

“I do not much observe pictures”, or looking and images in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*

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Abstract

This article discusses Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* from the perspective of the notion and the activity of looking or being looked at. It is argued that the power of the gaze and the particular semiotics of “ocular economy”, while to some extent linked to biographical contexts, can also be noticed in Walpole’s text itself. What is studied is not only the way in which images are used in the text, i.e. what function they perform, but also how they structure the importance of an appeal to vision and images within hauntological perspective and the Gothic genre of literature.

Résumé

Cet article aborde Le Château d’Otrante du point de vue de l’acte de regarder et d’être regardé. Il met en avant l’idée que le pouvoir du regard et la sémiotique de l’« économie oculaire », dont il faut admettre qu’ils sont liées à des éléments contextuels de type biographique, peuvent être déduits du texte même de Walpole. On étudie ici non seulement la manière dont les images sont utilisées dans le texte et quelle y est leur fonction, mais aussi comment elles aident à donner de l’importance à un appel plus large à la vision et au visuel dans la double perspective de l’étude des fantômes et de la littérature gothique.

Keywords

Gaze, Gothic, *The Castle of Otranto*, images, hauntology

Among the aspects of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) that make it a founding work for the Gothic literary form, the uses of looking and images throughout the novel stand out as particularly interesting. Even though images and visuals may well be included within such a type of fiction as the staple props and accessories that dominate such a narrative (castles, winding staircases, rattling chains, etc.), it can be argued that they function as something more than mere elements of the setting crucial for the development of the plot and the atmosphere. Just as images in the story cannot be limited to motionless paintings on the wall – as these literally leave their frames – the visual also transcends its regular form and functions to inform the spectral in the story, indicating a certain ocular economy haunting Walpole's classic text. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to study the polysemy of looking within such ocular economy and to trace how seemingly straightforward voluntary acts of visual cognition turn out to be entangled in a much larger system of what might be called scopic semiotics.

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A polyphonic structure of meanings is immediately perceived when one thinks about a whole range of distinctions associated with looking, as Madeline H. Caviness aptly points out while sketching the field of words associated with sight in European languages, especially with respect to the way English lends itself to a whole range of distinctions associated with looking (18). In contrast to the fairly simple differentiations of aural experience, falling under the categories of active and passive (i.e. hearing and listening), seeing may also denote both of these states. However, it is the range of active forms that is particularly telling and which encompasses numerous features – from glancing, perceiving, observing, through gazing or staring, to leering, ogling or even hypnotizing. In addition to the verbs (Caviness enumerates more than twenty) that suggest particular active subject positions with corresponding behaviours (viewers, spectators, scopophiliacs, voyeurs, observers or visionaries), looking as a “metaphor for cognition” is not only connected to scopic perception, i.e. taking a good look at, or fixing one's eyes on someone, but may indicate observing norms and traditions (rules or rituals); including speculations about the future and reflecting back on the past. Such rich “linguistic investment”, as Caviness calls it, indicates much more than the mere cultural significance of looking. It fits into a long tradition of scopic economy associated with the power of the gaze, which traditionally denied women the right to look: “It was reinforced through the Bible, through medieval writings and images, particularly through the versions of Freud's theories that found acceptance in early twentieth-century Vienna and through the modernist films from which Laura Mulvey and others have evolved their theories of the gaze” (Caviness 19). Following a long running tradition of stereotypes associated with women, the activity of looking, staring or being stared at is thus associated not only with sexual behaviour but with politics and hierarchies of power.

Interestingly, power and politics in the case of Horace Walpole played a doubly important role. For an active Member of Parliament and the son of a renowned Prime Minister (Sir Robert Walpole), the notions of reputation and family background constitute at least one level of being subject to the public gaze – simply stemming from his social position. What is more, Walpole also seemed to follow the likes of many of his contemporaries in acquiring works of art for his father's collection and embarking upon the Grand Tour, a hands-on educational experience providing immersion in continental art, culture and language popular among the upper classes at the time. Significantly, all of these activities involve looking, being looked at, or collecting in order to put on display in a controlled environment (such as an exhibition, or his Strawberry Hill House) and

can partly account for the omnipresence of the scopic in the author's creation.

