

At the Limits of Perception:

Liminal Space, Vision and the Interrelation of Word and Image in Walpole's *Strawberry Hill*, *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysterious Mother*

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways that Horace Walpole's Gothic texts, *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysterious Mother*, and even the architectural Strawberry Hill, operate within a fascinating nexus of visual and narrative discourse. By analysing the intersections of the verbal and visual within these works, which combine and collide within liminal spaces that figure a threshold state between the supernatural and the subconscious, this paper explores the ways that Walpole's texts work collectively to interrogate eighteenth-century theories of perception and imagination by positing a slippage between word and image that undermines the human attempt to make sense of the world.

Résumé

Cet article examine la manière dont divers textes de Walpole, Le Château d'Otrante, La Mère mystérieuse, mais aussi le projet architectural de Strawberry Hill font partie d'une structure plus large qui comprend des éléments à la fois visuels et discursifs. En analysant les intersections des mots et des images dans ces œuvres, qui combinent et confondent des espaces liminaux suggérant un état de transition entre le surnaturel et l'inconscient, cet article scrute les manières dont les textes de Walpole se lient pour interroger les théories contemporaines de la perception et de l'imagination en mettant à jour une faille entre le verbal et le visuel qui compromet l'effort des hommes de donner un sens au monde.

Key words

Perception, vision, imagination, space, supernatural

Following Isaac Newton's *Opticks* and its expansion into aesthetic theories by thinkers like John Locke, Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke, the eighteenth century became preoccupied with vision. In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke conceptualises vision as a fairly straightforward process occurring via the optical transmission of images "from without to their Audience in the Brain, the Mind's Presence-room" (II.iii.1). This theatrical and spatial model of mind is both echoed within Addison's notion of imagination, which, in *The Spectator*, No. 411, involves "opening the Eye, and the Scene enters", and also projected outward in his idea that "the whole Universe is a kind of Theatre filled with Objects that either raise in us Pleasure, Amusement, or Admiration [...] and fill the Mind with a perpetual Succession of beautiful and pleasing Images" (No. 387). The powerful sense of narrative implied in this theatrical space, where the spectacle communicates story to the viewer, can also be found in the popular eighteenth-century view of the world as a text to be read via the gaze: "that universal and publick Manuscript that lies expans'd into the Eyes of all" (Sir Thomas Browne cited in Sambrook 27). Within these spatial, visual and textual conceptions, word and image neatly coexist as empirical understanding: there is a harmony between vision and the mind's ability to read it. In the words of Aristotle, to see is to know.

Referring to *The Castle of Otranto* in the *Monthly Review* for February 1765, John Langhorne wrote, "To give the Reader an analysis of the story, would be to introduce him to a company of skeletons; to refer him to the book will be to recommend him to an assemblage of beautiful pictures" (cited in Sabor 71). While many critics acknowledge Walpole's – and more broadly the Gothic's – preoccupation with the visual (Price 1), there is a tendency to polarise interpretations of his supernatural and sublime "visions" into either positive representations of a real supernatural, or "blatantly fictive and intentionally hyperbolic" illusions that do not aim to represent "anything close to a verifiable reality" (Hogle 165). David Morris charges critics such as Devendra Varma with "ignoring the artificiality of Gothic supernaturalism" (318), which "carries no presumption of truth" (309): the Gothic sublime is "utterly without transcendence", and "takes us deep within rather than beyond the human sphere" (306). Such models reflect the parallel tendency in Gothic criticism to read the Gothic sublime in terms of Sigmund Freud's *Uncanny*, where, as Terry Castle explores, the supernatural moves inward to become psychosis: haunting is not ghostly, but is the return of the repressed unconscious (59). While these perspectives are useful, my paper aims to take a closer look at Walpole's engagement with optics, perception and liminal space (as physical rather than just symbolic structure) not just within *The Castle of Otranto*, but also within his two other architectural constructions – his house, Strawberry Hill, and his drama, *The Mysterious Mother* – to reveal that Walpole's true innovation, and the Gothic mood he aims to create, lies in an ambiguous hesitation between the poles of supernatural and psychological that is expressed through his interrogation of the relationship between word and image.

