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**STRANGER THAN FICTION: THOMAS LIGOTTI'S
DECEPTIVE REALITIES IN HORROR FICTION**

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Resumo: Thomas Ligotti é hoje considerado um escritor de culto no âmbito da chamada *weird fiction*, sendo o horror o seu terreno literário privilegiado. Levando o Gótico e a escuridão cósmica de H.P. Lovecraft mais longe, os temas de Ligotti envolvem quase sempre a desconstrução da realidade tal como a conhecemos. Esta é-nos apresentada como uma espécie de máscara aceitável que cobre a verdadeira realidade que, segundo as premissas da ficção do autor, se assume como algo de sinistro e hostil face ao ser humano. Nas narrativas de Thomas Ligotti, a realidade das personagens é desestabilizada e as suas crenças e valores desmoronam-se, dando lugar à dúvida, ao caos,

ao desespero e ao pânico. Neste universo pautado pelo horror, as personagens experimentam uma sensação de estranhamento oriunda de uma escuridão cósmica, habitada por criaturas maléficas, cuja função primordial consiste em desacreditar o ser humano, fragilizar as suas crenças e estilhaar a sua percepção de identidade. Este confronto entre o humano e o Outro modifica completamente a natureza das personagens, trazendo no seu encaço consequências irremediáveis. De uma forma implacável, Ligotti introduz o Real Lacaniano no universo do simbólico, ameaçando aniquilar a sua coerência e fazendo vacilar as suas estruturas, deixando as personagens perdidas num mundo que já não sentem como seu, à beira de um precipício que se projeta sobre uma vastidão cósmica onde o Inferno tem o seu berço.

Palavras-chave: horror; realidade alternativa; estranhamento; Real/Simbólico; escuridão cósmica.

Abstract: Thomas Ligotti is nowadays acclaimed as a cult writer in the field of weird fiction, where horror stands as his privileged creative ground. Taking Lovecraft's Gothic and cosmic darkness to great lengths, his narratives almost always involve the deconstruction of reality as we know it. This reality emerges as a sort of mask that covers the true reality, which is sinister and hostile towards the human being. In Ligotti's short stories, the reality of the characters is thus destabilized and the truths and beliefs held by those same characters are shattered, giving way to reactions of doubt, chaos, despair and panic. In this way, characters become face to face with a newborn reality, a reality with more sinister and ominous contours. In this universe, governed by horror, the characters experience the uncanny that resides amidst a cosmic darkness inhabited by malevolent creatures, monsters, whose primordial assignment consists of instilling uncertainty among individuals, thus making their beliefs vulnerable and likewise shattering their

sense of selves. This terrible encounter changes the nature of the characters and will ultimately result in irreparable consequences. In a relentless fashion, Ligotti invites the concept of the Real, put forward by Jacques Lacan, so as to shake and absorb the Symbolic structures with which the characters are familiarized with, thus plunging them into a reality filled with cosmic darkness, where hell has its cradle.

Keywords: Horror; alternative reality; uncanny; Real/Symbolic; cosmic darkness.

If things are not what they seem - and we are forever reminded that this is the case - then it must also be observed that enough of us ignore this truth to keep the world from collapsing.
(LIGOTTI, 2015, p.357)

The fertile and dark imagination of Thomas Ligotti and his incursions in dystopian narratives where gothic tradition and horror meet the weird, herald him the status of a cult writer. Following in the footsteps of H.P. Lovecraft, this North American writer has stretched the idea of the Cosmos-at-Large to the limits, immersing the characters in the darkness of an alternative reality that will haunt their minds and dreams for eternity. In almost every short story, Ligotti deconstructs human consciousness and reason, rendering these unique human attributes secondary, thus offering the characters a glimpse of the true reality, the one that lodges the undefinable and fearful darkness, the scarred face that lurks behind the mask of these characters' daily lives. As John Edward Martin observe in *Fear and Learning: Essays on the Pedagogy of Horror*, horror is the terrain in which narratives that are prone to destabilize the reality we know normally thrive:

Horror makes aware that 'reality' may not be what we think it is, that its grounding may lie beyond our limited perceptual or cognitive abilities, or that its rules may not be what either our rational scientific theories or our religious and philosophical doctrines have taught us to accept as truth. (MARTIN, 2013, p.225)

"The Frolic" and "Dream of a Maninkin" are two weird tales that date back to 1982, and form part of *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (1986), an anthology of horror stories where this assault on the premises of the reality constantly takes place, thus bringing the uncanny to surface in a relentless fashion.

