totalising definition of transgression is reflected in the range of transgressions discussed'; nonetheless, here, as in the slippery category of Gothic, 'sexuality, violence, and the figuration of the human body are understandably recurrent themes'.¹¹ On the one hand, the allure of taboo content has provided comics with the potential for increased readership and profits. On the other, however, the medium's visual basis and formal properties of panels and gutters (that is, the spaces between panels) enable a 'focus on the boundaries of the body and the moral implications of the subject – both victim and viewer,' breaking down perceived notions of the self's imaginary unity and bodily integrity.¹² This notion of transgression common to Gothic is present in Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* line through its innovative structural portrayal of nightmares and threats of bodily evisceration. In *Aliens #2* (September 1988), a dream sequence conflating the birth and infant memories of one of the characters with his actual impregnation by a Xenomorph uses comics gutters to depict a human foetus in the womb and snarling Xenomorph heads. Here, the outside, non-spaces of the comics gutters distort and mark intrusions in the sequential narrative. The boundaries separating bodily interiority and exteriority, and those between the narrative and its structural presentation, are momentarily transgressed.

While the body horror present in these *Aliens* titles is not inherently transgressive and, as with other comics, may primarily aim to secure their economic success, some of the

Gothic themes of the *Aliens* line do arguably fit the theory of transgression. Besides the structural transgression of comics' formal properties, the Batailleian idea of sacred transgression in religion, unexpected laughter, or traumatic wounding is readable through the Xenomorph's presentation in Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* line. In *Aliens #4* (March 1989), a religious cult employ suicide bombing to break into a laboratory in which a queen Xenomorph is contained, for the purpose of worshipping it. Their leader proclaims to the queen that the cult wishes 'to consummate our love [...] to purge the vision from our minds [...] to be one with you'.¹³ Such transgressive moments of violence, religious extremism, and the breakdown of the corporeal self leave a lasting impression on the reader, even if they are overfamiliar with the apocalyptic aftermath of alien infection and outbreak. As represented by *Aliens* (1988–89) and three other *Aliens* comics this article analyses – *Aliens Sacrifice* (March–June 1993), *Aliens Stronghold* (May–September 1994), and *Aliens: Dead Orbit* (April–December 2017) – I argue that Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* line weaves this transgression across their titles to promote intertextuality, the 'paradigm of all fiction, all textuality' that sustains the internal paradoxes of the Gothic in their comics.¹⁴ As demonstrated by the three texts chosen for close analysis, Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* line coheres the Gothic's contradictions of radical excess and restorative tradition, novel innovation and formulaic convention in style that are innate to the genre's literary history.

In 2019, when the Walt Disney Company purchased *Aliens* rights holder Twentieth Century Fox, the licence to produce *Aliens* comics was transferred to Disney-owned Marvel Comics.¹⁵ Marvel would then continue the tradition of Dark Horse Comics' use of Gothic art, body horror themes, and psychologically driven character development in *Aliens* comics through their own *Aliens* titles. Three six-issue miniseries, which together form the multi-arc comic, *Alien* (March 2021–August 2021, September 2021–June 2022, and August 2022–February 2023 respectively) have been completed under this new arrangement. While it is

beyond the scope of this article to compare Dark Horse Comics' and Marvel's *Aliens* titles, the high contrast pencilling, depictions of graphic gore, and emphasis on mystery and characters' interior monologues rather than outright action are also present in Marvel's titles, indicating the Gothic's effectiveness in both *Aliens* lines.

The Gothic's literary origins, as Nick Groom writes in his editor's introduction to Horace Walpole's 1764-published *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (2014), lie in the complicated and contradictory eighteenth-century notions of Medieval violence and English political progressiveness, synthesised rather than untangled. Groom qualifies this conflation, citing Richard Hurd's restorative aim 'to demystify the Middle Ages by contextualizing the attitudes and values of medieval society, connecting the unfamiliar, remote, and strange to the everyday and recognisable'.¹⁶ The tropes of dreams, taboos, architectural ruins, and even Shakespearean tragedies in Gothic literary and popular culture that have escaped the confines of Walpole's foundational story are still with us, Groom contends. Referring to a contemporary Gothic in which menacing cyborgs and aliens now terrorise and excite modern readers, he states that 'we are yet to escape its deadly embrace'.¹⁷

'Everything Reduced to the Shape of its Jaws': Living Under the Shadow of the Alien in *Aliens: Sacrifice*