As Peter Otto notes, "critics have struggled to explain the exchanges between these disparate works and their relation to the craze for Gothic literature that began more than twenty years later" (682). This paper explores these exchanges, which form a close fabric of visual and narrative inspiration, and interrogates the way that Walpole's texts, taken collectively, constitute optical experiments that draw on conflicting theories of perception and imagination to place his protagonists in threshold spaces between inner and outer, and above and below: in other words, at the brink of both the supernatural and the subconscious. In either direction, hidden secrets exist within seemingly infinite, invisible spaces that extend beyond the usual confines of the everyday world, and which threaten to cross over at any moment. This ambiguous positioning of the spectator

applies to the house, which engages with aesthetic theory and the tenuous intersections between imagination and history to evoke the sublime and create fictive realities, as much as to the written works, which manipulate vision to evoke a powerful sense of architectural space while simultaneously privileging and undermining sight as the primary sense for understanding the world through moments of blindness and unspeakability. In these texts, word and image jostle against one another unsatisfactorily, and combine in ways that create multiple realities, which in turn question the ontological order of the universe, and undermine the human ability to make sense of it. For Walpole, then, word and image are both essential for imaginative creation, and they tautologically imply each other's existence, but even as they create, they fail in their relationship to one another. The power of Walpole's Gothic, I suggest, arises in the chasm that opens up between image and word as the implied invisible, the unspeakable, and, therefore, the unknowable.

Strawberry Hill

From 1747 until his death in 1797, Walpole was engaged in a continuous construction of theatrical space that depended on the interplay of word and image. According to Walpole's *Description of the Villa*, the "Gothic castle" Strawberry Hill was built to "please my own taste, and in some degree to realize my own visions" (iv). Based largely on printed illustrations, as well as some visits to Gothic cathedrals, tombs and ruins, the house was centred on the production and performance of vision through the manipulation of space and light to evoke the sublime in accordance with Addisonian principles of optics, association and imagination.

Walpole's description of one such site of inspiration reveals the sublime, haunting atmosphere, as well as many of the spatial and visual techniques that he would later apply to Strawberry Hill: the convent of Chartreux "is old and irregular. The chapel is gloomy: behind it through some dark passages, you pass into a large obscure hall, which looks like a combination-chamber for some hellish council. The large cloister surrounds the burying-grounds. The cloisters are narrow and very long, and let into the cells" and the whole is governed by a mingled "charming solitude" and "uncouth horror that reigns here (cited in Harney 9). At play in this description are the associative powers of imagination that Addison describes in *Spectator* No. 110, which are stimulated by the sights, sounds and spaces within monastic ruins to the point where the "spectator could not but fancy it but one of the most proper scenes for a ghost to appear in." Gothic castles have long been associated with a sense of the infinite spaces of the supernatural world. In his "General Character of the Gothic Mind in the Middle Ages" Coleridge wrote that Gothic architecture is "Infinity made imaginable" (cited in Clery and Miles 103), and modern critics such as Varnado argue that in their blending of "sacred and profane", Gothic castles become liminal "halfway houses between earth and heaven" (32).

