

Reconfiguring the Garden of Eden: suspended temporality in Jim Jarmusch's "*Only Lovers Left Alive*"

CHRISTOS ANGELIS

Abstract

The Gothic has long been considered a mode particularly apt to describe conditions at the limits of human comprehension. In a way parallel to the process of creating myths and legends, the Gothic features strong elements of metaphor and allusion, of symbolic representation that facilitates the viewing of realities that would have otherwise been too horrific, confusing, or taboo to be exposed. In this article I study Jim Jarmusch's film *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), a Gothic story revolving around a vampire couple aptly called Adam and Eve. The narrative arc is strongly structured around the concept of time and progress. More particularly, the film – fittingly set in the collapsing city of Detroit in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis – attempts to negotiate the seemingly unresolvable dialectics between, on the one hand, experience and progress and, on the other, decay and loss. The core question posited by the narrative is ultimately related to the reconfiguration of the archetypal myth of the Garden of Eden in a contemporary environment: to which extent is the human experience intrinsically connected with suffering, regression and loss, and what is the role of time and its repercussions in the process? As the concept of the eternal return focuses precisely on repetition (and hence time), the examination of the dialectics presented above can be a fruitful task. The goal of this article is to offer an attempt at a resolution of the dialectical knot, precisely focusing on the blurry in-between area between these (only seemingly) antithetical and neatly separated dialectics.

Keywords: Gothic, temporality, humanity, progress, ambiguity.

1. Introduction

The Gothic, as a literary mode, has had a rather remarkable and perhaps surprising journey. Beginning with a group of texts written between 1760 and 1820 and referred to as "Gothic novels", it has since undergone numerous modifications. From Frankenstein's creation (1818) to Dr. Jekyll's (1886) equally unwise experimentation,

and from Count Dracula's (1897) enigmatic sexuality to Lestat's (1976) matter-of-fact bisexuality (in the era of the AIDS epidemic, to boot),¹ the Gothic mode seems to be as undead as its characters.

More importantly, as I will explain in this article, the Gothic possesses the rather unique attribute of balancing between two antithetical metaphysical categories: although not strictly fantastic in a Tolkienian sense, it nevertheless cannot be called a realistic mode, either. Similarly, despite the superficial obsession of the Gothic with the past, its here-and-now relevance cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the merging between past and present (or the threat of such an outcome) precisely emphasizes the lack of a neatly defined temporal border (Botting 2014, 3-4). This inherent ambiguity of the Gothic facilitates its deployment as a mechanism of allusion, with Gothic texts being typically replete with metaphors, hidden meanings, intertextual connections, and archetypal symbolism.

It is in this aspect, in particular, that Gothic texts are often read as parallels of traditional myths and legends, classical as well as biblical. Sometimes the association is explicit, as in the case of Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, the title of which already indicates the thematic area. Additionally, the novel begins with a quotation from *Paradise Lost*, itself directly associated with the legend of Prometheus and his fall from grace.² More often than not, however, the connection is very subtle. As a simple example, I will mention Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, elements of which have been read as a parody of Christianity (Rowen 1997, 241).

However, as the example right above illustrates, there is often a significant divergence between classical (and especially biblical) legends and the Gothic: the stance in regard to patriarchy and established ideology. While traditional legends are often offered in a distinctly moralistic framework, the Gothic is habitually deployed as a mode that can express the marginal, the unspeakable, and the taboo. As David Punter argues, the Gothic often serves as a mechanism opposing "the function of ideology to naturalise the presented world, to make its consumers think that the cardinal features of the world they inhabit are natural, eternal, unchangeable" (Punter 1980, 419). In other words, while the basic function of biblical legends is that of *cohesion* and *continuation*, the Gothic acts as a mode that facilitates *decohesion* and *discontinuation*. By upsetting the monolithic order, the Gothic attempts to offer different interpretations, diverse alternatives, and unique outcomes. By offering connections to traditional legends – indeed, sometimes by parodying them – the Gothic draws attention to the subconscious need to demolish fossilized ideas. I will refer to this process as *reconfiguration*.