The nightmarish quality of the Xenomorph in the four-part *Aliens: Sacrifice* miniseries (hereafter referred to as *Sacrifice*) is derived more from the creature's psychological than its physical threat. The story was serialised in the UK by Dark Horse International's *Aliens* magazine (Vol. 2 #9–12, March–June 1993), and collected in the USA as a one-shot comic book by Dark Horse Comics in May 1993. In British comics artist Paul Johnson's cover art for *Aliens* magazine's March 1993 issue, the alien's position over the bed of the story's

female protagonist, Ann, recalls the scene of Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* (1781). Accompanied by the tagline 'to sleep, perchance to scream!',¹⁸ this image outwardly signals the Xenomorph's Gothic attributes associated with psychology, dreams, trauma, and *Hamlet* that constituted the degree zero ingredient of *Otranto*'s supernatural.¹⁹ Johnson and *Sacrifice*'s writer, Peter Milligan, bring their considerable credentials in Gothic comics to this title. This section will therefore analyse the wider creative relationship they have with Gothic comics and how this in turn influences the art and transgressive themes of *Sacrifice*.

Sacrifice marks a major shift from previous *Aliens* comics stories, in which the creatures have completely overrun the Earth, in order to explore the Gothic horror of nightmares, isolation, psychological trauma, and the taboo of infant sacrifice.²⁰ One of the story's characters, who is part of a group stranded on an alien planet sheltering from a single Xenomorph, remarks: 'We've tried asking for help. We're a long way from anywhere out here and one solitary alien doesn't seem to cut much ice nowadays.'²¹ This consciously signals a turn away from earlier miniseries' more action-packed, militaristic content. Instead, the individual alien multiplies itself in the settlement's dark claustrophobia and inhabitants' fears:

The monster is everywhere, a fog, a cloud. In every corner, every home, every gaze. I wonder if, if you lived here, that after a while you would think of nothing but the alien. Would everything be boiled down to when it might strike again? Everything reduced to the shape of its jaws? Would there be something almost... attractive about that?²²

This internalised alien, its presence a series of haunting yet potentially pleasurable shapes, is supported by its depiction in and across comics panels. As a miasmatic terror, the creature's psychological impact transgresses the boundaries of the comics structuring format. In a

sequence in which Ann, who joins the survivors after her spaceship crash-lands on the planet, is lying in bed, the Xenomorph's nightmarish form looms over her, while below, a rough and broken panel depicts a close-up of its head, detailed with two evilly glowing eyes. *Sacrifice's* rendering of the oneiric collapse of temporality by dissolving comics panels comes from earlier UK Gothic comics. Johnson's chiaroscuro technique and merging of visual perspectives beyond frames bears a striking resemblance to the work of fellow British comics artist Dave McKean. McKean's covers for DC Comics' *Hellblazer* (1988–2013) and illustration of *Arkham Asylum* (1989) are influential in establishing the Gothic themes of nightmares, madness, and psychological and social degeneration in the comics format. The narrative power of this art style is carried over into *Sacrifice*. In its aforementioned nightmare scene, the chronology of two seemingly separate, sequential images is undermined by a leaking comics panel that has been superimposed upon the lower half of a single illustration. Similar to McKean's work of incorporating multiple, undivided perspectives on a single page, Johnson's art uses the broken panel border to convey Ann's untethered, dreamlike horror when experiencing the Xenomorph's phantasmal presence (figure 1).

Figure 1. *Aliens: Sacrifice* #1, Dark Horse Comics, March 1993.

Further to establishing the Xenomorph's power in nightmares as opposed to literal strength and numbers, *Sacrifice* relocates the creature into more traditional literary Gothic territory. One of Ann's childhood memories, split across two discrete flashback sequences, recalls a traumatic incident in which a Xenomorph broke into her home and killed her mother. In her reflection, Ann narrates:

Even as my mother screamed at me, the wall caved in. Twenty years ago, and I still see it, as though it were happening in front of me now. The cloud of dust and the dark

thing moving through it. My mother screaming at me to run now, not stay still,
run...²³

