


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gothic visibilities and International Relations: Uncanny icons, critical comics, and the politics of abjection in Aleppo

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(Received 9 November 2021; revised 13 July 2022; accepted 20 September 2022)

Abstract

The war in Syria has been communicated to global audiences through images of dead and injured children, decapitated and tortured bodies, and ruined cities. The article shows how news media coverage of the war's impact on the city of Aleppo invoked a Gothic tradition. Drawing on Kristeva and Freud's concepts of the abject and the uncanny, the article argues that the Gothic tradition can further International Relations research on the constitution of Selves and Others. The Gothic Other is constituted through the (Gothic) Self's repulsion, fascination, and desire, and the Gothic tradition revolves around an understanding of the invisible as an in-between space of fear and anticipation. The ability to recognise Gothic themes in an image depends on one's familiarity with the Gothic tradition, hence images are theorised as having a Gothic potentiality. The article focuses on how the Anglo-Saxon Gothic tradition enabled Western readers to identify Gothic themes in news coverage of the war in Aleppo. The article adopts a multimethod strategy including a content analysis of 457 images published by Western news media; a discourse analysis of news stories; an analysis of three Gothic, uncanny iconic motifs; and an author-created comic drawing on Gothic elements from the published photographs.

Keywords: Abject; Comics; Gothic; Iconic Images; Syrian War; Uncanny; Visuality

Introduction

On 17 August 2016, the photograph of a bloodied, pale boy, sitting in an orange ambulance seat, staring blankly into space became an instant global icon signifying the devastating impact of the Syrian war on innocent civilians.¹ Within 24 hours, the boy had been identified as Omran Daqneesh – a five-year-old from Aleppo – and photographs and a video of his rescue from a bomb scene had been viewed more than 350,000 times.² Over the next days, Daqneesh became known as ‘Aleppo boy’, and an account of what had happened before and after he sat shell shocked in the ambulance arose: the airstrike that injured Daqneesh had caused the apartment building where his family lived to collapse and his brother, Ali, died of his injuries a few days later. On social media, remediations of the photo of Daqneesh were used to ask why nothing was done to prevent the carnage of the Syrian war, for example, by inserting him into a photo

¹Anne Barnard, ‘How Omran Daqneesh, 5, became a symbol of Aleppo’s suffering’, *The New York Times* (18 August 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/world/middleeast/omran-daqneesh-syria-aleppo.html>} accessed 7 August 2021.

²Mette Mortensen and Nina Grønlykke Møllerup, ‘The Omran Daqneesh imagery from the streets of Aleppo to international front pages: Testimony, politics and emotions’, *Global Media and Communication*, 17:2 (2021), pp. 261–77.

of Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama in attentive conversation.³ Another widely shared remediation by the Sudanese cartoonist Khalid Albaih connected Daqneesh and the iconic photo of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Kurdish-Syrian boy who drowned in September 2015, under the headline ‘Choices for Syrian children’.⁴

By 2016, many children had died in the Syrian war, and many photos had been produced which, in far more graphic ways, showed injuries and death.⁵ What was striking about the photo, commentators noted, was thus not the level of bodily damage but how Daqneesh appeared simultaneously familiar and ghostly. Wearing a T-shirt and shorts, he looked like many children his age; yet his pale colour, bruised arms and legs, and silent stare gave the impression that he might as well be ‘undead’: a reanimated body returning to earth. As *The New York Times* put it, ‘We should all feel *haunted* by our inaction.’⁶

The constitution of Daqneesh as a ghostly apparition resonates with a Gothic discourse harking back to the nineteenth century. This was far from the first or last time that references to a Gothic tradition were made by photos and reporting from the Syrian war. Desolate ruins invoked Gothic tales of houses haunted by their deceased residents; children killed in chemical weapon attacks looked uncannily like they were waiting to rise after a long sleep; and the hooded executioners in the beheading videos released by the Islamic State echoed the darkest side of the Gothic tradition’s fascination with medieval barbarism and violent death.⁷

We use the resonance between the Gothic tradition and the representation of the Syrian war to make four contributions. The first is to demonstrate that and how Gothic themes and archetypes were used in Western media coverage of the Syrian war, particularly as it involved the city Aleppo. We focus on Aleppo rather than the wider Syrian war because this enables a more thorough engagement with a particular site and its history.⁸ Aleppo was the largest city in Syria in 2011, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and one of the main theatres of war from 2012 to 2016. Western Aleppo was under the control of President Bashar al-Assad while oppositional groups including the Free Syrian Army as well as the al-Nusra Front (with ties to al-Qaeda) held the eastern part of the city. The whole city experienced attacks, but the eastern part, in particular, was subject to snipers, shelling, and airstrikes targeting hospitals and mosques. What became known as the ‘Battle of Aleppo’ came to a height in 2016, where a six-month siege caused the

³Barnard, ‘How Omran Daqneesh’; on iconic remediation, see Lene Hansen, ‘How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 263–88; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen, and Lene Hansen, ‘Images, emotions, and international politics: The death of Alan Kurdi’, *Review of International Studies*, 46:1 (2020), pp. 75–95.