"The Frolic" is one of those narratives in which the suspense builds on progressively, becoming almost unbearable until the end of the story. It is set in the tranquility of the domestic space, in Dr. Munck's home, a psychiatrist, who works in a nearby prison. The narrative opens with an idyllic domestic setting: "In a beautiful home in a beautiful part of town...Dr. Munck examined the evening newspaper while his young wife lounged on the sofa nearby, lazily flipping through...a fashion magazine. Their daughter Norleen was upstairs asleep..." (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.3). According to the description, the Munck's house appears to be located in a quiet neighbourhood, in the suburbs, "a locale that seemed light-years from the nearest metropolis" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.3).

Once at home, the psychiatrist tells his wife that he has been assigned to treat one of the worst serial killers in that prison, a mysterious man without name. He describes the unnamed man as someone attractive but inherently malevolent and manipulative; he claims that he is "the standout example of the pernicious monstrosity

of that place. A real beauty, that guy. One for the books. Absolute madness paired with a sharp cunning” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.6). The psychiatrist pursues his description, highlighting the murderer’s mysterious origins: “According to him, though, he has plenty of names, no less than a thousand, none of which he’s condescended to speak in anyone’s presence” (2015, p.6). Given the difficulties in finding the man’s identification or any previous records, David explains, “...he was convicted as John Doe, and since then, everyone refers to him as that. They’ve yet to uncover any official documentation on him” (2015, p.4). He then adds, “It’s as if he’s just dropped out of nowhere. His fingerprints don’t match any record or previous conviction. He was picked up in a stolen car parked in front of an elementary school” (2015, p.6). However, the psychopath’s version of the story is a bit different from his doctor, as he claims, he is spending some holidays at the prison centre. The murderer tells David that, “he was fully aware of his pursuers and expected, even wanted, to be caught, convicted, and put in a penitentiary” (2015, p.6). Pursuing the account concerning John Doe’s mysterious origins, David Munck calls the attention of his wife Leslie to the poetical nature of the man’s discourse, infused with “different voices, accents, and degrees of articulacy” (2015, p.9). The doctor tells Leslie that

there’s actually quite a poetic geography to his interior dreamland as he describes it. He talked about a place that sounded like a cosmos of crooked houses and littered alleys, a slum among the stars. [...] a phantasmagoric mingling of heaven and hell. (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.13)

When his wife asks if her husband has dared approach the subject related to the violent crimes John Doe has committed, he explains,

Doe denies that there was anything pedestrian about his mayhem. He says he just made the evidence look that way for all the dull masses, that what he really means by 'frolicking' is a type of activity quite different from, even opposed to the crimes for which he was convicted. (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.13)

Within the psychopath's semantic code, the verb 'frolicking' assumes a sinister meaning, since he (ironically, maybe) envisions extreme violence as something associated with playfulness. In this light, both his intentions and his language are rendered cryptic and not easy to decode by the rational psychiatrist. Undeniably, there is an uncanny aura that envelops both John Doe's discourse and personality. In his seminal essay *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud extends the concept of the uncanny to individuals, claiming, "We can also call a living person uncanny...when we credit him with evil intent. But this alone is not enough: it must be added that this intent to harm us is realized with the help of special powers" (FREUD, 2003, p.149).

In truth, Dr. Munck seems carried away by Doe's eloquence and apart from the professional interest that he may feel, he seems to be almost hypnotized by the psychopath's discourse, as he confesses to his wife: "Actually, it wasn't that much of an ordeal, strange to say. The conversation we had could be even called stimulating in a clinical sense. He described his 'frolicking' in a highly imaginable manner that was rather engrossing." (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.12). Surprisingly, the doctor describes the dangerous man almost in magical undertones. He concludes with some irony that the man resembles "a...demi-demon from a Neverland where dizzy chaos is the norm" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.9).

Later on, at some point in their ongoing conversation, Leslie mentions that she went shopping and bought a gift in a shop that sells artifacts built by prisoners. Then, she shows the present to David, who stares at the object, in shock.

Suddenly, the psychiatrist realizes that he had witnessed John Doe sculpting the head of a boy, modelled upon his last victim. Ominously, the prisoner had made sure that the *objetd'art* would fall into the hands of Leslie. Considering this, the macabre sculpture can be said to stand for a ciphered message that David, blinded by his over-rationality, is unable to grasp immediately. In truth, the blue boy made of clay evokes the image of a child's dead bruised body, victim of asphyxia.