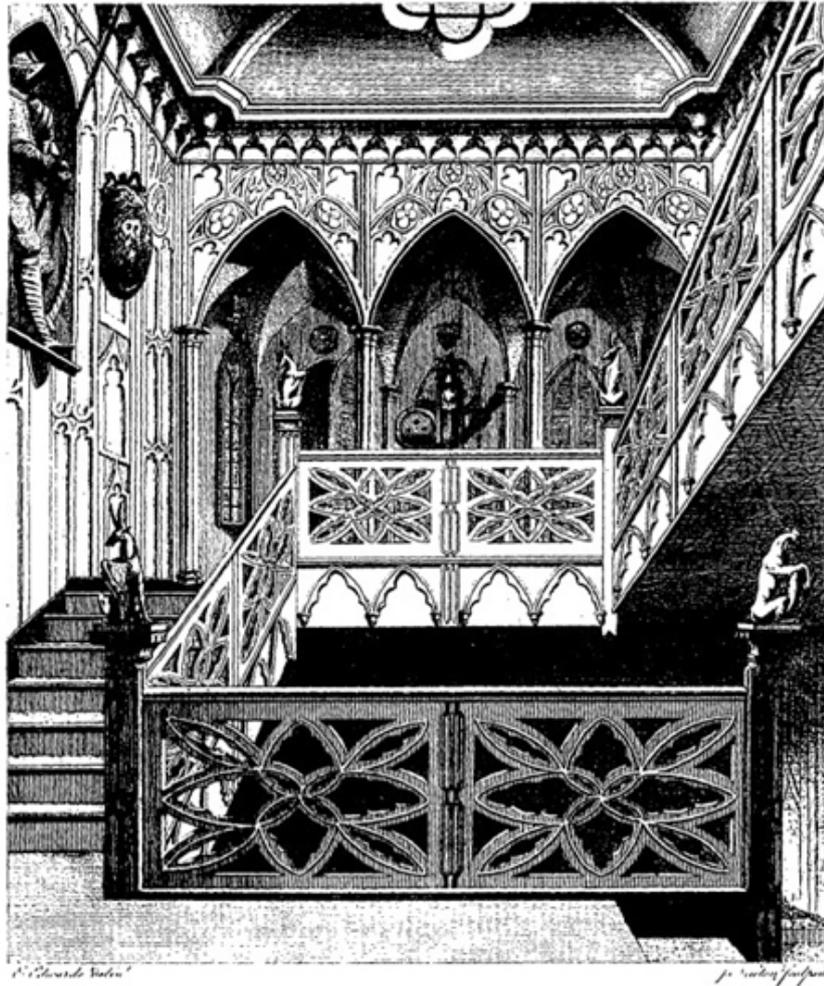
The sense of infinity created within Gothic architecture operates largely via a seemingly contradictory limiting of vision within multiple uneven boundaries that create simultaneously closed and open space. Consisting of thresholds like corridors, cloisters, stairs, screens, windows and doors that both limit the field of vision and yet offer glimpses beyond, Gothic castles imply that boundaries are liminal rather than finite, and emphasise a sense of boundlessness via the suggestion of multiple spaces unfolding and extending beyond. The idea is reflected in the aesthetics of Locke, Addison and Burke who follow Newton's concept that "we cannot imagine any limit anywhere without at the same time imagining that there is space beyond it" (cited in Sambrook 7). Indeed, for Burke, the sublime is evoked by the inability of "the eye or the mind, (for in this case

there is no difference)” to “readily arrive at [the] bounds” (IV.x), and through spatial limits that are permeable and unfixed, Gothic castles evoke the sense “that there exists a greater extension than any we can imagine” (Newton cited in Sambrook 7). Burke’s elision of the eye and mind here is significant and signals the dual optical and cognitive struggle in the face of infinity. In Gothic architecture, “unclear boundaries between the inside and the outside, and [...] sprawling structures” suggest “lack of control over one’s space” (Cavallaro 86), and in this immeasurable quality, the process of ontological destabilisation is already underway as Gothic liminal space overrides the authority of vision as a means of understanding.

Horace Walpole applied these principles freely within Strawberry Hill, which deliberately emphasises unevenness, incongruity and juxtaposition in its spatial layout and its placement of liminal thresholds to interrupt vision in space. Walpole’s *Description* conveys that the house was built and layered “at different times”, resulting in a space that is agglutinative rather than homogenous (2). The printed word here complements the effect of the liminal spaces and renders the house an architectural narrative of space unfolding and extending ever outwards, an effect which is emphasised by the *Description*’s illusion of an unending journey as it guided the viewer “through circuitous routes, with perspective views of spaces beyond and framed by views of objects and external vistas, including passage through a uniquely picturesque winding cloister” (Harney 278).¹ Visiting the house is a confusing journey through a network of interconnected spaces that seem to slot around each other with overlapping boundaries: corridors twist and turn, the ceiling is alternately low and high, stairwells curve into halls and abruptly interrupt rooms, passages are confined and claustrophobic but open out suddenly into vast, open halls or round rooms without corners to disrupt the gaze. Doors are cut at odd angles through walls to magnify the illusion of depth, and rooms are decoratively partitioned with ornate screens that both halt the gaze and yet allow it to trickle through into the space beyond, in which stained glass windows repeat the process. In this layered, distorted space, vision is simultaneously curtailed and unleashed, and becomes a faculty that works across multiple spaces, seeing “through” and around limits to evoke an aura of infinite space, and the paradoxical feeling, which would become so much a hallmark of Gothic fiction, that the house is “larger inside than outside” (Aguirre 6). The space becomes a “theatre of the imagination” that operates via what Harney, referring to its associative powers, calls “a reciprocal arrangement between performer and audience” (280).

