

*The New Queer Gothic: Reading Queer Girls and Women in Contemporary Fiction and Film*

by Robyn Ollett

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Emily Naser-Hall, Western Carolina University

Robyn Ollett's *The New Queer Gothic: Reading Queer Girls and Women in Contemporary Fiction and Film* investigates contemporary queer Gothic texts that focus on queer girls and women, a subject position often overlooked in queer theory's longstanding emphasis on white Western cis men. Ollett 'articulate[s] the relationship between Queer narratives, issues, and subjectivities, and the themes relevant to their context within the Gothic mode' in a wide range of international literary and film fiction' (1). Ollett proposes the term 'New Queer Gothic' to describe both texts that engage with queerness and Gothicity as politically, culturally, and representationally valuable and a mode of reading fiction and cinema that fall within this category. The book's broad sweep in terms of both theoretical foundation and recent texts is its major strength. Throughout the book, her focus on queer characterization adds to the queer Gothic canon within an ongoing discourse regarding how the signifiers 'queer' and 'Gothic' 'prove precarious places for representation' (4).

Ollett introduces the New Queer Gothic by examining three guiding frameworks: the queer Gothic, new queer cinema and Gothic film, and the female gothic. She critiques dominant writings in queer film and literary theory as limited in their privileging of the white gay male experience. Ollett seeks to expand considerations of queer Gothicity by 'looking towards new means, methods, and modes of observing, categorizing, and reading New Queer Gothic fiction,' including imagining queerness not as an identity, but as a rejection of identity

(6). Central to this methodology is the tension between Sedgwickian queer theory that calls for redemptive identity-based queerness and Bersani's and Edelman's antisocial theory. 'While recognizing the necessity of this critical tension, and without attempting the impossible task of neatly reconciling' these strands of thinking, Ollett argues, 'what *The New Queer Gothic* will do is work to prove the importance of encouraging an ongoing conversation...[that] speaks to the strength and value of queerness' (35-36).

Initiating Part I, Ollett's first chapter analyzes lineages of female gothic texts that established the foundation for New Queer Gothic. She documents how the themes and concerns in works by Shirley Jackson, Angela Carter, Anne Rice and Sarah Waters foreground female subjectivity within a Gothic milieu and illustrate oppressive systems that complicate queer women's representations. This chapter's densely researched explication of foundational female Gothic texts provides a thorough overview and useful bibliography for examining histories of representing the subjectivities of women, girls and queer characters in Gothic narratives throughout the twentieth century.

This lineage establishes the basis for the second chapter's consideration of John Harding's *Florence and Giles* (2010), a reworking of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). This analysis centralizes the queer Gothic girl within the New Queer Gothic's overall politics and theoretical debates concerning representation. Ollett positions Florence within historical attitudes toward children and adolescent girls, an exercise that 'allows an investigation into the troubles and fissures replete in queer feminist critique' (89). She returns to the identitarian versus desubjectivation debate to argue that the queer Gothic girl fits neither side neatly and in fact resides within the transformative potential of the queer Gothic to render queerness both recognizable and unstable. Ollett's assertion that Florence's 'identity is initially presented as apparitional, a status that connotes the history of queer female (in)visibility'

elucidates the chapter's primary strength of considering the slipperiness of queer theory as an aperture for reading (116).

The texts that Ollett analyzes in Part II emphasize the value in considering queer and feminist theory concurrently rather than antagonistically. In Chapter Three, Ollett explores the typical Gothic tropes of monstrosity and doubling through a queer feminist lens in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) and Bradley Rust Gray's *Jack & Diane* (2012). She draws on Katharina Lindner's method of searching for ambiguities in Hays Code-era queer cinema to read the films as representing queer anxiety through dematerialization, body horror and abjection. As in many chapters, Ollett spends significant time establishing a critical foundation while leaving the reader wanting more attention to her chosen texts. Chapter Four, however, in which she considers the postcolonial Queer Gothic in *The Handmaiden* (2016), excels in close reading. 'What is revealed as performative about these women's identities throughout the narrative not only pertains to essentialist class identity,' Ollett contends, 'but also colonial, racial, and national identity' in the formation of a queer utopia (166). Ollett's modeling of a paranoid reparative reading of same-sex desire and subjectivity in a film in which queerness is figured as utopic and anti-patriarchal is beautifully articulated.

Ollett's analysis of the queer cannibal in Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016) purports to relate theories of biopolitics and hybridity to the monstrosity of patriarchal society. She reads protagonist Justine's ambivalent queerness in the context of French New Extremity and attitudes around sex and feminism in France post-#metoo. Ollett reads Justine's queerness as allegorical, distinguishing this chapter's chosen text as a different flavor of queer film than the Part II films, which feature more explicit same-sex desire. Ollett extends this consideration of allegorical queerness in her final chapter, in which she considers hybridity as itself a form of queerness in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014). Gothic motifs 'provide a springboard from which to launch an

argument that the New Queer Gothic girl in contemporary fiction provides a valuable symbol for hybrid identity' (199). Ollett's consideration of postcolonial queerness nicely complements her chapter on *The Handmaid* and adds valuable insights to her interpretation of the Queer Gothic girl from her interpretation of *Florence and Giles*.

*The New Queer Gothic* provides a rich theoretical foundation for Ollett's argument that the hazy relationship between subject formation and dis-identification in feminist and queer theories itself grants an opportunity for reading queerly. Although the book occasionally struggles to establish the relationship between Ollett's newly articulated genre and her proposed methodology, what becomes clear through her analysis is that New Queer Gothic texts are defined precisely by the ways in which they invite their audience to read them. Ollett acknowledges the lack of attention to trans and non-binary subjectivities and lists additional texts for consideration. This book celebrates queer girls and women as powerful figures of negation, aggression, and utopia, uniquely situated for enabling new genres and new modes of reading.