In this context, writing *The Castle of Otranto* as a form of escape from political turmoil is perfectly understandable. In a letter to William Cole from 9 March 1765, Walpole seemed to have been "very glad to think of anything rather than politics" at the time of writing the novel (*Correspondence* vol.1, 88). This is slightly discernible, for instance, in the bogus preface for the initial edition of the book, which may be perceived as an attempt at concealing himself from public view within the carapace of fake identity or nom de plume, at least at an early stage when the reception of his creation was uncertain. One reason for delving into fiction at the time of writing the book was that 1764 "was a strange year for Walpole, a year of tireless effort and protracted nervous tension, of incessant political intrigues mingling with the unique *visionary* mood" (Ketton-Cremer 1964, 221; my emphasis). Whether conscious or not, his awareness of being in the spotlight or subject to public scrutiny certainly accompanied Walpole in his life. In the period leading up to the writing of the novel, on his return to England from Italy in September 1741, more than two decades before its first composition, he found that Sir Robert's government had lost its popularity and influence. This, consequently, put Horace Walpole in an awkward position where he had to defend his father against unjust political allegations, including those of corruption. Given the "whirlwind activity, his quarrels and whisperings and pamphleteering, distasteful reconciliations with old enemies and tedious political dinners with new friends" at the time (Ketton-Cremer 1964, 221), *The Castle of Otranto* can easily be seen as a zeitgeist allegory in terms of the political life prevailing at that time (cf. Samson 1986).

As has been seen, the author's biography itself could also be viewed from the ocular perspective, especially given the fact that his position at the time could be termed as that of both an "observer and participant of political dealings" (Ketton-Cremer 1964, 197). This is in fact one of the vantage points from which Michael Gamer introduced the novel in a 2001 Penguin Classics edition: "With this reversal of fortune, Horace Walpole's involvement in parliamentary matters over the next decades was intermittent and *behind the scenes*. Rather than acting as direct participant in affairs of state, he moved between the role of periodic strategist and pamphleteer and that of *perpetual observer* and chronicler" (Gamer xix, my emphasis). Despite voyeuristic suggestions, *The Castle of Otranto* seems to have been written from the position of a writer acutely aware of the intricacies of the ocular economy and its political involvement in the literary culture of the 1760s.

At a less literal level, further significance of looking at things, for Walpole, could also be identified in his antiquarian and literary pursuits. The particular importance, sensitivity, and influence attached to images and representation, which were to arrive with the coming of modernity – when images and the constructiveness of representation was to be further problematized – could partly be seen as anticipated by Walpole not only in his collection of objects for display but also in the neo-Gothic villa of Strawberry Hill, which was an attempt, in architectonic form, to re-create a selective past. In fact, this selectiveness on Walpole's part with reference to history is evidence of his effort to construct a certain vision of the past. A case in point being his interest in genealogical research, which resulted in the family's "coats of arms being proudly displayed on the ceiling of the library" (Ketton-Cremer 1967, 131). The ceiling, like many other constructional ideas at the villa, was obviously of Walpole's own design, fitting into his architectural preoccupations, all of which could be said to constitute and conform to a certain authorial vision – carried out with an acute awareness of other people's subsequent gaze. In a similar vein, recent critical work has also highlighted the view of the villa as a

projection of Walpole's ego, together with the connections between the house's architecture and eighteenth-century sexuality (cf. Reeve). This was partly due to the fact that Walpole's own promotional material (*A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole* of 1774, revised and reprinted in 1784), historically one of the first illustrated accounts of an English house, featured a "group of representations across paintings and graphic works [which] playfully juxtapose Walpole's body with Strawberry Hill, not simply as the setting for his literary and artistic pursuits but as a personification of its patron" (Reeve 411). On the other hand, the literary text of *The Castle of Otranto*, as an exponent of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, has been read by literary critics as "a new literary mode [that] thematized sexual alterity through transgressions of social and sexual binaries" and one that "centred around the perversions of male effeminacy and the threat of public exposure" (Reeve 419). Correspondingly, the importance of vision, or what can be seen or looked at, and which, significantly, at the same time plays around with the ocular perception, can be identified in "theatrical devices, like *trompe-l'oeil* paintings or materials like plaster and papier mâché" (Gamer xxiii), placed around the mansion and used as transpositions and adaptations of past architectonic means. Likewise, the very theatricality of the novel – visible in its insistence on "representing the *expression* of emotional conflict rather than describing its internal processes" as well as its "fidelity to the classical unities of the drama" – points to Walpole's soft spot for playwriting (Gamer xxxi). Such endeavours to write dramatic material (*The Mysterious Mother* or *Nature Will Prevail*) could, in this context, be taken as an expression of the significance, or at least understanding of how to construct objects, places and people to look at, i.e. the look and its power.