For Walpole, “the most particular and chief beauty of the castle” and therefore “impossible to describe” was the Staircase (**Fig. 1**), which was seen on first entering the house (*Letters* 71). A visual spectacle beyond the reach of words, this space draws on painterly techniques of “Chiaro Scuro” (the juxtaposition of light and shade, and a label that Walpole applied to the entire house) to evoke the Gothic monastic atmosphere that Addison believed the natural habitation of ghosts. Walpole writes: “You first enter a small gloomy hall [...] lighted by two narrow windows of painted glass, representing St. John and St. Francis” (*Description* 3). “With regard to light and shades. The first Entrance strikes by the gloom: the Staircase opens upwards to a greater light” (cited in Harney 170). This upward direction of the gaze drawn from the shadowy depths to the celestial light has clear religious overtones, and evokes the aforementioned sense of liminal space between worlds. Its manipulation of light and shade evokes G. R. Thompson’s observation of Gothic cathedrals, which have “both an outward, upward movement toward the heavens, and an inward, downward motion, convoluting in

¹ Silver suggests “The *Description* organizes Strawberry Hill into a complicated but deliberate narrative experience” (555).



STAIRCASE AT STRAWBERRY HILL.

Fig. 1: Staircase at Strawberry Hill (“The Great Stairwell”), in [Horace Walpole], *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole ... at Strawberry-Hill near Twickenham, Middlesex. Twickenham, Strawberry-Hill: printed by Thomas Kirgate, 1784, opp. p. 31.*

upon itself in labyrinthine passages and dark recesses, descending to catacombs deep in the earth” (47n).² This effect is enhanced by the profusion of liminal thresholds and suggestions of extensions of space beyond the spectator’s gaze: in addition to the upward movement of the spiralling staircase, and its suggestion of multiple levels of space, “Six Gothic doors were located in the hallway giving the misleading impression that they led-off to many more rooms, when, in-fact, two of them were merely storage areas. The illusion was enhanced by low light levels, grey painted walls and balustrades added to the dark atmosphere by giving a mysterious quality to the space” (Harney 170).

Walpole’s mind was “filled with Gothic fancies” and “teem[ed] with ghosts and giants and romances” (Epilogue, *The Mysterious Mother* 1–2). When he writes that “visions [...] have always been my pasture [...] I almost think there is no wisdom comparable to that of exchanging what is called the realities of life for dreams” (cited in Harney 1), he reflects Addison, for whom the imagination was a necessary part of perceiving the ordinary world, and functioned as a “secret Spell” that beautified ordinary vision so that the spectator walks “delightfully lost [...] in a pleasing Delusion [...] like the Enchanted Hero of a Romance” (cited in

² Davison sees these poles in Gothic fiction as “the two principal dynamics at play [...] between the sublime and the subliminal respectively” (30).

Sambrook 109). This connection between optics and imagined narrative, and the process of exchange between dream and reality, was at play within Strawberry, and it is through evoking multiple narrative associations within the Gothic visual space that Walpole achieves the first of his Gothic tensions between word and image.

The visual experience at Strawberry operated in terms of Addison's theory of association, in which objects and styles each carry their own historical and cultural narratives, which play out in the mind of the spectator. Strawberry Hill employed "architectural quotations from Gothic tombs, representing visual links to historical figures and events" (Harney xiv), and therefore functions via a kind of visual intertextuality, where its constituent parts, juxtaposed against one another, each refer to a narrative that extends beyond the immediate architectural boundaries, and consequently extends the imaginative and temporal space that the house occupies. Several scholars have noted the performance of the house as a theatrical space within which the multiple associated historical and mythological narratives attached to Walpole's extensive collection of paintings and objects combine, often overlapping their discursive boundaries, to continually haunt the present and challenge a single, coherent notion of history (McEvoy suggests that if the objects didn't come with a story, they were given one).³ These multiple stories serve to create a collage of time and space that disrupts its usual linear progression, and "flouts the distinction between reality and illusion" (Cavallaro 29). In a letter to George Montagu in 1770, Walpole describes a process of association at the gardens at Stowe that is akin to that operating within Strawberry: the visual scene conjures imagined visions of those who had visited before, so that "all these images crowd upon one's memory and add visionary personages to the charming scenes, that are so enriched with fanes and temples, that the real prospects are little less than visions themselves" (*Letters* 143). In this description, Walpole speaks of consciousness and the process of visualisation as a haunted affair, where the crowding of images upon the brain conjures visions of the imagined past, which are then projected onto the landscape, which itself becomes destabilised as if also a projected image and not a physical space. Skating dangerously close to Berkeley's notion that "the external world is wholly mind-dependent" and "exists only as it is perceived" (cited in Sambrook 204), this description signals the spectral imagination's power to destabilise reality and render the visual senses fantastic. This spectral approach to vision within space creates a slippage between word and image where truth operates somewhere in the chasm opened up between them.⁴