Before focusing on the analysis of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, I will begin by placing some theoretical foundations. In more detail, I will rely on the concept of ambiguity as presented by Tzvetan Todorov in his attempt to define the fantastic (Todorov 1973, 25). Todorov emphasizes the uncertainty between reality and fantasy, and it is precisely in this area that I choose to place the Gothic mode. At the same time, I will study

Hegelian concepts related to synthesis, with the purpose of formulating the process of reconfiguration mentioned above. Since the goal of the article is to examine how the archetypal myth of the Garden of Eden can be reconfigured in a modern context, aspects of temporality will also be studied, particularly focusing on the concepts of the eternal now and the eternal return.

2. Ambiguity, Synthesis, and Time

As mentioned in the introduction, I argue that the Gothic can be productively examined as a mode situated in the ambiguous halfway area between categories it seems to separate – only seemingly, as it will become apparent. I have so far mentioned the pseudo-separation between the past and the present/future, as well as the ambiguous placement of the Gothic between reality and fantasy. Arguably this latter element is where one should begin any analysis related to Gothic metaphysics. At this point, it is productive to recall Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of the same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us ...

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. (Todorov 1973, 25)

Todorov's formulation drives a wedge into the traditional process of dividing the Gothic into "explained" and "supernatural". Although Todorov himself refers to the "two tendencies" within the Gothic, "that of the supernatural explained (the 'uncanny') ... and that of the supernatural accepted (the 'marvelous')" (Todorov 1973, 41-42), this separation can be considered problematic, if not outright lacking. For if the Gothic exists only for the duration of the uncertainty, once it collapses onto either of the two separate branches, it should no longer be considered as truly Gothic. In other words, to divide the Gothic into explained and supernatural produces the paradoxical outcome of neither branch being Gothic, at least within the Todorovian framework. The way out of this predicament is to focus precisely on the ambiguity, which is arguably the purest form of the Gothic mode, according to Todorov's definition.³

If one wished to approach Todorovian ambiguity from a more general perspective, it becomes apparent that a certain pseudo-dichotomy is present: that between the fantastic and the realistic. The reason I refer to this as a *pseudo*-dichotomy is the fact that the ambiguous placement of the Gothic as the tangent between these metaphysical circles precisely allows it to assume either form, shifting enigmatically from one to the other. In other words, although nominally the Gothic functions as a separator between reality and fantasy, the fact that this separator is an ambiguous one means that it simultaneously also functions as a connector.

At this point, it is fruitful to recall Hegelian dialectics and particularly the triad comprising of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The thesis signifies a proposition (generalizing, one can refer to any given perspective or posited fact); the antithesis is its negation, essentially a reactionary polar opposition; the synthesis offers a resolution of the conflict by incorporating both thesis and antithesis into a new thesis. In the context of the present article, it is particularly important to underline the temporal aspects of synthesis:

Thus, while “being” and “nothing” seem both absolutely distinct and opposed, from another point of view they appear the same as no criterion can be invoked which differentiates them. The only way out of this paradox is to posit a third category, “becoming,” which seems to save thinking from paralysis because it accommodates both concepts: “becoming” contains “being” and “nothing” since when something “becomes” it passes, as it were, from nothingness to being. That is, when something becomes it seems to possess aspects of both being and nothingness, and it is in this sense that the third category of such triads can be understood as containing the first two as sublated “moments”. (Redding 2010)

Effectively, what occurs is a temporal separation between past and future, with a focus placed on the ambiguously defined present; the undefinably small *eternal now*. It is important to acknowledge not only the temporal dimension implied, but also the fact that a synthesis does not nullify the thesis and its antithesis but rather incorporates them.

At the same time, however, it is important to underline that the difficulty encountered in defining the eternal now is not the only ambiguity about it. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely this inherent inability of definition that causes a certain paradox to emerge: the metaphysical spectrality of the eternal now exists in a conflicting relationship with the sheer weight of reality it seems to carry. Human consciousness possesses epistemological access to the present that is uniquely more reliable than that of the past or the future. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, these “contain mere concepts and phantasms ... The present alone is that which always exists” (Schopenhauer 1969, 279).