The creature's sudden intrusion into a domestic environment, preceded by a terrified outburst of 'It's in the house!' uttered to Ann by her mother, is an enactment of the Gothic's paradox.²⁴ *Sacrifice*'s sudden transformation of the Xenomorph from Science Fiction to home-invasion monster exemplifies comics' understanding of the transgressive power of Gothic. This turn to a more recognisably Gothic scene is bound up in the British influence on American comics. *Sacrifice*'s writer, Peter Milligan, authored some of the *Hellblazer* stories. *Hellblazer*'s various writers, including Milligan, create an 'interplay between [...] psychological wounds [...] and the visceral reality they inhabit'.²⁵ The sudden narrative theming of a haunting past's impact on the present in comics franchises such as *Aliens* that at first may have seemingly little to do with the Gothic, but, like *Hellblazer*, have always been inextricably linked to it, is a key indicator of the Gothic's transgression. As Julian Wolfreys writes, 'the gothic, as a body of fiction, is always already excessive, grotesque, overflowing its own boundaries and limits'.²⁶ Wolfreys' image of the Gothic's monstrous textual transgression reveals not only the Xenomorph's horrific body, but also its historical role through its initial appearance in H.R. Giger's visual art. The creature was always already part of Gothic art's surreal, dreamlike subject matter and claustrophobic darkness that the *Aliens* film franchise then adapted. Wolfreys' definition of the literary term transgression points to the Gothic's paradoxical tradition of artistic innovation and historical anachronism, a movement reflected in the image of the Xenomorph's invasive return to an earlier aesthetic and narrative tradition of Gothic literature: the genre's emphasis on the returning traumatic past in the site of domestic relations. Gothic could well be 'the transgressive that *is* fiction, and what, in fiction is always transgressive; that is, its ability to invent endlessly its own forms, demolish its own boundaries, and enter illegally [...] into the territories that are

already familiar to it'.²⁷ *Sacrifice*'s construction of the Xenomorph as a nightmare and childhood trauma is at once a breeching and restorative generic act that draws upon Gothic transgression in a larger SF plot.

Sacrifice's narrative and visual style provide transgressive scenes elsewhere too. The Gothic's ongoing concern with affronting religious faith are represented in the narrative. Simon Marsden explores 'some of the ways in which contemporary Gothic texts have engaged with Christian ideas, tropes and images [...] as sources of creative friction, struggle, challenge and hope'.²⁸ He also discusses the 'uncanny inheritances' of Christian theology and their reimagination and renewal by the contemporary Gothic, even in the secularised late-twentieth and early-twenty first centuries. Marsden states that in the modern era, 'there is an unavoidable link between the concepts of divine absence and divine death'.²⁹

Sacrifice creatively engages in what Marsden terms the mutual reinforcement of divine silence and the intellectual challenges to God's existence.³⁰ In a series of comics panels in which Ann reveals her occupation as a priest, she offers to give a Sunday service and removes a shawl she has covered her body with to reveal her religious habit. In the final panel of this sequence, she stands before an almost entirely white backdrop, which merges with, and thus becomes part of, the white comics gutter. It therefore connects to the gutter's unseen content between comics panels and becomes an almost dreamlike, liminal moment. This image reveals a series of structural and identity oppositions – a disrobing revelation of traditional Christian robes, an order of worship given by a female cleric appearing before a blank social unrecognisability. The white background to Ann's religious unveiling symbolically introduces faith, hope, and the redemption of the survivor community's taboo of infant sacrifice. In order to stave off attacks by the Xenomorph, they satiate its thirst for human blood by periodically offering it genetically cloned babies on a stone pedestal. Here, the ceremonial function of human sacrifice follows Bataille's understanding, in which 'man

is never looked upon as butcher's meat, but he is frequently eaten ritually'.³¹ The ritual consumption of human flesh in Bataillean terms is a recognition and exchange for the offer of one's own body. Yet when Ann undoes this substitution of being devoured oneself by going to the pedestal herself in place of an infant sacrifice, the symbolic exchange of profanation with piety, sacrifice with self-sacrifice, and Satan with God collapses. She misreads the evil reflection in the alien's eyes, stating: 'If there is a Devil, then there must be a God.'³² But when she confronts the creature, she witnesses only a force of nature, 'Bland indifferent destruction. No more demonic than an earthquake or a plague.'³³ Ann is blinded by an explosion in an attempt to kill the Xenomorph. This denouement reverses the common biblical trope in which (re)gaining eyesight represents belief in or coming to the Christian faith; what Ann finally sees is not a religious adversary but a force of nature.

The participation of *Sacrifice* in the Gothic comics style is in its high-contrast use of shadows and light, transgression of comics' formal properties in a manner similar to earlier notable examples in the medium, and narrative transgression associated with the literary Gothic in the form of childhood trauma and taboo extremes that shatter religious faith.