However, as Walpole's text makes us aware, looking is indeed not simply the activity of directing one's sight to a particular place. Towards the end of the narrative, for example, when Isabella states "I do not much observe pictures" (78), she is referring to much more than the act of visual cognition of a work of art. Such a declaration plays on the notion of observation precisely in the sense of going beyond the regular act of visual perception and seems to be also bordering on the idea of observing conventions, laws or regulations, i.e. the tradition of the past epitomized by paintings within the narrative, ones that turn out destructive for the usurper of Otranto because of all his transgressions. Interestingly, this statement comes from a character who manages to escape Manfred's enclosing passions and can be further read as Isabella's declaration to disobey new tradition, or the new laws being laid down by the usurper.

While Jacques Lacan's problematization of the gaze has demonstrated various aspects of the psychoanalytical significance of looking and "looking back", visual perception and images or objects that can be seen, through their entanglement with the spectral, offer going beyond customary psychoanalytical interpretation. In Walpole's now classic text the spectral may be read as an exploration of a certain hauntology of the mutual overlapping between the visual and the uncanny. The significance of the visual – including its polysemy – may, in turn, be regarded as a trait symptomatic for the tendency that evolved into contemporary society's cultural interest in the visual; one that, after Michel Foucault's investigations into discursive changes to language and representation brought on by the advent of modernity, Walpole's "new" type of romance seems to record.

“A bystander often sees more of the game than those that play” (41)

The scopic system in *The Castle of Otranto* concerns looking, images and, in general, objects to look at, all of which abound in Walpole’s story. The function of these elements seems to vary, ranging from what might be called regular use, through aspects of power of the look, or hierarchy, the supernatural and the spectral (associated with the visual), to a certain representational instability noticeable in the uneasy relationship that exists between images and language. Interestingly, in most of these areas the traditional understanding of sight often betrays a propensity for going beyond its customary understanding as cognition because the narrative often recognizes the limits of its representation. What perfectly illustrates this is a passage from the grand finale where, literally, there seems to be a lot to see:

The moment Theodore appeared, the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. “Behold in Theodore the true heir of Alfonso!” said the vision: And having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of St. Nicholas was seen, and receiving Alfonso’s shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory. The beholders fell prostrate on their faces, acknowledging the divine will. The first that broke silence was Hippolita. “My Lord,” said she to the desponding Manfred, “behold the vanity of human greatness! Conrad is gone! Matilda is no more! In Theodore we view the true Prince of Otranto”. (98)

This final section makes extensive use of objects to look at – a vision where accompanying phenomena appear for onlookers to see and where the true heir of Otranto is manifested. Even though the supernatural presence is also marked by auditory experiences (speech, a clap of thunder, etc.), the predominant element underlying this whole scene is visual. Certainly, its intrusion into reality is one associated with power, the authority of the rightful past and a physical shaking of the castle’s stability together with its neurotic usurper. Significantly, power and authority seem to be based on an act of visual (re)cognition on the part of the onlookers – the crowd avert their eyes from supernatural manifestations, behold Manfred’s vanity and acknowledge the new prince only when they see one. Moreover, chiming with the end of the story, these shifts in power are narrated by a woman, emphasising the waning of male authority embodied by Manfred. This betrays an entanglement of the visual in aspects associated with patriarchal power, which, together with the supernatural, suggests not only the importance of sight and power, but also the complexity connected with looking and visuals in the text.