The Castle of Otranto

Perhaps Walpole's most famous castle of spectral imagination is his 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*, which was not only inspired by Strawberry Hill via a dream vision, but also draws on its theatrical architecture, its play with aesthetics, and its evocation of Gothic uncertainty to itself become an immersive space within which image and narrative play out against one another, and terror is evoked in the thresholds between. Several critics have noted that the narrative turns on a series of linked images in the manner of a dream, and these images have traditionally received the most critical attention for their implausibility. Sir Walter Scott, for example, found fault with some of the spectres, such as the colossal helmet, which he felt were overly

³ Otto provides a detailed and insightful account of the many other layered narratives woven into this space via the collected objects, which, framed within the cabinets, rooms, and castle itself, constitute a kind of performance of multiple histories and realities (699–700). For similar analyses, see also Harney, Silver, and McEvoy.

⁴ For different treatments of this idea, see Cavallaro, who accords that Gothic works hinge on uncertainty rendered "prominent by an unresolved tension between visual and verbal discourses" (ix), and Otto, who suggests that "the real-unrealities of *The Castle of Otranto* open a gap between intensity of perception and epistemic knowledge, which gives the first a degree of independence from the second" (696–697).

corporeal, and did not follow the Burkean notion of “mysterious obscurity” which “seems congenial at least, if not essential, to our ideas of disembodied spirits” (cited in Sabor 95). Walpole’s manipulation of vision within the architectural space of the narrative, which is heavily couched in terms of obscurity and blindness, is, however, perhaps more important to the overall effect of sublime terror he was aiming to achieve. Indeed, a closer look reveals that despite Walpole’s conviction in his preface to the first edition that the “reader will be pleased with a sight of this performance” (7),⁵ the novel’s focus is less on the visions themselves, and more on what these phantoms reveal about the optical and psychological processes of seeing, and the slippage between image and word that constantly undermines attempts to perceive and make sense of the castle’s space.

In his preface to the second edition, Walpole’s French translates literally to, “of all my works it is the only one [...] where I have enjoyed *being*” (Harney 283). Overlaid upon the architectural space of Strawberry Hill (Lewis 90),⁶ this immersive space operates along the same principles of liminality and restricted vision, placing the characters (and by extension the reader) within threshold spaces that render vision a fraught and limited medium, bound and curtailed by walls, corridors and screens that both entrap, and yet suggest infinite and invisible extensions of space beyond. The organisation of space in this way represents “desubjectification” in the way it resists “the individual’s attempts to impose his or her own order” (Punter and Byron 262), and “questions the possibility of quantification, of finiteness, and therefore of cognoscibility; in effect, it consecrates ‘mystery’ at the heart of the rationalist world” (Aguirre 13).

One of the most influential “images” within the novel is Isabella’s terrified flight through the “subterraneous passage” beneath the castle (27). The effect of this scene is created through a combination of liminal space, obscured vision rendered more prominent by heightened auditory senses in line with Burke’s theories of the sublime,⁷ and a resultant undermining of the reliability of perception. “The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters [...] An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except” for the wind that “shook the doors she had passed, and which grating on the rusty hinges were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. Every murmur struck her with new terror” and she “frequently stopped and listened to hear” sounds that are couched in terms of uncertain perception: “she thought she heard a sigh”; “she thought she heard the step of some person” (27–28). As perception begins to be undermined by the threshold space, the spectral properties of association arise: “Alone in so dismal a place, her mind imprinted with all the terrible events of the day”, “[e]very suggestion that horror could inspire rushed into her mind [...] all these thoughts crowded on her distracted mind” (28–29). Utilising the Newtonian image of the mind as a blank canvas upon which images are projected, the process of association here operates in the dual directions of supernatural and subliminal to conjure a haunting sense that Isabella is not alone. The idea recalls Addison’s belief in *The Spectator*, No. 12 “that all the Regions of Nature swarm with Spirits; and that we have Multitudes of Spectators on all our Actions, when we think ourselves most alone.” Though Addison invokes the ghostly here in positive support of Christianity, there is something profoundly unsettling in the reversal of roles where the spectator becomes the spectacle – in the sense of being watched by beings whose vision and perception extends beyond our own optical and spatial limits – and it this reversal, signifying our blindness, that in part

5 Walpole continues the depiction of the text as theatrical space when he laments that the author “did not apply his talents to what they were evidently proper for, the theatre” (7).