The Comic Turn in *Aliens: Stronghold*

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik claim that the Gothic is a hybrid literature whose concerns are not limited to paranoia, the barbaric, the taboo, violence, darkness, and death.³⁴ It extends, they argue, across an aesthetic spectrum 'that at one end, produces horror-writing containing moments of comic hysteria or relief and, at the other, works in which there are clear signs that nothing is to be taken seriously'.³⁵ This less orthodox and sometimes critically under-recognised configuration of an incongruous literature that encompasses serious inquiry and 'frivolous' aesthetics exposes 'the fragmented condition of the modern subject'.³⁶

Gothic comics and their culture, as Round contends, are also situated on this spectrum of ‘hybridity and tension: ranging from funny animal stories to the darkest graphic reads’.³⁷ In contrast to the Xenomorph’s nightmarish and traumatic qualities emphasised by *Aliens: Sacrifice*, in *Aliens: Stronghold* (hereafter referred to as *Stronghold*), an imitation of the creature enables exploration of its uncanny qualities and, ultimately, its humorous potential.³⁸ One of *Stronghold*’s characters, Jeri, is a synthetic being who looks exactly like a Xenomorph and was designed for alien hive infiltration and monitoring. This provides the narrative with a brief instance of horror and the uncanny, in which two other characters, the married human couple Joy and Philip Strunk, initially mistake Jeri for an actual Xenomorph. During these introductions Jeri is given a cigar to smoke, to which he reluctantly acquiesces. The comedic (if somewhat demeaning) image of a cigar smoking Xenomorph recalls the humorous elements of *Aliens* and comics history, including Sergeant Apone’s similar habit in *Aliens* (1986) and that of the grotesque figure, Big Head, the protagonist of the Dark Horse Comics series, *The Mask* (1989–1991). John Arcudi and Doug Mahnke, *Stronghold*’s writer and artist respectively, co-created *The Mask* and another series that similarly blends action, violence, and humour: DC Comics’ *Major Bummer* (August 1997–October 1998). Thierry Groensteen’s definition of comics braiding and the transgressive laughter at the grotesque or violent body enable a Gothic reading of this visual intertextuality. Historically, transgression captures the terrifying and disconnected fragments of carnival and imposes a limit on them: the sublimation of ‘grotesque material into [the] comic form’ of culture and literature.³⁹ The intertextual braiding of Arcudi and Mahnke’s work on humorous, grotesque characters in their co-authored comics establishes a nonlinear and dechronologised network of recurrent images across panels and texts in line with Groensteen’s theory. Here, ‘physically and contextually independent [symbols, such as the cigar are] suddenly revealed as communicating closely, in debt to one another – in the manner that Vermeer’s paintings,

when they are reunited, are perceived to come in pairs, or in threesomes'.⁴⁰ This interrelation of symbols between Arcudi and Mahnke's various titles also submits the utter horror of the Xenomorph to the comic form. The transgression in *Stronghold*'s humorous portrayal of the alien body smoking a cigar exceeds expectations surrounding the creature and pushes it to a new horizon of laughter.

The intertextuality of the Gothic text, Horner and Zlosnik write, 'can be seen as taking up a sceptical position towards authority and morality and as problematizing authenticity and legitimacy'.⁴¹ The figure of Jeri introduces a Xenomorph body that possesses comedic, human-like mannerisms and undermines the *Aliens* franchise's prevalent representation of the creature as a terrifying, extra-terrestrial predator. Though *Stronghold* discusses serious themes such as android rights and black-market profiteering, Jeri's continual interjection of comic relief deflates the pervasive horror read historically in the Gothic text. This narrative incongruity in the miniseries, as in the contemporary Gothic at large, is reflected aesthetically in Mahnke's art, which exchanges the high-contrast, claustrophobic style common throughout the *Aliens* comics for brighter, shadowless visuals. Catherine Spooner argues persuasively for the critical legitimacy of a flip side to traditional Gothic aesthetics that is comic, gleeful, or whimsical. Though she identifies the turn to 'happy Gothic' as a broadly post-millennial phenomenon, she warns against tying Gothic's social themes and aesthetics to either side of a specific temporal threshold. Many of the post-millennial texts analysed in her monograph present continuations of preexisting styles, such as those of Tim Burton's films, that were also in effect before the Year 2000.⁴² Following Spooner's claims for a celebratory joy in the Gothic, and Horner and Zlosnik's notion that the comic turn acts as the Gothic's doppelgänger,⁴³ *Stronghold*'s characters and visual aesthetics under discussion in this section constitute the *Aliens* comics' doppelgänger. This is achieved not only through Jeri's behaviour and the use of light, open spaces in the title's laboratory setting, but also in the

depiction of graphic violence via bright, colourful hues and exaggerated lettering fonts and sizes.