In the middle of their conversation, the possibility of David presenting his resignation arises, a fact that makes Leslie dream a life far away from Nolgate:

Now, there was reason to celebrate, she thought. [...] Now everything would be as it had been before; they could leave the prison town and move back home. In fact, they could move everywhere they liked, maybe take a long vacation first, treat Norleen to some sunny place. This quiet was no longer an indication of soundless stagnancy, but a delicious prelude to the promising days to come. (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.10)

Surreptitiously, an aura of claustrophobia permeates the whole domestic narrative: Leslie feels imprisoned in that small town and her husband also feels somehow hypnotized and encircled by John Doe's alluring words. It is in this sense that the city where the prison is located can likewise be considered a prison for its dwellers. The

name Nolgate is itself reminiscent of the expression “no-gate”, which seem to imply that the couple and their daughter are sort of trapped in that suburban neighbourhood in a sort of forsaken town.¹

Ligotti plays here with the elusive safety inherent in the suburban landscape, where dwellers think themselves safe from any potential dangers. In “The Frolic”, the author introduces horror into the domestic scene by means of the presence of a psychopath who impersonates an evil entity. Concerning domestic horror, Gina Wisker, in *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* stresses that,

domestic horror often uses adjectives suggesting invasion of those spaces, a cracking of the secure fabric to reveal gaps, fissures and leakages, indicating contradictions and threats to what then appears a kind of culpably naive investment in domestic and personal security. (WISKER, 2005, p.151)

The Virgin Suicides (1993) by Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Lovely Bones* (2002) by Alice Sebold and *Little Children* (2004) by Tom Perrotta, constitute some of the novels that deconstruct the belief that the suburbs are indeed safe havens for families, devoid of any threats or dangers. Threading a similar path, “The Frolic” starts with a quite normal domestic scene and ends up with the deconstruction of the domestic bliss by an act of violence perpetrated by a monster in a human shape. John Edward Martin associates the surfacing of the monstrous with the collapse of the symbolic, the law and any existing frontiers. The author highlights:

When those illusions of reality begin to crumble in the face of some undeniable physical monstrosity, then we see that it isn’t the monster that is unreal

1 Interestingly, the term Nolgate is also reminiscent of the Newgate prison, located in London.

- it is *we* and our world of symbols, laws and boundaries that lack substance. The monster is *not* a symbol, and it knows no laws or boundaries; it cannot be banished by fleeing reality because the monster is the real. (MARTIN, 2013, p.225)

Therefore, by denying the possibility of the intrusion of the Lacanian Real upon the Symbolic, David fails to prevent a tragedy. In Lacan's repertoire, the Real is intimately linked to the "the impossible, the unthinkable" (Kolozova, 2014, p.91) and, as such, it works as a threat to the Symbolic Order. The Real is what resists to meaning and therefore is blocked by the Symbolic. It is the site of the unrepresentable horror. Thus, the encroachment of something that belongs to the Real upon the domestic life of the Muncks destabilizes the instituted order and, as a result, an uncanny atmosphere starts to infiltrate their home. Dr. Munck, as a representative of the Symbolic system, fails to grasp the full length of the threat posed by the nonsensical universe weaved by the deranged mind of the serial killer. Within this framework, we can consider the psychiatrist's encounter with John Doe as an encounter with an emanation of the Real that opens a reign of chaos capable of breaching the frontiers of the Symbolic, thereby causing irreparable havoc and pain.² In other words, Dr. Munck fails to "translate" the clues given to him by the prisoner into a language compatible with the Symbolic system.

2 Jacques Lacan establishes a crucial tie between the Real and the emergence of trauma. As Lois Tyson explains, "The trauma of the Real gives us only the realization that the reality hidden beneath the ideologies society has created is a reality beyond our capacity to know and explain and therefore beyond our capacity of control." (TYSON, 2006, p.32) Given the eerie circumstances that surround "The Frolick", it is legitimate to conclude that Dr. Munck's *rendezvous* with the Real has resulted in a genuinely traumatizing experience.

Although he perceives John Doe fundamentally as an unreliable narrator, he unconsciously misses the insinuations between the lines of Doe's whimsical discourse. Indeed, he promptly dismisses the apparent nonsensical nature of the psychopath's discourse as the product of fantasy.

