



## BOOK REVIEW

### *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety*

By Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock  
Fordham University Press  
2023

240 pp., \$30 (pbk.)

Weinstock has created an original argument in relation to the application of Thing Theory and Materialism as new ways of viewing the Gothic. This work creates an innovative linking tool, encapsulating the arguments of scholars working within the field of Thing Theory and creating strong arguments for extending Gothic theory to incorporate the parameters set out within the theoretical framework. The work is well considered and is an excellent introductory text for those who are rethinking the theoretical framework that shapes their research. It is also an excellent listing of texts that may have flown under the radar, while making clear that it is neither pro- nor anti-Thing Theory. Rather, it uses it as a nexus from Gothic theory, despite the problematics relating to human anxieties expressed through human interaction with “Things.”

This monograph is divided into six chapters discussing how the Gothic intersects with Thing Theory, referencing standard tropes from Gothic literature, such as haunted spaces, possession of people and objects, cursed books and the words contained therein, and the Gothicizing of the ordinary—how things take on a sense of enchantment or become a relic of fear based on their setting. The work is a deep dive into new ways of considering Gothic anxieties and tropes through a contemporary theoretical lens.

The first two chapters focus on elements of Gothic theory including “Dark Materialism” and the way that it intersects with more traditional Gothic theories of haunted or cursed spaces, people, and places. Chapter Three, “Body as Thing,” and Four, “Thing as Body,” discuss, respectively, the anxieties around the human body transforming into a thing, along with the “inverse” of this phenomenon: “the animation of things that become bodies exercising agency” (91). Chapter Five deals with books as things, receptacles, and devices capable of interacting with humans, while Chapter Six deals with “buildings” and the spectre of the haunted house—a space

not necessarily inhabited by ghosts, but by memories—and examines the “agency of place” (137) and the idea of houses that haunt, that act and feed and consume.

Weinstock discusses the ways in which the contemporary frameworks such as Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism are linked to the Gothic, particularly the ways in which humans interact with people, places, and objects. Part of this details the loss of control as humans work within society, with its anthropomorphic slant towards objects that are given human characteristics. Weinstock also considers the functionality of the Gothic trope as an uncanny interpreter of the new theories. He shows the use of storytelling as a coping method to deal with traumatic events, while ascribing values to “inanimate objects” or things. The book is well written and researched, providing an extensive bibliography for further investigation, and providing adequate scope for researchers that may be interested in this topic area. I suggest this work will be of benefit to scholars working in the Gothic studies field, as it provides links between the Gothic tropes and new theoretical frameworks that create collaboration and multi-disciplinary works.

Weinstock provides Nick Groom’s (2012) theoretical framework for the Gothic, which features the use of geography (location and cultural place), weather patterns, and narrative structure, including folktales and the telling of rumours or stories within stories to create links to current or future events. Weinstock credits this as a linkage between things as objects and things as a Gothic modicum that allows the weather, a room, a locket, etc., to be inscribed with a layer of meaning that influences the viewer or reader’s interpretation of how to relate to that object. Weinstock states in the introduction that his aim is to reorient the Gothic into the new theoretical frameworks of materialism and objects. Within this reorientation, we can view the horror caused by the reduction of the human experience into a series of things, with humans ultimately being viewed as a marketable commodity or a collection of parts rather than individuals with unique experiences.

Weinstock states in the introduction that he recontextualizes Thing Theory within the Gothic framework, while creating an understanding of the uncanny and anxiety which exist both in the Gothic and the new theories of Thing Theory and New Materialism. He specifies three tropes, “Spectrality, Monstrosity and Apocalypse” (20), creating a sense of Anthropocene anxiety. Drawing on the work of Derrida and spanning through to contemporary studies such as Tsing et al.’s *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (2007), he provides an excellent review of the principal theories of haunting and spectrality, relevant to current history tropes, bringing subjectivity to colonial viewpoints and occupation

of areas. This creates a new past that includes ecological history, forming a viewpoint that intermingles human and other histories. This includes a discussion of hyper objects, and consideration of whether humans are able to perceive the object or occurrence with their limited senses. It also touches on the theory of Anthropocene studies that shows how humans relate to others and the world they inhabit.

Monstrosity relates to an idea that human agency enables each individual to choose to become monstrous. Weinstock focuses on Derrida and Cohen's theses on the Monstrous, in which monstrous can only be defined within the boundaries of culture as an absence of conformity or normative behaviours within societal expectations. Apocalypse is the third of Weinstock's links to the Gothic, with the anxieties of the twentieth century of warfare and nuclear holocaust, re-emerging in the twenty-first century with pestilence, warfare, and a perception of impending doom brought about from ecological changes, creating an ongoing narrative of anxiety over the Anthropocene and human interaction. While Weinstock notes the Lovecraftian influence in literature, it can also be found in the surge of mass-market movies in the late-twentieth century that targeted geological and environmental disasters, such as *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998), *The Core* (2012), and *Super Volcano* (2023). Moreover, dependent on where they are made, the movies also present a different level of cultural anxiety for what will happen to the human race if an extinction level event occurs or if humans bring about their own demise.

While Weinstock has focussed on critical theory, he raises the spectre of a new variation of the Anthropocene—that human interference and the ghosts of the ecological past are a constant reminder creating a haunted landscape in which humans dwell. This includes consideration of Timothy Morton's work on Dark Ecology, linking it with Gothic language. As part of this, Weinstock delves into Eugene Thacker's work on the philosophy of horror, creating a horror based on what the world would be like without the interference of people. This shows the role of Speculative Realism, and the influence of Lovecraft on the field of Thing Theory, despite the focus of anxieties being on creatures and human monstrosities rather than ecological anxieties.

I recommend Weinstock's *Gothic Things* as an innovative work that explains the links between the Gothic tropes and new theories, allowing Gothic scholars to reframe arguments in a contemporaneous manner, and provides principal authors for each theory along with reviews of fictional books and movies that create an extensive to-be-read/watched list for researchers. The work also offers a deep dive into other areas that may not immediately come to mind in relation to Thing Theory, New Materialism or

Gothic Theory, such as the role of economics in the commodification of humans and the hierarchical significance of the home.

— Naomi von Senff

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**Naomi von Senff** is an operatic soprano and musicologist, currently singing with River City Voices. Her research interests include pop culture, Gothic and vampire studies, Egyptology, performance practice, costuming, fashion design, opera and politics, Weber's *Der Freischütz*, and depictions of the demonic and witchcraft in Opera and Libretti. Naomi is currently undertaking PLT and holds a BCrim/BLaws, BMus Hon Opera, BA Hon, BA Humanities, and Associate Diploma Music. She is also an Operational expert panellist for Assistant Coroners in NSW. She has presented to IASPM, POPCAANZ, GANZA, IGA, and MSA.

## References

Groom, Nick. 2012. *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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