Another of *Stronghold*'s synthetic beings, Dean, is a hulking, heavily armoured, titanium exoskeleton designed only to identify and exterminate aliens. He is a mere object, with limited logical processing. As one of the characters states: 'Dean is not inside that 'contraption' [...] Dean *is* that contraption.'⁴⁴ Dean's potentially threatening hypermasculinity collapses through the comic's exaggerated presentation of graphic violence, in which he, Jeri, and a detachment of other, more humanlike, synthetic beings use high-tech weaponry to hold off a marauding infestation of Xenomorphs. Mahnke's use of colouring in this scene – the vivid, purple walls and bright, flat yellows of gunfire – brings *Stronghold* in line with the exuberant action of the other comics he created with Arcudi. Action in *The Mask* series on which they collaborated employs a similarly lurid palette, and both it and *Stronghold* use onomatopoeia in contrasting, bold lettering to articulate the sounds of gunfire creatively (figure 2). *Stronghold*'s visual aesthetic and descriptions of diegetic sound, which include 'BRAKA BRAKA', 'BUD-DOOM' and 'BLAM', revel in the carnival explosion of colourful violence, and taps into the cultural memory of the onomatopoeia featured in the *Batman* television series (1966-1968). The campness of this show, as Andy Medhurst writes, demonstrates a 'playful, knowing, self-reflexive theatricality'.⁴⁵

Figure 2. *Aliens: Stronghold* #4, Dark Horse Comics, September 1994.

While *Stronghold* does not foreground the grotesque body horror of *The Mask* or the campness of *Batman*, it moves beyond the notion in most other *Aliens* titles of the Xenomorph as a horrific, mortal threat. The above image embraces combat as performative spectacle and self-consciously signals its attachment to the humorous style of comics history. Despite its vivid colouring, this sequence is entirely bereft of red, human blood; only the

aliens' green acid and synthetics' white fluid are present in the fight. In this story, synthetics do not suffer conventional death when maimed by the creatures; they are modular and can be stitched together again surgically. This violence against the android body, then, subverts the established threat of death in the *Aliens* comics through its performance of dazzling, Gothic surface. *Stronghold*'s postmodern revival of comics' aesthetic past and on Gothic's comedic rather than horrifying action, focuses on these superficial bodies. As Spooner notes, for Eve Sedgwick and Allan Lloyd-Smith, 'Gothic is about the denial of depth and the insistence on the surface',⁴⁶ and postmodernism 'an aesthetics of surface, dominated by the depthless image' respectively.⁴⁷ Because *Stronghold*'s androids can be reassembled, the cuts delivered to synthetic flesh by Xenomorph attacks are unable to destroy a core, unified self that was never present to begin with. Alongside this, Mahnke's departure from the visual techniques of high contrast or chiaroscuro art broadly associated with the *Aliens* titles in favour of solid, flat colours offers a mirthful, postmodern alternative to the dominant Gothic themes of psychological interiority, serious tone, and shocking, graphic violence in horror comics.

'Don't Touch Them!': Negative Nostalgia, Preservation, and Transgression of *Alien* in *Aliens: Dead Orbit*

The Gothic paradoxically moves towards past traditions and, simultaneously, embraces radical new horizons in literary aesthetics and social themes. According to this article's argument so far, *Aliens: Sacrifice* and *Aliens: Stronghold* reveal a restorative engagement in Gothic horror and a pastiche of superhero comics' historical style respectively. The two titles are also preoccupied with offering reading experiences that, in their discrete ways, 'expand the horizon of expectation' within the *Aliens* franchise.⁴⁸ Where *Sacrifice* provided a transgressive conception of the Gothic theme of psychological trauma

through fragmentation of comics' structural properties, *Stronghold* subjects the predominantly serious tone of *Aliens* media to a humorous and exaggerated style in line with Gothic's comic turn. The Gothic's contradictory restraint and excess in aesthetics and tone is also at work in the title under discussion in this section, *Aliens: Dead Orbit* (referred to as *Dead Orbit* in this section hereafter). This double movement of Gothic in *Dead Orbit* revolves around its negotiation of the cultural nostalgia for the run-down space trucker aesthetic seen not only in *Alien* but also in other near-contemporary SF films such as *Solaris* (1972) and *Star Wars* (1977).