Munck seems to disavowal his patient's real identity, hence dismissing the prisoner's "disabled discourse", as a figment of a fertile imagination.³ When David's wife, Leslie, asks him if he feels alright, he answers mysteriously: "I'm not sure exactly. It's as if I know something and I don't know it at the same time" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.17). This hesitation stresses David's solid connection to the Symbolic Order, and to the structures that David Punter terms the law (PUNTER, 1998, p. 44). The law incorporates a set of rules and principles that "will contain the world of order" (PUNTER, 1998, p.44), which means that it works as a kind of guardian against threats that might put the Symbolic into question. In this sense, the law is deeply linked to a notion of security and safety. As David Punter puts it:

the law is the imposition of certainty, the rhetorical summation of the absence or the loss, of doubt; which mean in turn that the law is a purified abstract whole, perfected according to the process of taboo which can find no purchase in the doubled,

3 As a matter of fact, David's mind is so entrenched in the conventions of the Symbolic Order, that he unconsciously ignores some of John Doe's insinuations. When he guesses that he has a daughter, David thinks that this is an information that the prisoner might have obtained by talking to the staff at the prison. The doctor also dismisses the fact that John Doe has said that he could leave whenever he wanted; he was just spending some time at Nolgate because he wanted to. Also, when Leslie questions David about the security of the prison, and the possibility of the psychopath evading it, he confidently replies, "Prisoners like that don't escape in the normal course of things. They just bounce off the walls, but not over them." (LIGOTTI, 2015, p. 8)

creviced, folded world of the real; by which it in turn is destined to be haunted. (PUNTER, 1998, p.2-3)

Lacan's Symbolic Order ties in with Peter L. Berger's concept of the "the sacred canopy" (BERGER, 1967, p.23), the order of meaning, likewise designated by nomic world. Deprived of the protection of what Peter Berger terms the sacred canopy, the human being

is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror. To be in a society is to be 'sane' precisely in the sense of being shielded from the ultimate insanity of such anomic terror. Anomy is unbearable to the point where the individual may seek death in preference to it. Conversely existence within a nomic world may be sought at the cost of all sorts of sacrifice and suffering - and even at the cost of life itself, if the individual believes that this ultimate sacrifice has nomic significance. (BERGER, 1967, p.23)

In "The Frolic", the emergence of the monster throws the "sacred canopy" into a chaotic state of anomy, as it brings down the moral and rational premises in which the Munck's reality is anchored.

According to Rosemary Jackson, this destabilization of the safe and sacred familiar environment occurs due to the incursion of the uncanny into familiar terrain:

Fantastic literature transforms the 'real' through this kind of discovery. It does not introduce novelty so much as uncover all that needs to remain hidden if the world is to be comfortably 'known'. Its uncanny effects reveal an obscure, occluded region which lies behind the homely (*heimlich*)... (JACKSON, 1981, p.38)

So, in the end, Dr. Munck himself becomes a victim of John's 'frolicking'. He is played as if he were a puppet by a deceitful and experienced mind who has manipulated him into believing that he and his family were safe. The doctor is forced to accept that John Doe's discourse was not derived from psychosis (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.11) or multiple personality disorder (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.9), hence not the product of a previously diagnosed mental illness. John Doe's discourse in which fantasy is interweaved with pure evil encapsulates a menace to the integrity of the symbolic order. Logically, Munck and his wife promptly assume that it was in fact the clever prisoner that invaded their home and took away their daughter. Other premise that the couple must come to terms with is the fact that John Doe might be a monster, a demon capable of travelling inter-dimensionally.

Susan Beth Miller, in *Emotions of Menace and Enchantment: Disgust, Horror, Awe and Fascination*, also notes that the insurgence of horror evokes the destruction of a certain order, the crisis of the so-called Law, and she stresses that this destructiveness is accompanied by a feeling of awe which, in turn, appears linked to the surge of a new reality. The author observes: "Horror is order exploded, and awe, more often, our gasp when faced with a remarkable construction. But frequently the two abide together because destroying an old organization is birthing one that is new" (MILLER, 2018, p.118).

While in the room, the couple feel the cold of a draft and climb upstairs, where they see that Norleen's bed is empty. Ligotti crafts a setting where indeed horror explodes, giving rise to an uncanny fear that leaves the couple in awe: "He turned on the light. The child

was gone. Across the room the window was wide open, the white translucent curtains flapping... Alone in the bed was the stuffed animal, torn, its soft entrails littering the mattress” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.17).

Inside Bambi’s entrails lies a note addressed to David, informing: “We leave this behind in your capable hands,⁴ for in the black-foaming gutters and black alley of paradise, ... in starless cities of insanity, and in their slums...my awestruck little deer and I have gone frolicking” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.17).

Sinisterly, the short story reaches the end when domestic bliss is shattered by a demonic laughter that confirms that David Munck has fallen prey to a trick orchestrated from the depths of hell, as the last paragraph of the narrative denotes: “Then, the beautiful house was no longer quiet, for there rang a bright freezing scream of laughter, the perfect sound to accompany a passing anecdote of some obscured hell” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.18).