Looking, as a notion in *The Castle of Otranto*, is from the very beginning entangled in power hierarchies, which erupt in narrative moments when visual activity is mentioned. In chapter one the very first mention of the power of look is noticeable in the introductory paragraph when Manfred’s tenants and subjects are described as attributing his “hasty wedding to the prince’s dread of seeing accomplished an ancient prophecy” (17). Already from the narrative onset the faculty of seeing is associated not only with certain power but also with symbolic debt, manifestations of which can be encountered throughout the text in various forms (objects of disparate shapes and sizes, apparitions and so on). Seeing is rendered here in the passive to emphasize the inactive position of Manfred’s subordinates and thus to prepare the ground for Walpole’s most developed and active character (one who lays down the law). The notion of visual experience consequently brings about issues of power which may suggest that the whole opening chapter of the tale can well be read as announcing

that observation and observing will function in the narrative as meaning that transcends mere sense of sight. That is why “the domestics”, for example, do not “observe the singularity of [Manfred’s] decision [to take care of Lady Isabella]” (19), which neatly suggests the notion of both following regulations and obeying rules (Manfred’s law). What is more, quite early in the novel, Manfred is reported as not being able to “support the sight of his own family” (23), and when, in a comic-relief-like scene with his bumpkin servants, he hears them declare “Diego has seen such a sight! your highness would not believe our eyes [...]” (31) – he orders them out of his sight, concluding that he only trusts his own eyes (33).

The power ingrained in the faculty of seeing is not solely reserved for Manfred, which may indicate a more complex semiotics of look at play throughout the narrative. During an early questioning scene, for instance, in response to inquiries about how the secret of opening the lock was discovered, “the youth” points to “providence” as his guide (30). Taking into account the “forseeing” nature of God’s care in various religions and popular representations of the higher force as an overseeing eye, the power of the look turns out to be a greater force than that associated with the negative main character. Similarly, the regulations, or what might be called paternal law, is also visible in the case of both parents – as Matilda comments on Hippolita: “Perhaps my mind would be less affected”, said Matilda, “if my mother would explain her reasons to me: but it is the mystery she observes, that inspires me with this--I know not what to call it. As she never acts from caprice, I am sure there is some fatal secret at bottom--nay, I know there is: in her agony of grief for my brother’s death she dropped some words that intimated as much” (38). As a figure subordinate to Manfred, his wife observes the mysteries which are inaccessible to the child. Paradoxically, the absence of the look also points to its significance. When the knight, whose face is “entirely concealed by his vizor”, comes to Manfred (58) he seems to embody the concealment of the source of any look or gaze whatsoever. Such potentiality, or ocular obliteration, seems disconcerting to Manfred, especially given the fact that the accompanying guests also remain silent and answer only with (mute) signs such as raising their vizors “sufficiently to feed themselves” (59).

Economy of the Gothic Gaze

The subconscious paternal power at play in the manifestations that Manfred sees is, symptomatically for Gothic fiction, one of the ways in which the sight of certain things, together with supernatural occurrences, lend themselves to a reading from a psychoanalytical perspective. First of all, the power of sight seems to be so great that it overpowers other faculties, such as speech. When Manfred notices “something that appeared to him a mounting of sable plumes” the text informs us that he gazed without believing his sight; “but what a sight for a father’s eyes!”, “The horror of this spectacle” [...] took away the prince’s speech (18). Overlapping familial relations, the gaze of an object, following Jacques Lacan, functions as a distortion in an individual’s field of vision or perception where the gaze, as in the passage below, is also disquieting in the auditory dimension:

[Isabella] shrieked and started from him. Manfred rose to pursue her, when the moon, which was now up, and gleamed in at the opposite casement, presented to his sight the plumes of the fatal helmet, which rose to the height of windows, waving backwards and forwards in a tempestuous manner, and

accompanied with a hollow and rusting sound. (24)