The paradoxical connections between Gothic, nostalgia, and transgression have been the subject of prior scholarship. Carina Hart defines the 'negative nostalgia' of Gothic's interrelations with the ghosts, vampires, and werewolves featured in folk and fairy tales as attempts to encompass the contradictions between the nostalgic revival of these textual pasts and the social progression beyond the stories' coded heteronormativity and restorative moral order in their happy endings.⁴⁹ Isabella Van Elferen has explored nostalgia and transgression as 'two seemingly opposite yet inseparable aspects of Gothic rewriting [...] both defined by the desire to re-create stories, films, or music'.⁵⁰ My analysis of *Dead Orbit* rests upon the comic's Gothic rewriting of *Alien*'s movie aesthetics through its innovative narrative sequencing, use of the comics medium's formal properties, and choice of art style. As a Gothic example of negative nostalgia for a definitive text in the horror and science fiction film genre, *Dead Orbit* recollects and transgresses the source material by which it was inspired. As Van Elferen writes, 'Gothic nostalgia [...] intervenes with the structure and nature of the thing remembered.'⁵¹

In a narrative that recalls the original *Alien* film's space-trucker aesthetic and 'chestbuster' scene, *Dead Orbit* (which is not an adaptation of that story but is inspired by its horror atmosphere) depicts two of the creatures emerging from their respective hosts onboard

a similarly worn-out, retro-futuristic space station, the Sphacteria. The station's doctor, upon seeing the Xenomorphs, yells to the other crew members not to touch them – a line echoing the one delivered by Ian Holm's android character Ash in the film. What appears as a faithful or untouched recollection of the suspense and horror experience from another medium, however, is in fact 'a particular form of narrative framing embedded in subjective and communal remembering' – a series of 'remembered expectations with which audiences encounter and engage with generic artefacts'.⁵² *Dead Orbit's* narrative framing then proceeds to draw on its unique use of the comics format. After the two aliens' hosts are killed, a third survivor crashes the Sphacteria's explorer shuttle into the space station, severely damaging the latter. This event embeds a series of flashforwards into the chronotopic structure of the narrative, shifting from before to after the alien outbreak and explosion. The jump forward in narrative time is determined by a large panel depicting the head in close-up of the story's protagonist, Wascylewski, disintegrating and merging with the detritus of the damaged space station (figure 3). The art style of this image, drawn by James Stokoe, conveys the aesthetic of the physical prop models used for spacecraft in Science Fiction films of the 1970s. The high detail in this portrayal of the Sphacteria captures the lived-in physicality of the USCSS *Nostromo* in *Alien* and the Millennium Falcon in *Star Wars*.

Figure 3. *Aliens: Dead Orbit #2*, Dark Horse Comics, April 2017.

This scene also introduces psychological trauma through comics' visual and structural elements. The image of Wascylewski dissolving into the Sphacteria's space junk establishes a sequence in which the surviving crew are denied integration of the witnessed Xenomorph births into episodic memory. This notion is reinforced by his traumatised expression and an ellipsis in the speech bubble of the other characters in a preceding panel. These panels follow the conventional paradigm of trauma fiction towards a negative nostalgia of *Alien's* retro-futurist aesthetics, in which the text is 'experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of

beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions'.⁵³

Instead of merely reviving the nostalgic aesthetics and linear time of the cinematic past, *Dead Orbit* conveys its retro-futurist art and narrative sequencing through the comics structure. It establishes the fragmentation of the iconic space station aesthetics as a visual indicator of a narrative flashforward. *Dead Orbit* also uses the oversized, kitsch charm of the now-dated computer hardware and interfaces of *Alien* to signify the comic's non-linear narrative. The narrative opens with Wascylewski's planting of a remote explosive device on the space station's hull during his attempt to escape from the two now fully-grown Xenomorphs onboard. It then shifts back in time, to before this crisis, showing an intact Sphacteria captioned by the word 'before'. The majority of the comic's plot, therefore, details the events leading up to Wascylewski's planting of the bomb, and concludes with his detonation of it and leaving the space station's orbit on a fragment of it that has been severed by the explosion. The bookends of this narrative structure are tied together by the presence in each of an oversized computer monitor drawn in *Alien*'s retro-futurist style. This technology connects the opening and concluding sequences temporally by computer readouts in digital clock font of oxygen remaining in minutes. The use of familiar, historical aesthetics of the film medium's past in an innovative comics structuring of popular SF horror narrative is a 'simultaneously nostalgic and transgressive rewriting' and an example of 'the consistent links between the various historical appearances of the Gothic'.⁵⁴ *Dead Orbit*'s negative nostalgia in preserving *Alien*'s unique visual retro-futurism and horror atmosphere while exceeding the linear narrative structure of film provides an understanding of how Gothic, across media, furthers its paradoxical attachment to and transgression of established literary convention.