Zeroing in on the concept of the eternal return, Friedrich Nietzsche – who was inspired by Schopenhauer’s work – made the dialectical conflict explicit in his 1882 work *The Gay Science*:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again” ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine”. (Nietzsche 2001, 194)

As Nietzsche's thought experiment illuminates, it is at least probable that without new experiencing and progress, humanity as we understand it seems to lack something critical. It is precisely this lack that Jarmusch's film attempts to highlight, as I will demonstrate.

3. *Only Lovers Left Alive*: Life at the Bottom of the Hourglass

Arguably one of the most pivotal moments of *Only Lovers Left Alive* comes when Adam, the male vampire protagonist, utters with despaired surrender that he feels as if "all the sand is at the bottom of the hourglass". He expresses his misery at the realization that every experience worth having has already been had and, as he believes, the future holds nothing better. Eve, his loyal partner who is much more of an optimist by nature, tells him to simply turn the hourglass over; to reset time.

In effect, the core problem of *Only Lovers Left Alive* is indeed related to time, particularly in the context of experience and progress: if perfection is already achieved (the archetypal paradise of the Garden of Eden), is the only way forward through loss and suffering? And, perhaps more importantly, to which extent is the human experience intrinsically connected with this grand paradox of time and progress?

The film begins with a shot of the starry sky. Soon the stars begin to revolve, as if the entire universe is spinning, and then the picture fades into a revolving record. The story is mostly set in the collapsing city of Detroit after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. This at first might appear counterintuitive in terms of the film being a metaphor of the Garden of Eden, but in actual fact there is a definite contrast between Adam's house and everything else in the city. His is a place of art, inventions, ingenuity; the rest of the city is displayed as a dead, decayed space. Notably, the film relies precisely on this contrast – between the "Paradise" and what is outside of it – something entirely absent from the archetypal myth, where the absence of a contrasting point of reference renders Paradise effectively meaningless. At this point, it is productive to recall Plato's allegory of the cave: Plato describes a group of people who have spent their whole lives chained to the wall of a cave, facing a blank wall opposite. A fire behind them projects shadows on this blank wall, causing them to construct reality in terms of the shadows. Until an individual is freed from the cave and is able to see the objects projecting the shadows, the only existing reality is the shadows. A similar argument could be put forward for the traditional Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve must rely (and accept as truth) the information presented to them, without having the ability to compare it with a reality external to the Garden.

Perhaps not surprisingly, considering the fact that the main protagonists are vampires, the story unfolds exclusively during the nights, in the dark, a fact which augments the display of the urban environment as a derelict and gloomy place. There are few inhabited houses shown, and even fewer with electricity. Humans are painted in mostly dystopic tints, referred to as "zombies" by the philosophically and artistically savvy vampire pair.

Although there is a nominal plot, in actual fact nothing really much takes place in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, which mostly involves long philosophical discussions and

dialectical discourses – more like a play and less like a film. Indeed, in that aspect as well Jarmusch’s production is strongly reminiscent of its archetypal myth, the Garden of Eden. For Adam and Eve, the vampires, there is no real past – but only as a romanticized daydream – and no real future. There is only an eternal now where, in a Hegelian sense, only “being” has any kind of meaning and weight, albeit incorporeal. However, the dialectical pull between past and future appears difficult to resolve. Eve chooses a clearly idolized eternal now; a never-ending series of present instances, where experiencing and enjoying (albeit, on a very sophisticated and mature level) becomes an existence-in-itself. Adam, disillusioned and depressed, sees death as the only subliminal escape. For him, Eve’s eternal present appears problematic and unsatisfactory.

Much like a Baudelairian dandy figure, or “the last shimmer of the heroic in times of decadence” (Benjamin 1983, 96) Adam is appalled in realizing his temporal displacement. Having influenced great historic figures, having discoursed with the greatest names in history – being still friends with a vampire Christopher Marlowe – he is now surrounded by mediocrity and servile “zombies”.