The family surname, Munck, suggestively evokes the painter Edvard Munch, author of the so well-known painting “The Scream” (1863). In the painting, a human figure seems to be screaming in terror and is portrayed against a distorted background. In a similar vein, the reality of Dr. Munck seems to fall apart when he is forced to admit that there are unknown forces, other entities out there that may destabilize the blissful reality of his family. The impossible irrupts through his regular universe, leaving in him appalled and in panic, thus mimicking the figure in the painting. All his beliefs are put at stake, shaken by a pervasive power that stealthily invades his home and kidnap his daughter Noreen.

4 The expression “capable hands” is here employed sarcastically by the psychopath who appears to joke with David Munck’s deeply entrenched certainties and his extreme attachment to the Symbolic Order.

Through this disturbing domestic horror short story, Ligotti revisits the idea that evil cannot be imprisoned. It's something pervasive, like a ghost. It slips through the walls and can permeate and infect even the most quiet and blissful place and steal the innocence of children and adults alike. The handsome psychopath, whose figure was liable to attract children quite easily, constitutes a vivid embodiment of evil. Actually, since their first encounter, Doe has been completely sincere with David. He informs him that he has many names and he is able to speak many languages, implying that he might be Lucifer himself. Ironically, and despite the havoc he wrecks upon the Muck family, he can also be said to truly operate as a character that brings light and knowledge to David. He successfully manages to teach him to doubt himself and his beliefs and compels him to put into question the foundations that support the reality that surrounds him, the premises of his own existence.

The gutted stuffed Bambi Doe leaves on Norleen's bed is a symbol for the loss of innocence and signals the victory of evil. The dismembered stuffed toy, also hints at the "fun" and "innocent" way he envisions his actions, his 'frolicking'. In this way, the toy resonates the semantics of John Doe's discourse, so different from the Muncks's; in reality, it not only constitutes a macabre *memento mori* for the family who got deprived of their daughter, but it is also the signature of the "frolic" intentionally left behind by the indomitable entity that trespasses the boundaries of their domestic quietness, breaking it with a horrid laugh and leaving an impression of impending violence.

The other short story that will be the focus of analysis is "Dream of a Manikin". It revolves around a woman named Amy Locher that

pays a visit to a psychiatrist, referred to him by a female colleague of his. During the appointment, Amy complains that she is having recurrent disturbing nightmares that prevent her from resting and that, ultimately, these leave her pondering upon the true nature of these dreams that she insists feel like reality itself. Although Miss Locher works at a financial firm as a loan processor, she claims that in these 'real' dreams that haunt her at night the nature of her profession is quite different: her workplace is transfigured into a store where she is a mannequin dresser.

Amy reports that, while she is dreaming, her bedroom assumes the shape of a theatre. She likewise adds that "...one of the walls of this lofty room is missing, and beyond this great gap is a view of star-clustered blackness" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.46).

While in the room, Miss Locher claims to feel the weight of a heavy silence. She states, "All is silent. [...] This silence somehow 'electrifies' the dream with strange currents of force betokening an unseen demonic presence" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.47). As in "The Frolic", the strong silence is an artifice that precludes some impending tragic event and appears associated with the presence of alien demonic entities.

Driven by an inquisitive mind, Miss Locher decides to inspect the odd room in order to unravel the source of her terror. During her search, she finds herself among people who appear to be in several different stages of becoming a doll. She observes,

that all around the room...are people dressed as dolls. Their forms are collapsed, their mouths open wide. They do not look as if they are still alive. Some of them have actually become dolls,

their flesh no longer supple and their eyes having lost the appearance of teary moistness. (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.48)

These mannequins that inhabit her dreams instigate reactions of repulsion: “Their unclothed bodies repel her touch because... they are neither warm nor cold, as only artificial bodies can be” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.46). At a given moment in her dream, she realizes that she is unable to close her mouth; she feels paralyzed and starts to sense “a presence in filthy rags” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.48). right behind her. As soon as she turns around, ready to face up to the creature, she wakes up and the dream is over.

One of the most original traits of this dark tale is that it is infused with vibrant cinematic undertones, as Ligotti bakes this creative gothic recipe, resorting to ingredients such as the the horror and the weird and ultimately spicing it up with features of the *film noir*, a fact that contributes to intensify the mystery behind Amy’s account. In fact, at some point, the psychiatrist, can be said to behave as the typical detective of a *film noir*. He starts thinking that Miss Locher may have been a victim of dream implant, carried out by his female colleague. Blindfolded by this conviction, he decides to hypnotize Amy Locker, intending to unveil the truth. However, after that session, the young woman vanishes, and the psychiatrist decides that he must try to find her. Obsessed with the intricate nature of the challenge posed by Miss Locher’s nightmares, he drives to the address she has given him with the purpose of meeting with her.