For Lacan, the gaze “is always a play of light and opacity” (96) and is understood as a certain connection: “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze” (73). According to the psychoanalyst, an object when looked at causes disturbance in the field of vision and at the same time creates an anxiety in people that they will become the object of a look/gaze coming from a place other than the subject. The anxiety of such a gaze is thus connected with the awareness that one, as if in return, can become the object of such a gaze, the understanding of which transcends the notion of ocular perception and should not be limited to the visual plane, as it also has an auditory dimension. Lacan points out how the gaze is not only “something that concerns the organ of sight, [but] refers to the sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting, to a footstep heard in a corridor”. These sounds are heard when “the gaze surprises [one] in the function of voyeur” and disturbs, overwhelms and reduces someone to feelings of shame. “The gaze in question is certainly the presence of others as such” (Lacan 84). Significantly, it is not tantamount to a physical presence because, as Slavoj Žižek makes clear, it “involves the reversal of the relationship between subject and object”; “all that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there” (Lacan in Žižek 228). This can be noticed when “the subject is approaching some uncanny threatening object” (Žižek 228–229) and when this object seems to be returning the subject’s gaze. In the quoted scene, the sight of the supernatural object (helmet) accompanied by “a hollow and rusting sound”, seems to catch Manfred off guard and red handed when he is surrendering to his passions. His subconscious realization that he, in turn, may become an object of the gaze – in other words, lose the position of power and control – provoke unease and, although he does not verbalize it, the very helmet as an object may suggest stirrings of some remorse, especially in the context of a scene immediately following this one. The very next narrative moment acts out what might be described as a responsibility spectacle. The manifestation of a painting’s displeasure (grandfather’s portrait sighs and heaves its breast) at the sight of Manfred’s dealings may be taken as an embodiment of Lacan’s remark about the way the gaze “surprises me and reduces me to shame” (84). When the picture begins to move and leaves its panel, the main character openly qualifies this in spectral terms: “‘Do I dream? cried Manfred returning, or are the devils in league against me? Speak infernal spectre!’ – [...] the vision sighed again” (25). Later on, when Manfred voices his apprehensions about the images we are told that he “recollected the apparition of the portrait” and asks “[w]ere all the pictures in their places?” “We did not think of looking behind them” (32). They say it was not the ghost, but a giant. Thus the problem with keeping the past in its proper place of abode materializes itself in gigantic proportions.

Although the psychoanalytical interpretation of such supernatural occurrences seems to be upheld in the story and reinforced, for example, by a reference to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (73), what seems significant is that such elements may simply suggest the importance of the visual within the spectral. Just as the Shakespearian reference emphasizes the notion of sight, images and the faculty of seeing do not constitute mere premonitions of a future narrative resolution but, at a most basic level, can be taken to illustrate an unease associated with representation. In other words, even though a Lacanian reading may imply that the supernatural occurrences in the text could be taken for manifestations of the unconscious reacting against tampering with traditional laws,

it simultaneously suggests that the entanglement of such objects and situations in the scopic economy at the same time complicates such a reading.

Seeing the Spectres

The spectres haunting Walpole's narrative are certainly of a visual nature. Frequently they function as visions that exert a powerful impression on the characters or represent the very power of the visual, problematising the mutual connection between the supernatural and the spectral, which, in turn, disrupts the present as an intrusion from the past. In *The Castle of Otranto*, the visual presence of an apparition is suggested, for example, by Hippolita, who is described as generally sceptical towards the supernatural, and "who no more than Manfred doubted the reality of the vision, yet affected to treat it as delirium of the servant" (34). In this passage she qualifies everything as a vision and a fable "and no doubt an impression made by fear". On the other hand, despite the protagonist's primary identification with the power of the visual, it is not only limited to the figure of Manfred. Characteristically for the story's often quick pacing, near the closure of the narrative, when Alfonso's background is recounted and Jerome speaks about Alfonso's spouse and her testimony, we are forced to acknowledge the power of a visual presence: "'What could a friendless, helpless woman do? Would her testimony avail?--yet, my lord, I have an authentic writing--' 'It needs not,' said Manfred; 'the horrors of these days, the vision we have but now seen, all corroborate thy evidence beyond a thousand parchments'" (100). Significantly, the ultimate power of the vision which comes from the past and reorders the present is a spectral power which seems to rely on the visual element. In other words, it is not so much about the importance of a visible object (after all a written document can also be experienced visually), but more about a presence whose nature is visible.