The end of the narrative – though there is no real conclusion – is instigated by necessity and *fait accompli*, much like in the archetypal myth. The couple is forced to flee after the arrival of Eve’s unruly sister and the ensuing events, which are loosely constructed as an allegory to temptation: the rowdy young vampire persuades the couple to go out to a nightclub and intermingle with humans – the film ambiguously implies that there are also other vampires present there. Away from Detroit and roaming the dark alleys of Tangiers, Adam and Eve are eventually compelled to make some difficult choices. They must either perish, or regress to older vampiric methods – that is, attacking people for nutrition.

This course of action is something that especially Eve is vehemently against, as she has earlier claimed that “this is the *bloody* twenty-first century!” after seeing her sister having sucked the blood of a human, killing him. Eve might be unaware of the irony carried by her words, but the film itself probably is not. After all, a similar occasion can be found in Bram Stoker’s seminal novel *Dracula*, the eponymous character of which is arguably the archetype to which all subsequent vampire characters must inevitably be compared to. In Stoker’s novel, the character of Mina Harker appears particularly insistent in describing in rich detail the “bloom and blood” narration of the captain of *Czarina Catherine*, the ship that transports Count Dracula back to Transylvania:

Final the captain, more red than ever, and in more tongues tell him that he doesn’t want no Frenchmen—with bloom upon them and also with blood—in his ship—with blood on her also...”No one knew where he went ‘or bloomin’ well cared,’ as they said, for they had something else to think of—well with blood again... The captain swore polyglot—very polyglot—polyglot with bloom and blood... Then the captain replied that he wished that he and his box—old and with much bloom and blood—were in hell. (Stoker 2003, 338)

The repetition is not accidental; rather, it is offered precisely because it draws attention to one of the major elements that permeates the novel, namely blood. Similarly, in *Only Lovers Left Alive* Eve rejects the practice of attacking humans as one not belonging to the “bloody twenty-first century”. At the same time, however, she subconsciously emphasizes not only the importance of blood in any vampire narrative, but, more importantly, the harsh modern reality: current times are bloody, too. In ways perhaps different than the past, but no less cruel.

On the surface, the expulsion from “Paradise” seems like a disastrous outcome. Adam in particular seems lost and forlorn, having abandoned his beloved musical instruments. At the same time, however, a glimmer of hope seems to exist in this new world. Having been exposed to the mediocrity and stupidity of “the zombies” throughout the narrative, Adam is fascinated with a young singer in Tangiers. New, local musical instruments are also discovered. The concluding act of the film is ambiguously but deliberately constructed as an in-between area which, while unsafe, dangerous, and representing loss, at the same time signals the emergence of new opportunities. More importantly, still, for Adam it stands as a possible answer to his boredom, depression, and misery. In the light of the traditional myth of Adam and Eve, it can be argued that safety has been exchanged for free will and the potentiality for growth and achievement. To revisit Nietzsche’s thought experiment and the concept of the eternal return, the choice seems to be one favouring change and new experiences, rather than mere repetition.

The film, perhaps subtly but still unmistakably, hints at a synthetic resolution of the quagmire. By being precariously placed between life and death, and ambiguously incorporating elements of both states, Adam and Eve are offered the single factor which was absent from their prior existence: temporal evolution. Much like in the archetypal myth, where time did not really exist until after the defining event, the “before and after” of the expulsion from Paradise, in *Only Lovers Left Alive* time is defined based on the very same dichotomy. As such, the concept of evolution or progress – even in its antithetical aspect of devolution and regression, respectively – can exist only within the framework of temporal succession. There is a hidden detail, however.

Although not directly exposed by the narrative, it can be assumed that such defining events in the history of the vampire couple were repetitive; that there had been prior “expulsions” from a settled way of life, a “Paradise”. As Eve in particular is revealed to be far older than Adam, who is only a few centuries old, she appears somewhat more accustomed to such great changes, a fact that perhaps explains her nonchalant talk of turning the hourglass over and resetting time. As a result, and unlike the archetypal myth, the film suggests a temporal model that does not depart from a cyclical to enter a linear form, but rather hints at the Hegelian synthesis of these two apparently unresolvable opposites, which is none other than the spiral. What occurs, then, is a reconfiguration of the legend of the Garden of Eden that posits a recurrence of past forms and experiences, but still leading to a forward motion of reaching new, future such forms and experiences.