When he arrives there, he realizes that he has been given another piece of the puzzle, since the address does not belong to a house nor a flat, but refers instead to a clothes shop where a mannequin

that bears strong resemblance with Amy Locker looks at himself from a window. He then addresses the mysterious colleague of his, telling her, "... I saw what you wanted me to see in the window of Mlle Fashions. The thing was even dressed in the same plaid-skirted outfit that I recall Miss Locher was wearing..." (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.55).

After the uncanny encounter, the image that follows strongly recalls the staging of a scene typical of the *film noir*: that of the psychiatrist inside a phone booth, under a heavy rain, calling back to his office, under the light of the neon letters that form Mademoiselle Shop's signpost. As Ian Brooks recalls in *Film Noir: A Critical Introduction*: "noir's visual style is linked to an iconography featuring dark cityscapes and rain-soaked streets at night, characteristics suggesting the influence of German Expressionism"⁵ (BROOKS, 2017, p.4).

Interestingly, the nameless psychiatrist and narrator of this unsettling story seems to hold ambiguous thoughts towards this mysterious female colleague that referred Miss Locher to his care. Throughout the narrative, Ligotti drops some clues that imply the existence of a romantic involvement between the protagonist and the female doctor that the reader has never had the pleasure to meet.⁶ The only glimpse that is given regarding her enigmatic character is conveyed by the text -the story itself- the doctor writes always with her person in mind.

5 Notably, Ligotti's "Dream of a Manikin" bears traits of German Expressionism, since the story employs the mannequin as a simulacrum for the individual, therefore exploring its uncanny nature as a source of fear.

6 The expressions the narrator uses when he addresses her - "my darling" (LIGOTTI, 2015, 44), "sweetheart" (LIGOTTI, 2015, 49) or "my love" (LIGOTTI, 2015, 51) - foreshadow the existence of a love affair between them. Interestingly, the way they are employed also suggest a patronizing attitude.

Read in the light of the *film noir*, the doctor in “Dream of a Manikin,” can be said to play the character of the detective who desperately tries to solve the enigma of Amy Locher, while the unnamed lady plays the part of the *femme fatale*, always artfully hidden behind the stage.

Paradoxically, despite the strong feelings the narrator nurtures for her, he seems too keen on despising the path her professional research has taken, hence calling it an “aberrant investigation” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.51). He dismisses her work as “transcendent nonsense” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.49).and throughout the narrative he resorts to several arguments to discredit her theories that revolve around her belief in the existence of a conspiracy weaved by the universe against humans.

However, the image of the rational reality that the psychiatrist believes in gradually becomes fissured when he starts to have the same eerie dreams as Amy Locher’s. Disturbed, he narrates: “In the whitened hallway - I cannot say brightened, because it is almost as if a fluorescent powder coats everything - there are things that look like people dressed as dolls, or else dolls made up to be like people” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.52). In the nightmare, he is approached by one of the mannequins that invites him to stay with them. He then runs towards his bed still holding on to the words of the doll that sounded like a “horrible parody of the human speech” (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.57). This dream-like encounter with the talking mannequin signals once more the intrusion of the uncanny. Kohei Ogawa and Iroshi Ishiguro call this phenomenon the effect of the uncanny valley, observing that, it “implies that if an object’s appearance becomes similar to humans beyond a certain point, humans suddenly experience

a feeling of uncanniness” (OGAWA; ISHIGURO, 2016, p.336). In truth, the mannequin awakens in the tale’s protagonist the fear of becoming an object, deprived of rational thought and devoid of decision-making capabilities. It operates as a double that evokes depersonalization, absence of autonomy and ultimately death.⁷

Mark Osteen, in *Nightmare Alley: Film Noir and the American Dream*, associates *films noir* with nightmares when he states that “films noir - with their bizarre circumstances, disorientating settings, and obsession with darkness - are like ‘bad dreams’” (OSTEEN, 2013, p.19). Confirming Osteen’s premise, Ligotti’s narrative which draws on the traditional conventions of the *film noir*, can be said to literally plunge the “hero” into a nightmarish alley, a dark underworld.