Such an understanding of spectrality – as a disruption from the past that haunts the present – follows Jacques Derrida's hauntology and highlights the importance of the visual within the spectral. Writing about these topics and Gothic fiction, Julian Wolfreys identifies that:

[o]ur experience of reading relies on a blurring, which is also a suspension, of categories such as the real or the imaginary. Textuality brings back to us a supplement that has no origin, in the form of haunting figures – textual figures – which we misrecognize as *images* of "real" people, their actions, and the contexts in which the events and lives to which we are witness take place. We "believe" in the characters, assume their reality, without taking into account the extent to which those figures or characters are, themselves, textual projections, *apparitions* if you will, images or phantasms belonging to the phantasmatic dimension of fabulation. (xiii, my emphasis)

If for Walpole the "mortal agents" of modern romance are made to "think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary circumstances" (Walpole in Botting 20), Wolfreys draws attention to the fact that "images of 'real'" people are incorporated by constituting textuality as such. Notions such as textuality and haunting become associated with images and the visual, and both are included in and contribute to the instability and blurring provoked by spectrality. As textual figures are based on a misrecognition which the readers are witness to, and since the notion of events unfolding before our eyes is

further reinforced by the mentioning of an apparition – not only a cognate of an appearance but also of a presence which can be seen – the ocular economy and references to the faculty of sight seem thus to permeate the spectral. At the same time, however, we should be careful about making generalizations because “[t]he spectral or uncanny effect is not simply a matter of seeing a ghost” (Wolfreys 6). Instead this should be seen as a reordering of the familiarity, which, at its core, is related to the problematization of representation – “The efficacy of haunting is in its resistance to being represented whole or undifferentiated, or being ‘seen’ as itself rather than being uncannily intimated”. If “[t]o ‘see’ something is, however precariously, to initiate a process of familiarization” than “spectral persists in its disturbance” (Wolfreys 6).

Such a disturbance is clearly noticeable in *The Castle of Otranto* where haunting is performed on several layers. Firstly, it illustrates haunting of a dwelling place, which is coupled with Manfred’s identity and the rightful ownership of the castle, and secondly, in its spectral literary influence, with many subsequent Gothic texts replicating the founder of the genre. Precisely this “sense of incipient destruction of the physical environment” as a strong trait of the Gothic, is pointed out by Alexandra Warwick, who notices that “from the castle of Otranto through to the house of Usher [...] the connection between the built environment and the identity of its occupants is common; Manfred is Otranto [...]” (79). Inhabiting places and spaces can thus be seen as referring to our sense of identity, which the spectre displaces. In Walpole’s new romance, it is also connected to the notion of haunting a home or, in a broader sense, architectural spaces. A domestic setting, as Wolfreys observes, indicates the utmost familiar space and can thus further be read as an uncanny or *unfamiliar* disruption to the sense of selfhood because in it the spectre and dwelling as “otherness both exceeds and serves in the determination of the identity of place” (7). Interestingly, these aspects are also associated with the classic Gothic theme that borders on the uncanny – that of the double. Warwick’s mention of Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher” is thus more than accidental, as the theme of the doppelgänger is already at play in Walpole’s text, similar to the way it would later function in terms of characterization and setting in the American classic. It is Bianca who reminds Matilda about the uncanny likeness between an image and a living character:

[...] in short, madam, a young hero resembling the picture of the good Alfonso in the gallery, which you sit and gaze at for hours together. “Do not speak lightly of that picture,” interrupted Matilda sighing; “I know the adoration with which I look at that picture is uncommon--but I am not in love with a coloured panel. (37)

Despite an awareness of the deceiving nature of the pictures, Matilda acknowledges the difference between art and reality. The close resemblance between a character and the painting is a clear exploration of the theme of the double, which can be seen as subverting the notion of return, repetition and the very nature of doubling itself. More importantly, according to Wolfreys (16–18), who aptly identifies the texts by Freud (“The Uncanny”) and Heidegger (“The Structure of Uncanniness”) as influential in terms of theorizing the “strangely familiar”, the visual occupies a significant position within the unfamiliar. Already in the Freudian classic we can observe the overlapping of images and the uncanny: “that strange sensation we encounter is itself apparitional, and Freud’s diagnosis can in no way control its haunting or spectral position” (Wolfreys 16). This seems to be another instance where the image or visual quality of an apparition might be taken as one contributing to the understanding of the spectral and the interruptions it provokes.