⁴Amara Walker, ‘Cartoonist captures the plight of Syrian children’, *CNN* (n.d.), available at: {<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2016/08/18/syrian-toddler-omran-cartoonist-khalid-albaih-walker-interview.cnn>} accessed 25 September 2021.

⁵Barnard, ‘How Omran Daqneesh’; Kate Nelson, ‘War photographers explain what makes that Syrian child image so powerful’, *Independent* (19 August 2016), available at: {<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-boy-aleppo-rubble-omran-daqneesh-child-war-photographs-video-nicole-tung-a7197726.html>} accessed 19 May 2021; Mortensen and Mollerup, ‘The Omran Daqneesh’.

⁶Insider Staff, ‘Seeing orange: What caught commenters’ eyes about a small Syrian boy in a big chair’, *The New York Times* (31 August 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/insider/seeing-orange-what-caught-commenters-eyes-about-a-shell-shocked-syrian-boy-in-an-ambulance.html>} accessed 6 April 2021, emphasis added.

⁷Helen Berents, ‘Politics, policy-making and the presence of images of suffering children’, *International Affairs*, 96:3 (2020), p. 593; Simone Molin Friis, ‘“Beyond anything we have ever seen”: Beheading videos and the visibility of violence in the war against ISIS’, *International Affairs*, 91:4 (2015), pp. 725–46; Jessica Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics: The Obscenity Taboo* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); François Debrix, *Global Powers of Horror: Security, Politics, and the Body in Pieces* (London, UK: Routledge, 2017).

⁸Keith A. Grant and Bernd Kaussler, ‘The battle of Aleppo: External patrons and the victimization of civilians in civil war’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31:1 (2020), pp. 1–33; Johannes Scherling, ‘A tale of two cities: A comparative study of media narratives of the battles for Aleppo and Mosul’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 14:2 (2021), pp. 191–220; Nina Gronlykke Mollerup and Mette Mortensen, ‘Proximity and distance in the mediation of suffering: Local photographers in war-torn Aleppo and the international media circuit’, *Journalism*, 21:6 (2020), pp. 729–45; Mortensen and Mollerup, ‘The Omran Daqneesh’.

fall of eastern Aleppo to al-Assad's regime.⁹ As the siege broke and the fighting stopped, journalists went to document the devastation brought on by the war.¹⁰ While Media Studies scholars have analysed numerous aspects of the Syrian war including the role of social media and citizen-generated images as well as news frames adopted in American, European, Russian, and Middle Eastern media, the mobilisation of Gothic discourse and visual symbols are yet to be examined.¹¹

Our second contribution is to research in International Relations (IR) on how to theorise the constitution of identity and the implications thereof for foreign policy. There is by now a substantial body of literature on this question, including poststructuralist engagements with constitutive Others and radical as well as non-radical Others,¹² ontological security literature focusing on the stability of the Self,¹³ and psychoanalytical and semiotic approaches foregrounding drives, desires, and the abject: that which is both part of and excluded from the Self.¹⁴ A few studies of the Gothic tradition in IR draw on poststructuralism and semiotic-psychoanalytical work on abjection.¹⁵ The Gothic Self fears and is repulsed by the Other, but also fascinated by it and unable to let it go. The Gothic Other is not fully separated from or external to the Self but constituted through the Self's own actions and imaginations. Hence, the Gothic tradition allows us to capture more complex constitutions of 'other' places and subjects than do binary separations between Selves and Others.

The third contribution of the article is to draw attention to how the Gothic tradition can be invoked through images specifically. We add to visual IR by foregrounding the significance not just of *what* objects or subjects are depicted, but *how*. The child, for example, is identified as a central political subject in research on the visualisation of migration, famine, and warfare.¹⁶

⁹We use 'Aleppo' as a shorthand for 'the Syrian war as fought over and in Aleppo' and to indicate the constitution of Aleppo as a site.

¹⁰Robert F. Worth, 'Aleppo after the fall', *The New York Times* (26 May 2017), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/magazine/aleppo-after-the-fall.html>} accessed 5 September 2021; UNESCO, 'Five years of conflict: The state of cultural heritage in the ancient city of Aleppo: A comprehensive multi-temporal satellite imagery-based damage analysis for the ancient city of Aleppo' (Paris: UNESCO, 2018).