The ability to escape the timelessness of the Paradise is intrinsically connected with the human experience. Rendering one's self vulnerable to loss and suffering effectively becomes a prerequisite for evolving and experiencing, because in an unaltered environment where nothing ever changes, there can be no talk of progression. Furthermore, in such a context the concept of ethics becomes meaningless. Umberto Eco, in his essay "The Myth of Superman", argues that in the time span of an individual story, the mythical superhero fulfils a task and, at the end of the story, there is a clear closure; a new comic book that brings with it an entirely new story, totally disconnected from any past events. The crucial inference is this: had the new story presented a sort of narrative evolution from a prior one, it would essentially mean that Superman "would have taken a step toward death" (Eco 1984, 114). However, the inevitable result is a situation in which reality is formulated as consisting solely of an "ever-continuing present", and this absence of past or future as reference points fails to communicate a sense of moral stability and continuity (Eco 1984, 116).

In the Paradise of Adam and Eve – in the traditional myth as well as in Jarmusch's film – the lack of time progression signifies a lack of meaning. Adam, as a younger vampire, appears more human in his reactions and more dismayed by his own meaninglessness, as well as by the state of the world in general. His state of mind mirrors that of traditional Gothic immortals, whose inability to die is portrayed as a curse far more than as a gift. A typical such example can be found in Mary Shelley's story "The Mortal Immortal", where Winzy, one of the students of Cornelius Agrippa, gets his inexperienced hands on his master's elixir of eternal life, unleashing the curse of immortality upon himself. Everyone he loves withers away, and things become meaningless. As the human existence is located *within* time, once human life loses its temporal foundation, it becomes degenerate, as temporal linearity without the end that is death is incompatible with the human experience, which is based on cause and consequence. As Kochhar-Lindgren argues, Winzy feels aimless and alone because, by lacking the ability to die, he has lost his "compass for the human passage from nothing to nothing ... a contoured horizon to existence ... enabling a certain type of evaluation" (2005, 74).

In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Adam faces this lack to such an extent that he actively considers suicide. Somewhat dramatically – and certainly so from Eve's perspective – he asks from his human assistant (who is unaware of his master's vampire state) to get him a wooden bullet, claiming it is for an art project. When Eve discovers Adam's plan, she is surprised and chides him, yet in her unique, carefree way. She wonders how he could not see that his thoughts are a waste of living that could be instead dedicated to "surviving things, appreciating nature, nurturing kindness and friendship ... and dancing". She then proceeds to display her solution quite literally, playing an LP record and dancing to the music, pulling Adam along with her. The macabre thoughts are temporarily swept under the proverbial rug, but the raw reality of Adam's predicament does not vanish.

Trapped by timelessness, by the lack of evolution and progress (or even devolution and regression), Adam is painfully aware of the absence of meaning in his journey. His existential fear is augmented by the sheer scope of his vampiric life span – which is theoretically infinite – but *Only Lovers Left Alive* constructs the allusion with clear focalization on the human experience. Perhaps precisely for these reasons, that is, the limited time humans have on earth and Adam’s own immortality, the use of the term “zombie” appears so apt to describe a way of life devoid of sense of purpose. For Adam, who *cannot* die – but only by taking his own life – the human existence is but a waste of potential.

4. Conclusion: Living and Dying in an Eternal Now

The present article revolved around issues that, though not synonymous, can be seen as homocentric: time and timelessness, progress and loss, death and life. Intuitively, perhaps any one of us could vicariously understand the importance of these binary pairs, for without the one the other could not be defined. But just like time and timelessness appear mutually exclusive, so do life and death.