Conclusion: Alien Origins

This article has analysed how Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* line reveals the Gothic paradox of traditionalism and radical excess through a selection of miniseries. The titles' representations of the film franchise's aesthetics, atmosphere, and narrative through their chosen art styles and use of the comics format has been my central point. Carina Hart identifies the historical relationship of nostalgia to the Gothic tradition, in which the genre's emergence in the late-eighteenth century 'was imbricated from the beginning with antiquarian and progressive revivals of folklore and fairy tales across Europe'.⁵⁵ The Gothic's re-reading of the literature and aesthetics of the past, which also includes Medieval Courtly Romance and Jacobean Tragedy, operates in miniature with respect to Dark Horse Comics' interpretation and adaptation of the *Aliens* source material. *Aliens* (1988–89), the publisher's first comics miniseries in the line, extended the narrative of two of the characters from the sequel film *Aliens* (1986), namely Corporal Hicks and Rebecca 'Newt' Jorden, and adapted the claustrophobic, stark visuals of the first *Alien* film into a high contrast, black and white comics art. Subsequent titles in the line by turns preserve and transgress the tropes of these two films in their own unique ways, providing further progression and excess of this material's atmosphere – similarly horror-focused as in *Aliens: Sacrifice*'s or *Aliens: Dead Orbit*'s case, or transgressively humorous as in *Aliens: Stronghold*'s. Their discrete use of art and comics' formal properties introduce new narrative framing devices and structures, emphasising the oneiric or temporally nonlinear properties of the Gothic generally and of Gothic comics in particular.

Like all instances of contemporary Gothic, the miniseries in Dark Horse Comics' *Aliens* line are never too far from their origins and narrative pasts, returning to interrogate and reinvent them.⁵⁶ Their *Aliens* line furthers the construction of Gothic as a dialogue of contemporary media texts with the genre's historical, aesthetic concerns and its theoretical underpinnings. In a continuation of comics' critical explorations of Gothic's 'serious and

weighty tradition’,⁵⁷ these *Aliens* comics navigate a tradition of aesthetic conservatism for the distinct origins of the *Aliens* franchise in the form of the first two films. Dark Horse Comics’ paradoxical approach to the foundational texts of *Alien* and *Aliens* (1986) using Gothic nostalgia and excess supports the notion that comics help reinterpret Gothic’s literary and aesthetic origins in the era of the contemporary Gothic.

Notes

¹ The James Cameron-directed film is hereafter identified as *Aliens* (1986) to distinguish it from the expanded *Aliens* film franchise and comics line. The first film in the franchise, directed by Ridley Scott, is initially identified as *Alien* (1979) and then as *Alien* thereafter, to distinguish it from Marvel Comics’ three six-issue miniseries arc, *Alien* (March 2021–February 2023).

² Julia Round, ‘Horror Hosts in British Girls’ Comics’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. Clive Bloom (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan), 623.

³ Since 2005, Portland State University Library, in an ongoing agreement with Dark Horse Comics, has received, catalogued, and made available the comics publisher’s corpus, ‘both retrospectively and on a continuing basis’. See Gary W. Markham, ‘Cataloging the Publications of Dark Horse Comics: One Publisher in an Academic Catalog’, *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 35, no. 2 (2009): 162.

⁴ Michael R. Lavin, ‘A Librarian’s Guide to Dark Horse Comics’, *Serials Review* 24, no. 3–4 (1998): 78.

⁵ Julia Round, ‘“little gothics”: Misty and the “Strange Stories” of British Girls’ Comics’, *Gothic Studies* 23, no. 2 (2021): 163.

⁶ Carolyn Cocca, ‘Reproducing Inequality and Representing Diversity: The Politics of Gender in Superhero Comics’ in *Spaces Between: Gender and Identity in Comics*, ed. Nina Eckhoff-Heindl and Véronique Sina (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2020), 1.

⁷ Lavin, ‘A Librarian’s Guide to Dark Horse Comics’, 79.

⁸ Julia Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 8, 10.