¹¹Jelle Mast and Samuel Hanegreefs, 'When news media turn to citizen-generated images of war: Transparency and graph-ness in the visual coverage of the Syrian conflict', *Digital Journalism*, 3:4 (2015), pp. 594–614; Mareike Meis, 'When is a conflict a crisis? On the aesthetics of the Syrian civil war in a social media context', *Media, War & Conflict*, 10:1 (2017), pp. 69–86; Hyunjin Seo and Husain Ebrahim, 'Visual propaganda on Facebook: A comparative analysis of Syrian conflicts', *Media, War & Conflict*, 9:3 (2016), pp. 227–51; Deena Dajani, Marie Gillespie, and Rhys Crilly, 'Differentiated visibilities: RT Arabic's narration of Russia's role in the Syrian war', *Media, War & Conflict*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 437–58; Pavel Doboš, 'Imaginative geographies of distant suffering: Two cases of the Syrian civil war on television', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 19:6 (2018), pp. 764–88; Olivier Nyirubugara, 'Shooting kids: Children in Syrian war reporting by RT and Al Jazeera', *Journalism Studies*, 19:13 (2018), pp. 1969–79.

¹²David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006); Felix Berensköter and Nicola Nymalm, 'States of ambivalence: Recovering the concept of "the Stranger" in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 47:1 (2021), pp. 19–38.

¹³Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Filip Ejodus, 'Abjection, materiality and ontological security: A study of the unfinished Church of Christ the Saviour in Pristina', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 56:3 (2021), pp. 264–85.

¹⁴Vivienne Jabri, '(Uni)form instrumentalities and war's abject', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 27:4 (1998), pp. 885–902; Charlotte Epstein, 'Who speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:2 (2011), pp. 327–50; Jessica Auchter, 'Border monuments: Memory, counter-memory, and (b)ordering practices along the US-Mexico border', *Review of International Studies*, 39:2 (2013), pp. 291–311.

¹⁵Richard Devetak, 'The gothic scene of international relations: Ghosts, monsters, terror and the sublime after September 11', *Review of International Studies*, 31:4 (2005), pp. 621–43; Anara Karagulova and Nick Megoran, 'Discourses of danger and the "war on terror": Gothic Kyrgyzstan and the collapse of the Akæev regime', *Review of International Studies*, 37:1 (2011), pp. 29–48; Caron E. Gentry, 'The mysterious case of Aafia Siddiqui: Gothic intertextual analysis of neo-Orientalist narratives', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:1 (2016), pp. 3–24.

¹⁶Kate Manzo, 'Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity and the iconography of childhood', *Antipode*, 40:4 (2008), pp. 632–57; Helen Berents, 'Apprehending the "telegenic dead": Considering images of dead children in global politics', *International Political Sociology*, 13:2 (2019), pp. 145–60; Berents, 'Politics, policy-making'; Adler-Nissen et al., 'Images, emotions'.

We draw attention to the specific way in which ‘the Gothic child’ is depicted and the political implications thereof. We theorise such images as having a Gothic potentiality, that is, the capacity of an image to evoke a Gothic spectre of representation resides not solely within the image itself. Textual discourse can play a central role by mobilising Gothic archetypes and themes that anchor the reading of the image as having Gothic connotations. The Gothic tradition is situated in terms of place and time and (re)produced through cultural practices.

The visuality of the Gothic tradition has received little attention in IR though a latent Gothic visuality is present in analyses of site-specific seeing that refer to ‘haunting’ and ‘strange echoes’.¹⁷ There is also a connection between the Gothic tradition, particularly in its visual aspects, and IR work on horror by Jessica Auchter, François Debrix, Thomas Gregory, Tim Aistrophe and Stefanie Fishel, among others.¹⁸ Aistrophe and Fishel describe how horror as a genre ‘represent the despicable other, but also impulses that are familiar yet uncomfortable’.¹⁹ Gregory’s work on dismembered bodies in war has drawn on Adriana Cavarero’s theorisation of horror(ism) as referring to ‘the bristling sensation triggered by feelings of fear, anxiety and pleasure’.²⁰ The bodily reaction of seeing scenes of horror – whether in real life or as mediated through imagery – is one of ‘becoming paralysed, growing stiff and feeling cold’.²¹ This feeling of being trapped in one’s own body, unable to move, is a central theme in Gothic writings and cinema, too. That said, horror and the Gothic are not identical. The Gothic tradition is concerned not only with those sights that produce horror and horrific images of dead bodies might not necessarily invoke a Gothic sensibility in viewers. Concretely, our focus on Gothic visualities implies a more expansive incorporation of scenery than the beheadings, executions, and body parts, which have been at the centre of analyses of the politics of horror.²²

Taking inspiration from IR scholarship that explores creative methodologies such as narrative writing, documentary filmmaking, feature film, visual autoethnography, and the photo essay,²³ our fourth contribution is to introduce the academic author-created comic. Our comic forms one part of a multimethod strategy that includes content analysis and discourse analysis (textual and visual) of five hundred news stories covering ‘Aleppo’. Our choice to include a comic stems from the productive synergy we see between the Gothic tradition and the format of the comic. The understanding of invisibility in the Gothic tradition as an in-between space of imagination (fear and anticipation) resonates with how the gutter (the white margin between the panels of a comic) is theorised within comic scholarship as a space that houses that which is invisible, yet imagined (made visible) by the reader.²⁴ Our decision to draw, narrate, and colour our comic

¹⁷Ejdus, ‘Abjection, materiality’, p. 277; Debbie Lisle and Heather L. Johnson, ‘Lost in the aftermath’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019), p. 24.