6 In his preface to the first edition, Walpole’s fictional translator writes, “The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle [...] the author had some certain building in his eye” (8).

7 “But light now appearing, and now leaving us, and so off and on, is even more terrible than total darkness; and a sort of uncertain sounds are, when the necessary dispositions concur, more alarming than a total silence” (Burke II.xix).

drives the terror in Gothic fiction. This struggle with perception is one shared by Walpole's narrator, who like Isabella, finds himself unable to unite word and image at the threshold: "Words cannot paint the horror" (28).⁸

This failure of perception through blindness and unspeakability applies to the whole text, where the narrator repeatedly casts the reader in a position of blindness through various levels of narrative delay and diversion in the communication of image. Even when unequivocally supernatural spectres appear, they are rarely immediately or frankly described, and are instead couched within second-hand reports from both characters and narrator that are marked by ellipsis and suspension. When Conrad is crushed under the giant helmet, close focalisation through repeated reference to Manfred's "eyes", "sight" and "gaze" limits the reader's field of vision to a space where the supernatural occurs "off stage" so that we are forced to partake in Manfred's blindness to this vision. Not having seen the spectacle himself, Manfred relies on a servant's report, but even here Manfred's "vision" (cognisance) is delayed by slippages between word and image in the servant's narrative. The man attempts to speak but can only point, and as Manfred observes the man miming in terror, he "heard a confused noise of shrieks, horror, and surprise" (18), which figure both Manfred's blindness (in terms of both sight and understanding), and the failure of words. As a consequence, Manfred is reduced to reading the supernatural via its visible impact upon the body of the servant, who with "eyes staring" struggles to relate the vision he has seen.

Significantly, when Manfred eventually does witness the supernatural for himself, daring to "trust no eyes but my own" (36), it is now the reader who is detained in blindness as the narrator focuses not on the vision before Manfred's eyes, but on the optical and cognitive processes of vision itself. Just as Manfred was forced to read the supernatural via the body of his servant, the reader is now limited to reading the supernatural via its impact upon Manfred as his eyes and words alternately fail to grasp the incomprehensible: "He gazed without believing his sight [...] dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily – But what a sight [...] The horror of the spectacle" and "the tremendous phenomenon before him, took away the prince's speech" and "his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to become a vision" (18–19). The shock places Manfred in a trance state of silent observation: marked by "insensibility", nothing could "divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him" (19). As Cavallaro suggests, "The instability that characterises the relationship between the verbal and the visual also echoes the unresolved tension animating the dynamics of terror and horror – the oscillation between the impalpable and the physical" (103). As we read Manfred's processes of vision, which themselves signal in part the narrator's performance of blindness and unspeakability, Manfred occupies a liminal position as spectator, spectacle and text, and a Gothic dissonance occurs as he is forced to inhabit the very space between word and image that fails him in his attempts to understand the numinous beyond the threshold; a numinous that here encompasses both a real supernatural and the secret histories and repressed desires that it represents. The body thus becomes not only a discursive site through which the supernatural is read, but also doubles Locke's *tabula rasa* upon which impressions of vision are projected. In visually reading the Gothic body, we read the Gothic mind.

Once again, however, this process is not straightforward, and the slippage between word and image, as the brain struggles to comprehend the meaning of the signs it is presented with, threatens the observer's mind

⁸ Cavallaro notes how this elision also occurs at the textual level: "Visions are elusive apparitions whose connection with the empirical world is ultimately impossible to ascertain" and "[w]ords, in turn, are ghostly substitutes for the real: abstract signs. They have a physical presence, yet the objects to which they refer are inevitably absent from the page and the voice. Words, like phantasms, are presences unremittingly traversed by absences, paradoxically disembodied bodies" (104).