At this stage of his narrative, Thomas Ligotti appropriates the trope of contagion so deeply entrenched in Gothic fiction and transforms this awakening into a new reality into a sort of viral transmission. By trying to over-analyze Miss Locher, therefore trying relentlessly to discredit the true symptoms of her ailment, the psychiatrist ultimately falls into a trap. Amy is indeed the lock that, once unlocked, will enable him to confront the dismal truth behind his reality and the nature of his true self. As aforementioned, when the narrator becomes the prey of these nightmares, his beliefs become deeply shaken as he starts to admit the possibility that the story behind Miss Locher might be true:

In Miss Locher I believe you sent me an embodiment of your deepest convictions. But suppose I start admitting uncanny things about her? [...] Suppose I allow that she was not a girl but actually a thing

7 Freud, in his theorization concerning the uncanny, identifies the double as a “harbinger of death” (FREUD, 2003, p.142).

without a self, an unreality that, in accord with your vision of existence, dreamed it was a human being and not a fabricated impersonation of our flesh? (LIGOTTI, 2015, 58)

The major clue that escapes the narrator's detectivesque intuition is that his female colleague not only has manipulated Miss Locher, but simultaneously is also manipulating him, as if she were teaching him a cosmic lesson. Ligotti introduces, with a certain irony, the entity that lurks behind these dreams: the doctor's beloved colleague, a charismatic female who has been given the role of the *femme fatale*. She is the demon-like creature responsible for having orchestrated this theatre of fear, embodying, "some divine being" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.50) involved in playing games with humanity in order "to relieve itself from...cosmic enui" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.50).

Mary Anne Doanne's point of view with regard to the role played by the *femme fatale* in the *noir* narrative ties in with the role she plays in "Dream of a Manikin", since she represents "the other side of knowledge as it is conceived under a phallogocentric logic" (DOANNE, 1991, p. 12), therefore provoking epistemological chaos in the way reality is apprehended by the protagonist. In this way, she can be said to act as a puppeteer from hell who indulges in awakening humanity to its worst nightmare.

Mirroring the events that take place in "The Frolic", the Symbolic order is replaced by the Real with its chaotic consequences, here incarnated by a cosmic darkness and a sense of doom. The title of the horror story- "Dream of a Manikin" - encloses a solipsistic nature, since individuals are having dreams about themselves in an alternative reality, while it is also implied that in this new discovered reality they

are not fully humans, they are only akin to them. If decoded, the title of the story, shows that they are Man's kin (Manikin, as the word Ligotti certainly carefully selected to use as title), a fact that undermines the belief in the individuals' originality, autonomy and consciousness.⁸

The character of the psychiatrist is again invoked by Ligotti, to reinforce the credibility of the character, aspect that makes him a convincing impersonation of the Lacanian's Symbolic realm. Cleverly, the surname "Locher" may point figuratively to the term "locker", thus turning this female character into the holder of the key that enables to unravel the mysterious secret related to the eeriness of her nightmares. In reality, the psychiatrist's colleague intentionally sends him her patient so as to show him that he is living within a lie. Sadly, the psychiatrist becomes another imprisoned paralyzed body in the confines of some room amidst cosmic darkness. His reality is nothing but a machination of strange cosmic forces; it proves nothing but fictional.

There is a picture promoting the film *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), a *film noir* directed by Orson Welles, that features Rita Hayworth, (the actress who plays the role of the *femme fatale*), at the entrance of a fun house, one of the film settings. The entrance of this fun house is littered with parts of mannequins, tied by strings, an image that strongly evokes the aesthetics deployed by both German Expressionists and by Thomas Ligotti. Interestingly, there is a signpost with the slogan "Stand up or Give up", an image that strikes a chord with the final words that the female demon addresses the narrator of "Dream of a Manikin":

8 Ligotti seems to have intentionally selected the term "Manikin" instead of "Mannequin" to appear in the title of the story.

Goodbye my foolish love. Hear me now. Sleep your singular sleep and dream of the many, the others. [...] This is what you've always wanted and this you shall have. Die into them, you simple soul, you silly dolling. Die with a nice bright gleam in your eyes. (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.59)

Jamaluddin Aziz in *Transgressing Women: Space and the Body in Contemporary Noir Thrillers*, links the *femme fatale* with a dark underworld, observing that the male protagonist is tempted by the latter into "the sleazy and entropic underworld" (AZIZ, 2012, p.91) This "alternative landscape" (AZIZ, 2012, p.91) as the author calls it becomes "a product of noir's determinism by intensifying the sense of inescapable entrapment in the underworld" (AZIZ, 2012, p.91). In this light, there is another *film noir* that talks back to Ligotti's short story is *Nightmare Valley* (1947), directed by Edmund Goulding, featuring Helen Walker in the role of a psychiatrist who is a duplicitous *femme fatale* conveniently named Lilith Ritter.