The disturbance within the visible is also associated with looking and indicates a certain insistence on the limits of representation. Haunted by going beyond the limits of visual perception, together with the links with sight and manifestations of the supernatural, which are of a visual nature, scopic activity indicates representational destabilization. Throughout the text the narrator often explicitly states the limits to the capacity of verbal representation – “words cannot paint the astonishment of Isabella” (23) and when Jerome recognizes his son in Theodore we are informed that “The passions that ensued must be conceived; they cannot be painted (51). Such linguistic instability involving Walpole’s romance fits well into the notion of destabilization which can be recognized as “depthlessness” associated, after Foucault, with the advent of modernity (Botting 19) or chiefly as a key element of the Gothic narrative mode (Wolfreys). Given the characterization of such literature as “always already excessive, grotesque, overflowing its own boundaries and limits” (Wolfreys 8), a fair share of the fundamental wavering of the linguistic power of expression and representation in *The Castle of Otranto* is connected with disturbance of a visual nature. Thus the effectiveness of the thrill the Gothic provides lies not only in being scared but in the “blurring of the vision and the anatomization of experience” (Wolfreys 11), which indicates the subversion of representation.

One way in which all of the abovementioned aspects of Walpole’s novel could be read is Michel Foucault’s archaeology of ideas concerning representation. While tracing the discursive shift with respect to the notions of language and literature in the eighteenth century, Foucault identified changes to “literature” at the threshold of the modern age: “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the peculiar existence and ancient solidity of language as a thing inscribed in the fabric of the world were dissolved in the functioning of representation, all language had value only as discourse” (48). The French philosopher locates the notion of representation in Gothic within “the writings of Sade and tales of terror as indices of the new form of literature which ‘only speaks as a supplement starting from a displacement’ and, shedding ‘all ontological weight’, leading to language, reproducing itself in the ‘virtual space of the mirror and the double, and the wavelike succession of words to infinity enact their roles” (Foucault in Botting, 19). The space of language is “a virtual space” and “[G]othic romances are formed as virtual, other spaces” – ones in which Walpole himself sees an occasion for “the modern romance” to try and “make its ‘mortal agents’ think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary situations” (qtd in Botting 20). Correspondingly, Foucault’s famous opening of *The Order of Things* concerning the discussion of the gaze in Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* brings him to considerations on the relation of language to representation:

It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but defined by the sequential elements of syntax. (10)

The awareness of what one is observing is a significant notion, especially given the fact that it parallels Foucault’s ideas but also follows what Wolfreys terms as a disturbance “through indirection” (14). Seen as places where the silences that are generated “speak of the unspeakable”; such gaps signal an absence or the unrepresentability that is located at the heart of the spectral and at the very limit of meaning. A similar pro-

cess can be seen in the case of the uncanny – the category which is grounded in the visible and which can be viewed as evoking the form of “an image without image” (Wolfreys 15). Following Nicholas Royle on the uncanny, Wolfreys points out that Freud’s reading of that strange and unfamiliar sensation we encounter is itself apparitional and Freud’s discourse can in no way control its haunting or spectral condition” (16). This is perhaps what accounts, at least in part, for the story’s repeated investment in matters associated with the faculty of sight.

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Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* is a text where the notion of looking is at play in various places and the book seems to be constantly haunted by going beyond the limits of mere visual perception. While partly stemming from the author’s awareness of the gaze as a political and social force, looking is also used to indicate power relationships. These, through the psychoanalytical consideration of the notion of the gaze and the uncanny as discursive practices relying on images and apparitions, open the narrative to a much larger question of representation – one that the narrative struggles to render at various moments where the ambiguity connected with looking is noticeable. From this perspective, the founding text of the Gothic literary mode, registering awareness of the limits of representation and its disturbances, may be taken to illustrate that changes to language and discursive propensity for representation were effectively to take place after the arrival of modernity.

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