with madness. Berkeley's notion that the external world only exists via perception takes on an unsettling literalness when delirium and madness enter the fray. When Manfred mistakes Theodore for his Gothic double Alphonso, thinking him a "dreadful spectre" (83), he is forced to compare his own faculty of perception with that of others. As we once again read Manfred's body through Hippolita's vision ("what is it you see? Why do you fix your eye-balls thus?"), Manfred asks, "dost thou see nothing? [...] Is this ghastly phantom sent to me alone [...] dost thou not see him? Can it be my brain's delirium?" (83). The hesitation between supernatural and psychological interpretation causes an "agony of terror and amazement", in which the phantom – at once supernatural, delirium, and mistaken identity – has "unhinged the soul of Manfred" (83). For Punter and Byron, "the Gothic is grounded on the terrain of hallucination [...] within which we are frequently unsure of the reliability of the narrator's perceptions, and thus of the extent to which we as readers are enjoined to participate in them or to retain a critical distance" (293).⁹ However, even this critical distance is complicated when the reader is cast into the same space of uncertain perception as the protagonist by the text's manipulation of vision, and its frequent slippage between word and image. In such moments, an immersive visual and textual space is opened up between the text and the reader within which reality itself "has become fluid" (Otto 694).

The Mysterious Mother

While *Otranto*'s manipulation of vision within space creates an immersive theatrical experience, Walpole's 1768 drama *The Mysterious Mother* develops this technique even further, employing the gaze of the implied theatre audience to undermine and destabilise the relationship between word and image within liminal spaces that evoke the powers of imaginative association. The scenes are limited to two threshold spaces within the Castle of Narbonne – a platform before the gate, and a cloistered garden within the walls. While the scene description (and by implication the set design) illustrates the setting, the text further shapes the audience's vision and perception by filtering it through that of the speaker, who by verbally directing the audience's gaze and suggesting narrative associations of the supernatural, acts as a medium through which we interpret the scene, and by which the spectral imagination is conjured. In the opening scene, Florian immediately draws our eye to the "vacant courts" between "antique towers" that are cloaked in a tomb-like magnitude of "awful silence" that:

chill[s] the suspended soul,
Till expectation wears the cast of fear;
And fear, half-ready to become devotion,
Mumbles a kind of mental orison,
It knows not wherefore. (I.i.1–6)

The sense of slippage between mind, body and soul, where the awful visions "suspend" the soul and conjure trance-like prayers from the mind prefigures the slippage between word and image that is beginning to take place in the associative process of the spectral imagination, where words have the power to alter the process of seeing. This is a threshold space, within which the soul is "to be damned or to be saved" (I.i.38), and hinges on

⁹ Hallucination is a popular topic in Gothic criticism. Morris, for example, suggests, "Gothic sublimity demonstrates the possibilities of terror in opening the mind to its own hidden and irrational powers" (306).

the reliability of perception. Indeed, when the spectral image of “the Count [...] with clotted locks, and eyes like burning stars” (II.i.222–223) is evoked through this same process of association, it is once again, much like the recounted spectral visions in *Otranto*, an ambiguous supernatural occurring off-stage and recounted through narrative characterised by blindness as the orphans shut their eyes, or see only through a “wink”, and, like Florian, mumble a prayer “against spectres” (II.i.270–272). Recalling similar scenes in *Macbeth*, these visions are accompanied by hellish changes in the seasons that are posited as divine remonstrance against “hidden sins”, which “have forced th’offended elements to borrow / Tremendous organs!” (II.i.286–288).

While the narrative turns on the fallibility of the eye, and the mind’s inability to associate the correct narratives with images, the destabilising power of doubles is employed to full effect, and operates as the “impenetrable mystery” (I.i.379) at the heart of both the text and the castle, which becomes an embodiment of the Countess’s mind. The narrative direction from the outer platform towards the enclosed centre of the castle parallels the gradual revelation of the Countess’s secret, which is eventually exposed as a memory of incest occasioned by multiple failures of vision, and a slippage between image and association, as the Countess’s grief-stricken eye conflates husband with son, which results in an incestuous sister-daughter. This same fallible gaze banishes the son from the castle (“aversion in its fellest mood / Scowled from her eye, and drove me from her sight” [II.i.39]) and later disguises the son as his father’s double once more, as his matured features “mock the prying of a mother’s eye” (II.i.5), and cast him, in the Countess’s mind, as his father’s ghost “winged from other orbs / To taunt my soul” (III.i.271–273).