¹⁸Auchter, *Global Corpse*; Debrix, *Global Powers*; Thomas Gregory, ‘Dismembering the dead: Violence, vulnerability and the body in war’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:4 (2016), pp. 944–65.

¹⁹Tim Aistrophe and Stefanie Fishel, ‘Horror, apocalypse and world politics’, *International Affairs*, 96:3 (2020), p. 633.

²⁰Gregory, ‘Dismembering the dead’, p. 952; Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

²¹Gregory, ‘Dismembering the dead’, p. 952.

²²Gregory, ‘Dismembering the dead’; Auchter, *Global Corpse*; Debrix, *Global Powers*.

²³Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013); Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee (eds), *Narrative Global Politics: Theory, History and the Personal in International Relations* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016); William A. Callahan, ‘The visual turn in IR: Documentary filmmaking as a critical method’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:3 (2015), pp. 891–910; Sophie Harman, *Seeing Politics: Film, Visual Method, and International Relations* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019); Roland Bleiker, ‘Visual autoethnography and international security: Insights from the Korean DMZ’, *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), pp. 274–99; Lene Hansen and Johan Spanner, ‘National and post-national performances at the Venice Biennale: Site-specific seeing through the photo essay’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 49:2 (2021), pp. 305–36.

²⁴Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Lene Hansen, ‘Reading comics for the field of International Relations: Theory, method and the Bosnian War’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:3 (2017), pp. 581–608; Henry Redwood and Alister Wedderburn, ‘A cat-and-Maus game: The politics of truth and reconciliation in post-conflict comics’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:4 (2019), pp. 588–606.

around photographs used in Western media coverage allows us to engage critically with the ways in which ‘Aleppo’ has been brought to Western audiences and how the West responded.

The article falls in three parts. The first part provides an account of the Gothic tradition with a particular emphasis on its visual aspects. The second part presents our analysis of Western media coverage of ‘Aleppo’, and the third part introduces our academic comic.

Theorising the Gothic

The literary tradition and the unseen

The Gothic tradition grows out of a concern with ‘the Other’, and through the Other with the cultural, political, civilisational, and psychological Self. The term ‘Goths’ was originally coined as a hypernym for the pre-medieval tribes we have since come to know as Germanic, and ‘the Gothic’ became a reference to these tribes’ incivility as primitive invaders and destroyers of the Roman Empire (c. 376–476).²⁵ Parallel to the term’s original use, the attributive term ‘Gothic’ was applied in the early Renaissance to disregard certain ‘medieval’ styles of architecture as barbaric and disordered compared to the ‘superior’ aesthetics of Greece and Rome.²⁶

The Renaissance’s constitution of the Gothic-as-Other was resurrected, but also modified beyond the barbaric within the nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon Gothic novel. From the works of Mary Shelley (1797–1851) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) through Bram Stoker (1847–1912), to name a few, the Gothic novel was part of a larger aesthetic move that challenged the Enlightenment belief that rational thought and science could and should replace passion, emotions, and the sensorial in public and private life.²⁷ As such, there were affinities between Gothic and Romantic literature, but the Gothic departed from the nostalgia of (some of) the Romantic tradition in moving to ‘the contemporary and subversive’.²⁸

The Gothic became linked to horror, mystery, and suspense and to how the barbaric and uncivilised exist in our midst. For instance, how relatives and trusted members of society might harbour multiple personalities (like in *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*) and be able to commit heinous crimes.²⁹ Within the parameters of the haunted house, for example, subjects are locked away from ‘ordinary life’.³⁰ These subjects are contained by their distancing in time and space from the reality of the spectator; situated instead in liminal spaces, in which they are unable to impose their own order.³¹ Importantly, ‘they’ come back to haunt and terrorise ‘us’, often in the form of established archetypes, for example, monsters, ghouls, ghosts, vampires, zombies, and werewolves.³² The Gothic novel conveys the eerie, and the fear of the unknown which one knows is likely to be there, lurking in the shadows. It implores us to look at that which we would otherwise find despicable and interrogate the darkest parts of (in)humanity and ourselves.

The Gothic, with its devotion to what delineates social order through obscurity, concealment, and the *unseen*, stands in an ambivalent relationship with visual modes of representation. On the one hand, Gothic writings delve into un(th)inkable horrors and ominous presences lurking

²⁵David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), p. 3.