The realization is embodied much more eminently in Adam who, unlike his traditional namesake, seems far more aware of the quagmire posed by his peculiar condition, that is, immortality. For the vampire, to be immortal also holds implications regarding his being alive. Neither of the two categories, life and death, seem to be applicable to Adam. In a Hegelian framework, one could emphasize how the thesis of life and the antithesis of death need to merge and produce a synthesis which could resolve the predicament. Perhaps Bram Stoker’s use of the term “undead” was a subconscious understanding of this very issue. To be undead means neither to be dead, nor to be alive, and although Bram Stoker did not coin the word, the modern meaning of it begins with *Dracula*.

Applying a Todorovian process of ambiguity, that is, embracing the very inability to neatly define between these binary pairs, is a step toward a resolution. But, perhaps inevitably, such a resolution cannot be meant in the usual, linear way of cause-and-effect systems. The traditional legend of the Garden of Eden is ultimately a narrative of time, perhaps one of the earliest examples of the linkage between time, the human experience, and change. The change of affairs for the archetypal couple, Adam and Eve, has been approached as a loss, thus overlooking the fact that the expulsion from Paradise introduced time and change in the human experience.

Traditionally, the timelessness of the eternal now was unequivocally connected with the Divine and a Christian God that was outside time altogether, thus mediating a coexistence of past and present.⁴ Erich Auerbach rightly argues that such a simultaneity was then inconceivable without the Divine:

the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future; and strictly, in the eyes of God, it is something eternal, something omni-temporal, something already consummated in the realm of fragmentary earthly event. (Auerbach 2003, 74)

In such a temporal model, the future is effectively meaningless, as it does not possess any ontological substance, nor does it differ from the past in any graspable way. It is in such a predicament, precisely, that the vampire couple find themselves – with Adam, perhaps due to his younger age as I already mentioned, appearing more aware of the situation. The great difference is that this eternal now, this temporal void, is now decoupled from the Divine. As such, the rebellion against authority is all but absent, and the figurative expulsion from Paradise appears no longer as such – that is, enforced by an external factor – but more as a quasi-voluntary decision.

As a result, in Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive*, the process of introducing time and change is reconfigured in a way that highlights its anthropocentric characteristics. Although Adam and Eve, the immortal vampire couple, abandon their way of life and come face to face with extinction, at the same time they also experience what is akin to enlightenment. The process is more evident in Adam who, in the darkest and most critical hour, finally discovers a glimmer of hope in the voice of a young Lebanese woman. Eve notes that this is a singer that will surely be very famous, to which Adam meaningfully replies "God, I hope not".

Ultimately, in accordance with the ambiguous nature of the preceding narrative, the film ends without a clear indication of how the story of Adam and Eve continues. The cut occurs just as the vampires are about to attack a young couple kissing under the stars. This scene, the very final one, functions as an exclamation mark. Not only because it is the only occasion in the film where Adam and Eve are seen about to attack a human for nutrition, but also because it serves as a parallel with the archetypal fall from Paradise. Adam and Eve are indeed free, and all possibilities are available. But these are impossible to foreknow. Just perhaps, however, this is the very element that renders the vampires suddenly more human, namely the same element Adam and Eve faced leaving Paradise: the possibility to die, to experience loss and suffering, and to regress also assigns importance and value to the possibility to progress, and experience love, companionship, meaning, and pleasure.

Notes

1. For queer readings of the Gothic, see Haggerty 2006.
2. For connections between Prometheus and the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, see Werblowsky 1952.
3. For a more extended theoretical argument on Todorovian ambiguity and the Gothic, including a contrast to Tolkienian theorizations, see Angelis (forthcoming).
4. For a more extended analysis of the eternal now and divinity, see Anderson (2006, 23) and West-Pavlov (2013, 63).

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Christos Angelis has an MA in English Philology from the University of Tampere, Finland, and is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the University of Tampere. He is currently completing his doctoral dissertation, "Time is Everything with Him" The Concept of the Eternal Now in Nineteenth-Century Gothic", which explores aspects of temporality in nineteenth-century Gothic literature.
 Email: christos.angelis@uta.fi