Similar doublings and failures of vision reoccur throughout the text. After unknowingly marrying his sister-daughter, Edmund’s vision is called into question when:

the maiden’s tears and shrieks had struck
On his sick fancy like his mother’s cries!
Th’idea writhing from his brain, had won
His eye-balls, and he thought he saw his mother! (V.i.79–83)

The unstable cognitive processes here draw on mixed discourses of association and hallucination to reverse the process of seeing: association writhes with a serpentine will of its own and overpowers the “eye-balls”, outwardly projecting an image that seems, for a moment, to be real. The lack of volition in this scene, and the undermining of sight as a means of empirical judgement, produces the Gothic effect.

In an attempt to avoid the fallibility of vision, the Countess adopts an “ever-heav’n-directed eye” (I.i.56), but like the architectural associations within Strawberry, her upward gaze towards the heavens belies an equal and opposite gaze downwards to the Gothic cavernous depths of her subconscious that are mirrored within the liminal castle setting and its suggested disruptive supernatural hauntings. Within the liminal threshold, any gaze outward is necessarily a gaze inward. The Countess’s repressed memory is a vision which haunts her consciousness, unable to be verbalised except in “hints long treasured up, from broken phrase / In frenzy dropped, but vibrating from truth” (IV.i.71–72). In his attempts to divine this secret, Benedict mirrors Manfred as he reads the “impressions” on the Countess’s body, which once again inhabits the liminal gap between word

and image, as text. However, unlike Manfred, Benedict's reading position is active, and he takes advantage of Lockean notions of the mind as blank canvas to "nurture in [the Countess] new horrors" of association based on narrated "visions, phantoms and dreams" (I.i.215–216). In an unsettling reversal of optical processes, word paints image: the Countess's "memory retains the colouring: Oft times it paints her dreams" (I.i.217–219). In thus influencing consciousness via verbal painting of image, Benedict aims to "sound her inmost soul, / And mould it to the moment of projection" (I.i.272–273). "Projection" can be read here as the culmination of Benedict's plans to extract a confession, but it also carries important optical, painterly, mathematical and supernatural associations where it connotes: the "projection" of image onto the retina during sight; the painting of an image so that it appears to stand out in relief; representations of dimensional space mapped onto surfaces; and finally, the magic lantern's projection of light onto a screen to create supernatural illusions. All of these associations tumble over one another in the monk's attempts to read the Countess's mind by reversing the direction of vision to recall the original image that was projected onto the mind's *tabula rasa*, and project it outwards to the surface of the body as spoken or embodied word, and, more broadly, onto the spaces of the castle and the text itself. Once this projection has occurred, the Countess's earlier "heav'n-directed eye" is altered, and she is left, within the vaults of her exposed subconscious, "eyeing with despair / the heights I cannot reach" (IV.i.278–279). The only solution for Edmund is to cease reading the space altogether: quitting the castle (and the stage), he declares his intention, in aptly spatial, theatrical and optical terms, to "never more / Review (see again) this theatre of monstrous guilt!" (V.i.417). Berkeley's unsettling notion of perception is at free play here: without a spectator, the world (text) does not exist.

Word and Image in Space

While the interplay of word and image within the liminal spaces of Strawberry Hill was projected onto the textual spaces of *Otranto* and *The Mysterious Mother*, these "visions" in turn influenced the space of the house and the narrative experience of viewing it. Silver points out that not only did people visit the house with the knowledge that it inspired *Otranto*, but a portrait of a young woman reading the novel, displayed at the foot of the staircase, also "informs the experience" and "educates" the viewer on how to read the scene: "the staircase reads, as it were, *The Castle of Otranto* to its viewer, framing a prospect that redeploys the major tropes of *Otranto* historiography" (556). Perhaps the most significant alteration to the house was inspired by *The Mysterious Mother*, when Walpole added "one final room to his Gothic mansion" to house a series of drawings depicting scenes from the play (Baines and Burns xiv). An "immersive [...] theatre of sensation" (Otto 684), the Beauclerc Closet appears at first glance to represent the final separation of image from narrative, as the drawings represent scenes purified from their original narrative context. However, even beyond the cognitive processes of association, the ghostly presence of the text still haunts the images: to explain the drawings, Walpole secreted a copy of the play, ornately bound, within the drawer of a writing desk inside the room. The text was positioned invisibly, therefore, at the centre of a space dedicated to image. The concentric closeting of word within image replicates the narrative, architectural and symbolic structure of the drama itself. Words and image jostle within this scene, haunting each other, and like the wider text-spaces of Strawberry Hill, *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysterious Mother*, it is this tension between word and image that produces Walpole's innovative Gothic effect.

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