²⁶Punter and Byron, ‘The Gothic’, p. 4; Alfred E. Longueil, ‘The word “Gothic” in eighteenth century criticism’, *Modern Language Notes*, 38:8 (1923), pp. 453–60.

²⁷Aistrophe and Fishel, ‘Horror, apocalypse’, p. 645; Robert Miles, ‘The Gothic aesthetic: The Gothic as discourse’, *The Eighteenth Century*, 32:1 (1991), p. 39.

²⁸Round, *Gothic in Comics*, p. 13.

²⁹Madeline B. Gangnes, ‘Hysterical reality: Weimar Germany and the Victorian Gothic in Mattotti and Kramsky’s *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 8:6 (2017), pp. 510–20; Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, in *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (New York, NY: Gottfried & Fritz, 2015 [orig. pub. 1840]), pp. 38–50; Devetak, ‘The gothic’, p. 625; Nick Groom, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 43; Longueil, ‘The word “Gothic”’, p. 455.

³⁰Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, p. 262.

³¹Jerrold E. Hogle, ‘The Gothic ghost of the counterfeit and the progress of abjection’, in David Punter (ed.), *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2012), pp. 496–509.

³²Round, *Gothic in Comics*, p. 10.

in the shadows, out of sight; elements that seem to lose their potency if revealed. Crucially, argues Edmund Burke, ‘To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary.’³³ On the other hand, there is something ‘peculiarly visual about the Gothic’, as reflected in the Gothic tradition’s obsession with ‘spectacle’ and how it draws on ‘torturous, fragmented narratives’ and ‘horrible images’.³⁴ This dual quality of Gothic imagery resonates with Ann Radcliffe’s influential distinction between horror and terror: the former as shock and repulsion at the *sight* of something horrendous, and the latter as a reference to the dreadful anticipation of an impending fright.³⁵

The Gothic discourages a neat constitutive distinction between the visible and invisible, opting instead for an ambiguous schism between the two, as terror and horror exist ‘in the interplay between disclosure and evasion, obscurity and startling clarity ... the seen and the unseen’.³⁶ As much of the Gothic relates to what is not seen, but sensed as happening outside of the frame, in shadows, or in the past, the seen/unseen dichotomy is transgressed. The Gothic unseen may be non-agentive, but it may equally be agentive as ghosts or demonic possessions are permeating the scene from off-canvas. The ‘nameless things’ or ‘never-revealed monster’ are both present and absent; unseen but imagined.³⁷ The Gothic register is conveyed by seeing what does not belong within the perimeters of social order, for example, the undead, or by not seeing the hidden; as an intricate play on revulsion and morbid curiosity.

The uncanny and the abject

The Gothic has been widely theorised as a response to social trauma at the collective level and to psychoanalytical processes (often repression) at the individual level.³⁸ The concept of the *uncanny* as originated by Ernst Jentsch and later developed by Sigmund Freud has played a key role in bringing out this crucial aspect of the Gothic. Specifically, Freud theorised the uncanny as the ‘fear and dread’ that arise when the familiar or homely (*heimlich*) is fused with the unfamiliar and foreign (*unheimlich*).³⁹ While the German word *unheimlich* refers to that which does not belong to the home, it bears further notion to something that ‘was intended to remain secret, hidden away’, but ‘has come into the open’.⁴⁰ The uncanny marks an aesthetic encounter in which the distinction between Self and Other collapses; when what we fear is co-present within and haunts the Self, hence why Freud referred to ‘anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts’ as the ‘acme of the uncanny’.⁴¹ The uncanny represents a particular ‘species of the frightening’ in which the Other is not radically different from, but eerily familiar to the Self.⁴² Thus, there is a revelatory quality to an engagement with the uncanny, which brings into light the observer’s repressed fears, traumas, and desires.⁴³

³³Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015 [orig. pub. 1757]), p. 42.

³⁴Misha Kavka, ‘The Gothic on screen: Influence and technique’, in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 209; David Annwn Jones, ‘Gothic and photography: The darkest art’, in David Punter (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Gothic and the Arts* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 171–86; Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London, UK: Routledge, 1996), p. 2; Round, *Gothic in Comics*.

³⁵Ann Radcliffe, ‘On the supernatural in poetry’, in Clive Bloom (ed.), *Gothic Horror: A Guide for Students and Readers* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 60–9; Radcliffe’s use of the terms differs from that of Cavarero.

³⁶David Annwn Jones, *Gothic Effigy: A Guide to Dark Visibilities* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 6.

³⁷Round, *Gothic in Comics*, p. 76.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

³⁹Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 123.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴¹Freud uses the term ‘aesthetics’ here in reference to the sensorial and emotive: as ‘relating to the qualities of our feeling’.
Ibid., pp. 123, 148.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁴³Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), p. 48.