⁹ Referred to as *Aliens* (1988–89) hereafter. After its initial comic book run from July 1988 to July 1989, *Aliens* (1988–89) was re-released under the title *Aliens: Book One* in November 1989, to identify it as the first in a trilogy of miniseries published by Dark Horse Comics. Books One, Two, and Three are now known as *Aliens, Vol. 1: Outbreak* (1996), *Aliens, Vol. 2: Nightmare Asylum* (1996), and *Aliens, Vol. 3: Female War* (1996) respectively.

¹⁰ Other standout *Aliens* titles from Dark Horse Comics that channel this aesthetic fusion include *Aliens: Labyrinth* (September 1993–January 1994), *Aliens: Salvation* (November 1993), *Aliens: Fast Track to Heaven* (November 2011), and *Aliens: Dust to Dust* (April 2018–January 2019).

¹¹ Matt Foley, Neil McRobert, and Aspasia Stephanou, ‘Introduction: The Limits of Transgression and the Subject’ in *Transgression and its Limits*, ed. Matt Foley, Neil McRobert, and Aspasia Stephanou (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, xv.

¹³ Mark Verheiden, Mark A. Nelson, and Willie Schubert, *Aliens #4* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, March 1989), 17.

¹⁴ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), 1.

¹⁵ No author, ‘Aliens (Dark Horse Comics)’, *Xenopedia*.

[https://avp.fandom.com/wiki/Aliens_\(Dark_Horse_Comics\)#Origins_and_development](https://avp.fandom.com/wiki/Aliens_(Dark_Horse_Comics)#Origins_and_development), accessed 23 June 2023.

¹⁶ Nick Groom, ‘Introduction’ in *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xx.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

¹⁸ Peter Milligan, Paul Johnson, Ellie De Ville, and Dick Hansom, *Aliens: Sacrifice* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, March–June 1993).

¹⁹ Groom, ‘Introduction’, xxx.

²⁰ See *Aliens: Earth War* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, June–October 1990) and *Aliens: Earth Angel* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, January 1993–January 1994).

²¹ Milligan, De Ville, and Hansom, *Aliens: Sacrifice*, 8.

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- ²² *Ibid.*, 8–9.
- ²³ Milligan, De Ville, and Hansom, *Aliens: Sacrifice*, 34.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ²⁵ Chris Murray, ‘Denise Mina’s *Hellblazer* and the Triumph of Scottish *Schadenfreude*’, *Gothic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011), 79.
- ²⁶ Julian Wolfreys, ‘“I could a tale unfold” or, The Promise of Gothic’, in *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), xi.
- ²⁷ Julian Wolfreys, *Literature, in Theory: Tropes, Subjectivities, Responses and Responsibilities* (London: Continuum, 2010), 144.
- ²⁸ Simon Marsden, *The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³¹ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1986), translated by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books), 71.
- ³² Milligan, De Ville, and Hansom, *Aliens: Sacrifice*, 35.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ³⁴ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–2.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ³⁷ Julia Round, ‘Gothic and Comics: From *The Haunt of Fear* to a Haunted Medium’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Gothic and the Arts*, ed. David Punter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 419.
- ³⁸ John Arcudi, Doug Mahnke, Jimmy Palmiotti, Perry McNamee, Ellie De Ville, and Ryder Windham, *Aliens: Stronghold* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, May–September 1994).
- ³⁹ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 171.
- ⁴⁰ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 158.
- ⁴¹ Horner and Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn*, 10.
- ⁴² Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance, and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 6.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁴⁵ Andy Medhurst, ‘Batman, Deviance and Camp’, in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 243.
- ⁴⁶ Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 27.
- ⁴⁷ Allan Lloyd-Smith, ‘Postmodernism/Gothicism’, in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd-Smith, 8, quoted in Spooner 2006, 27.
- ⁴⁸ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22.
- ⁴⁹ Carina Hart, ‘Gothic Folklore and Fairy Tale: Negative Nostalgia’, *Gothic Studies* 22, no. 1 (2020): 3.
- ⁵⁰ Isabella Van Elferen, ‘Introduction: Nostalgia and Perversion in Gothic Rewriting’, in *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day*, ed. Isabella Van Elferen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 3.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁵² Colin B. Harvey, ‘Transmedia Genres: Form, Content, and the Centrality of Memory’, in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, ed. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2019), 157, 163.
- ⁵³ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 81.
- ⁵⁴ Van Elferen, 2007, 2.
- ⁵⁵ Carina Hart, ‘Gothic Folklore and Fairy Tale’, 7.
- ⁵⁶ Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brian, ‘Introduction: The Gothic Compass’, in *New Directions in 21st-Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass*, ed. Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brian (London: Routledge, 2015), 2.
- ⁵⁷ Round, ““little gothics””, 164.