In effect, the protagonist of Ligotti's story is driven by the psychiatrist *femme fatale* towards an abysmal cosmic underworld where he will meet a bleak destiny, becoming "a mere kin of Man", a simulacrum of a human devoid of his identity. Scott McCracken, in *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*, argues that the horror story offers itself as the privileged literary terrain where an individual's identity can be disenfranchised: "Horror stories... take apart a secure sense of self. They explore the fragile border between identity and non-identity and thus confront the frightening possibility of the self's destruction" (MCCRACKEN, 1998, p.129). McCracken's theory ties in with Nicholas Royle assertion that the occurrence of the uncanny always entails an identity crisis. The author notes, "The uncanny

involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly, one's sense of oneself...seems strangely questionable" (ROYLE, 2003, p.1).

Overall, Ligotti can be said to operate an interesting twist upon the essence of the Gothic genre, because for the narrators of his fiction, Enlightenment is truly found among the darkness; it is in there that evil and truth are hidden. Then, the Enlightened are those who come across the eerie experiences that challenge normal human daily routine. In the author's narratives, to become acquainted with horror, pain, suffering and evil is to awaken to the reality that hides behind a matrix that was weaved to deceive the human being. When characters claw the paper from the fictitious walls, they become enlightened because they encounter the mechanisms of a cosmic conspiracy that completely erases the idea of autonomy or free will.

Mark Jancovich in *Horror* claims that generally, horror narratives follow three stages:

The structures of horror narratives are said to set out from a situation or order, move to a period of disorder caused by the eruption of horrifying or monstrous forces, and finally reach a point of closure and completion in which disruptive, monstrous elements are contained or destroyed and the original order is re-established. (JANCOVICH, 1992, p.9)

Ligotti skillfully inverts this postulate, since the process of closure in his horror narratives does not bring redemption to the so-called protagonist or hero. Characters remain forever touched by a reality that they cannot "unsee." To some degree, Ligotti's

fiction can be said to share identical premises to the ones that sustain the blockbuster *The Matrix* (1999), because in the film, the hero, Neo, also finds out that the surrounding reality is only a fake montage, a sort of amusement park, where the humans think they live their normal lives, when, in truth, they are being used as batteries to feed machines. This matrix therefore configures the fabricated reality where the humans reside. Like Ligotti's concept of reality, it consists of a lie, a fake construct to deceive humans, a decoy, a facade covering for something much more sinister. As a result, this knowledge will totally revolutionize the way Neo thinks henceforth.

In "Dream of a Manikin", the narrator seems to grasp at the end that the human being's life as he believes in is a lie. He is shown that probably Amy Locher is not a patient suffering from a kind of sleep disorder. Somehow, she was shown the breach in the conventional reality; her disquieting dreams revealed to her the sad truth that humans are just mannequins being manipulated by a strange and pervasive cosmic force. Eventually, the male protagonist of "Dream of a Manikin" must come to terms with the fact that there are forces and events that escape his analytical control, eerie cosmic energies that are impossible to contain. The awkward reality that his patient underscores is literally a nightmare come true.

It is noteworthy to mention that Thomas Ligotti doesn't embrace, in these stories, the trope of the unreliable narrator. Both protagonists have a solid academic background and are primarily forged as credible witnesses. Conversely, Ligotti displaces the convention of the unreliable narrator onto reality. The narrators are afflicted by an unreliable variation on their realities, as the world as

they know becomes temporarily destabilized, disenfranchised and this unusual situation leaves them baffled, confused and horrified. Probably, only after coming across these breaches in their realities will they ponder the possibility of being insane. So, the unreliable narrator is artfully replaced by an unreliable reality that might be the true reality, leaving the narrator thinking that they have been experiencing a life that does not exist.

In a Surrealistic fashion, the world of dreams operates in Ligotti's fiction as a sort of window that provides dreamers a glimpse of a dismal and raw reality. In "The Frolic", the window assumes a significant role; it is the point of intrusion of the entity inside Norleen's bedroom. Metaphorically, it represents a kind of portal that gives access to the "slum among the stars" (LIGOTTI, 2015, p.13). If in *The Matrix* humans operate as batteries, in Ligotti's uncanny alternative realities, humans are marionettes being played, as if they were actual characters in a video game created by cosmic non-identified manipulators, who ultimately work as weavers of their destinies. In this sense, the feeling that he might be exempt of control leaves the psychiatrist disoriented, in awe (to apply the term in Miller's sense) and simultaneously horrified.

Before such uncanny events, Ligotti's characters freeze, like mannequins in a window shop, horrified and victimized by the 'frolicking' of some evil entities that plunge them into a cosmic **darkness** where they can contemplate the rawness of a blind chaotic universe that eternally mocks their sense of selves.

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