In Julia Kristeva's terms, the uncanny is *abject*: 'something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object'.⁴⁴ The abject has to do with 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.'⁴⁵ The primary abject relation in Kristeva's theorisation is when the nursing child experiences a separation between itself and the mother, which constitutes a fundamental collapse of meaning.⁴⁶ Casting off the abject becomes a precondition for the formation of one's identity, but it is also a separation that is never complete. As a form of identity constitution, the abject is thus, 'neither the self nor the other but something in-between';⁴⁷ and this in-between-ness or uncanniness is difficult, if not impossible, to control. The loss of the abject, and the 'ontological void' that this creates can never be fully recovered or filled; the abject is 'co-present with the self, desired and reviled at one and the same time'.⁴⁸ Beyond the mother, the abject can take many forms. One example is the corpse: it is neither experienced as alive, nor dead, but something that defies this binary distinction.⁴⁹ As this example shows, Kristeva's theorisation of the abject has clear affinities with the undead, the resurrected, the ghostly, and the monstrous in the Gothic.

The abject is inextricably tied to repulsion and horror, but also to a twisted sense of joy; though we detest the abject, we are also drawn to it.⁵⁰ As such, there is an uncanny aesthetic experience in engaging with the abject: 'an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it.'⁵¹ The process of abjection is one where the abject is cast off, yet where the self 'is forced to confront that which was once part of the self but no longer is, to confront the very process of expulsion which the self has tried so hard to hide'.⁵² The uncanniness evoked by the abject is thus, in accordance with the intertwining of Self and Other, not only with the Other, but also with oneself.

Gothic potentialities and uncanny icons

The psychoanalytical tradition following Freud and Kristeva provides an understanding of *how* Gothic imagery invokes the uncanny, but it does not in and of itself take into account how the Gothic tradition is situated in terms of place and time and (re)produced through cultural practices. To recognise the performative iterations through which the Gothic tradition is (re)produced, we theorise images as having a *Gothic potentiality*, that is, the capacity of an image to evoke a Gothic spectre of representation for those who encounter it is not lodged in the image alone.⁵³ Textual discourse and intervisual links to familiar motifs can anchor the reading of an image as having Gothic connotations.⁵⁴ Cinema, in particular, has been crucial for familiarising Western audiences with Gothic archetypes and with a sensibility for the uncanny offstage.

Iconic images play a particular role as Gothic visual potentialities are brought into Gothic actualities. Iconic images are 'visual nodal points': 'privileged discursive/visual signs that

⁴⁴While the abject, as a psychoanalytical concept, is 'Essentially different from "uncanniness"', the two are underpinned by a shared theorisation of the Self-Other relation as one of ambiguity, unease, and intertwinement. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 4–5.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁷Ejdus, 'Abjection, materiality', p. 268.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*; Jabri, '(Uni)form instrumentalities', p. 896; Kristeva herself rejects a conceptual link between the abject and desire, though this reservation arguably stems from the latter term's use by Lacan as embedded in the (psychoanalytical) symbolic order. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 9.

⁴⁹Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵²Auchter, 'Border monuments', p. 296.

⁵³On images as having an emotional potentiality, see Hansen and Spanner, 'National and post-national performances', p. 316.

⁵⁴Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 8.

provide a partial fixation to structures of meaning'.⁵⁵ Following recent scholarship on iconic images in IR, we distinguish discrete from generic (Gothic) icons. Discrete icons are those images that, following Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, are 'appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics'.⁵⁶ The image of Omran Daqneesh is an example of a discrete icon, and of an instant global icon that was 'circulated immediately to a world wide audience generating an emotional response'.⁵⁷ Generic icons are 'motifs and scenery' that arise as 'certain elements are repeated over and over, from image to image, so that despite varying subjects, times and locations, the basic scene becomes a familiar staple, a visual cliché'.⁵⁸ An uncanny generic icon is thus a motif that has become constituted as Gothic-uncanny for a particular audience through discursive and intervisual practices.

Our theorisation of Gothic visibilities (and invisibilities) as one of potentiality implies a more social and performative approach to the Gothic's aptitude for eliciting desire and fascination than usually found within the psychoanalytical literature following Freud and Kristeva (and Jacques Lacan). The concept of desire is crucial for providing us with an understanding of why we cannot turn away from looking at horrific images particularly of dead bodies.⁵⁹ Yet, practices of looking and looking away are not etched in psychoanalytical stone, nor are they culturally universal. In this article, we work analytically with how a desire to look or shut our eyes is invoked within Western media coverage of 'Aleppo'. First, we analyse how Western media coverage presented readers with images that might conjure the desire to look (away). Second, we work through such motifs visually and textually in our comic. Here we seek to make the reader look at the scenes from Aleppo again and look differently.

Gothic visibilities in 'Aleppo': Three uncanny icons

Methodology

The Gothic tradition described above is Western, more specifically Anglo-Saxon, and our analytical focus accordingly lies on how Western news media represented 'Aleppo'. There are other Gothic traditions elsewhere – in Russian and Central Asia for example – with distinct themes and narratives of their own.⁶⁰

Our article began by identifying Gothic signifiers in the iconic image of Omran Daneesh and in the textual discourse invoked by Western media to describe it. To analyse whether and how Gothic themes and archetypes were employed more broadly, we collected five hundred stories from ten Western online media outlets published between the onset of the 'Battle of Aleppo' (July 2012) and March 2021. The media outlets comprise *BBC*, *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Fox News*, *Washington Post*, and *Independent*, which were selected as the most

⁵⁵Hansen, 'How images', p. 265; Hansen draws on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's concept of nodal point. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, UK: Verso, 1985).

⁵⁶Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 27; Hariman and Lucaites's definition is of photojournalistic icons; Hansen expands it to cover images in general, 'How images', p. 268.

⁵⁷Hansen, 'How images', pp. 271–2; David Campbell, 'Atrocity, memory, photography: Imagining the concentration camps of Bosnia – the case of ITN versus *Living Marxism*, Part 1', *Journal of Human Rights*, 1:1 (2002), p. 1.

⁵⁸Lene Hansen, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, and Katrine Emilie Andersen, 'The visual international politics of the European refugee crisis: Tragedy, humanitarianism, borders', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 56:4 (2021), p. 373; David D. Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Icons of Outrage in International Crisis* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), p. 11.

⁵⁹Gregory, 'Dismembering'; Auchter, *Global Corpse*.

⁶⁰Karagulova and Megoran, 'Discourses of danger'.

frequently visited mainstream news websites.⁶¹ To ensure some geographic and linguistic variation, we included *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Danish Radio* based on their prominent status in the respective countries and our language proficiencies. We collected the stories by conducting Google searches, in which we included the first fifty articles from each media outlet.⁶² Articles that did not contain any images (14) and images that were not from in or near Aleppo, for example, of Western politicians and diplomats (29) were disregarded from the visual analysis, leading to a visual data set of 457 images. Of the 457 images, 343 were photographs, 107 were the opening still image of a video, six were maps of Aleppo, and one was a drawn artwork.

The first step in our analysis was to conduct a visual content analysis. We identified ten mutually inclusive categories: *ruins*, *Bashar al-Assad*, *deceased*, *suffering civilians*, *military forces*, *human figure(s)*, *human detail*, *morbid content*, *children*, and *women* (Table 1). These categories were chosen as they can be linked to Gothic potentialities. The ruin for example is an established theme in the Gothic novel and in cinema. Several of the categories, such as the number of human figures, children, and women, are also conventionally used within visual IR in content analyses of warfare and migration.⁶³ Intercoder agreement was computed with Cohen's Kappa, which ranged from 'moderate' and 'substantial' to 'almost perfect' according to conventional interpretations of the metric, most categories falling into the latter two.⁶⁴ Our coding results are shown in Table 2.⁶⁵

The next step in our analysis was to identify uncanny iconic motifs. We combined the results of our content coding with a reading of the news stories and analysis of the intervisuality of the images in what was in sum a qualitative visual discourse analysis.⁶⁶ We identified three generic iconic motifs – haunted ruins, ghostly children, and spectral dictators – that resonate with archetypes and themes associated with the Gothic. The first iconic motif – haunted ruins – draw on the second most frequent code in the material namely ruins. The second iconic motif – ghostly children – also relates to a code ('children'), which is present in close to 30 per cent of the photos. Further, we identify a third icon – the spectral presence of Bashar al-Assad – *not* because al-Assad is frequently shown, but because our Gothic reading attunes us to asking questions about what is *not* (or almost not) depicted. Visual discourse analysis also proceeds from the methodological assumption that frequency in visibility is not the only criteria to take into account.⁶⁷ We selected eight photographs from our dataset that capture different aspects of the three iconic motifs for more in-depth analysis and to illustrate the motif for the reader.⁶⁸ We traced the circulation of the selected photographs beyond our dataset by using reverse Google image searches to identify additional news stories that had included the photographs. We also traced the photographs through the homepages of the photographers when possible.

⁶¹Aisha Majid, 'Most popular news websites: Top 50 biggest websites in the world', *Press Gazette* (2021) available at: {<https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/top-50-largest-news-websites-in-the-world-right-wing-outlets-see-biggest-growth/>} accessed 4 May 2021.

⁶²For example, the search operation employed for BBC was: {site:bbc.com 'Aleppo'}. Only the first image in each story was coded.

⁶³Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison, and Xzarina Nicholson, 'The visual dehumanisation of refugees', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48:4 (2013), pp. 398–416; Chris Methmann, 'Visualizing climate-refugees: Race, vulnerability, and resilience in global liberal politics', *International Political Sociology*, 8:4 (2014), pp. 416–35; Hansen et al. 'The visual international'.

⁶⁴Cohen's Kappa scores for each coding category are shown in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵The majority of the five hundred articles were published in late 2016 as the siege tightened.

⁶⁶For visual discourse analysis of a larger number of images in IR, see Methmann, 'Visualizing', and Hansen et al. 'The visual international'.

⁶⁷Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London, UK: SAGE, 2016), p. 206.

⁶⁸In one case we were unable to obtain permission to include the photograph in the article. Instead we include two other photographs (Figures 7 and 9), which capture the same themes.

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Code	Category	Explanation
R	Ruins	<i>Visuals showing destroyed buildings in Aleppo.</i>
A	Bashar al-Assad	<i>Visuals depicting al-Assad.</i>
D	Deceased	<i>Human figures or objects visually linked to death, e.g., corpses or graves.</i>
S	Suffering civilians	<i>Human figures in civil clothing expressing agony or hurt, e.g., through facial expression or physical condition.</i>
M	Military forces	<i>Soldiers, military personnel/inventory identifiable through the presence of, e.g., uniforms or weapons.</i>
H-/+	Human figure(s)	<i>Visuals depicting human(s) (H- alone, H/ small group, H+ large group).</i>
Hd	Human detail	<i>Visuals are detailed enough for the observer to identify unique characteristics (e.g., close-ups and high-definition shots).</i>
Mc	Morbid content	<i>A person or object can be identified as dead, bloody, injured, or broken.</i>
Ch	Children	<i>Visuals showing human figures visually identifiable as children.</i>
Wo	Women	<i>Visuals showing human figures visually identifiable as female.</i>

Table 2. Coding results ($n = 457$).

Category	Images (n)	Proportion (%)
Human figure(s)	332	72.6
<i>Alone</i>	87	19.0
<i>Small group</i>	149	32.6
<i>Large group</i>	96	21.0
Ruins	272	59.5
Children	136	29.8
Suffering civilians	116	25.4
Morbid content	94	20.6
Human detail	93	20.4
Military forces	68	14.9
Women	61	13.3
Deceased	25	5.5
Bashar al-Assad	11	2.4

Note: Variations between the ten news outlets are shown in Appendix 2.

Haunted ruins: Aleppo as a ghost town

Ruins feature prominently in our data, but the ruin requires more than visual markers of destruction and emptiness to convey the uncanny atmosphere associated with a Gothic ghost town. Take Rome's Colosseum or the Parthenon in Athens as cases in which the aesthetic distancing between the structures' destruction and human presences allows 'guiltless enjoyment' and 'reflective pleasure in the recovery of fragments from the past'.⁶⁹ The 'chilling photos' of Aleppo obtain a different symbolic status.⁷⁰ Visually, the *site* and *sight* of 'Aleppo' are supported through depictions of the ruined city as abandoned or inhabited only by a small human frame accentuating the grandiosity of its destruction. Textually, there are numerous news stories informing the reader that 'Aleppo' is a ghostly place.⁷¹

⁶⁹Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 362.

⁷⁰Chantal da Silva, 'Chilling photos show how Aleppo has changed since Syrian conflict started', *Independent* (15 October 2016), available at: {<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/aleppo-chilling-photos-show-how-the-ancient-city-has-changed-since-the-syrian-conflict-started-a7362796.html>} accessed 7 August 2021.

⁷¹James Masters, 'Aleppo has become a "ghost city"', *CNN* (27 September 2017), available at: {<https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/26/middleeast/aleppo-syria-bombing-aid/index.html>} accessed 7 August 2021; Holly Yan, 'Aleppo: Who still lives in this decimated city – and why?', *CNN* (21 November 2016), available at: {<https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/20/middleeast/who-is-left-in-aleppo/index.html>} accessed 7 August 2021.



Figure 1. Aleppo old city. © Hosam Katan.

Emblematic of several other takes, the photograph in Figure 1⁷² depicts a desolate Aleppo in grey colour palettes.⁷³ We are introduced to the city through an opening in the wall of a building, as indicated by the blurred and fractured masonry that frames the photograph. The camera's perspective creates the impression that one is peeking out at the city from a place of cover, imitating the viewpoint of those experiencing the mayhem firsthand.⁷⁴ Despite not seeing civilians in the street below us, we know that they are there, as indicated by their frequent textual mention and intervisual links to the depictions of civilian suffering in the media coverage. The civilian population occupies Aleppo's ruins as an absence; a ghost population that come into view through their implied presence; a tension strikingly parallel to the Gothic's use of hauntings. Like in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' – which employs tone and structure to link the ruined building to a broader sense of 'social and psychological decay' – sorrow, agony, and affliction seem to be 'stained into the architecture' of the city's crumbling walls.⁷⁵ What arises is an Aleppo where the cityscape – in keeping with a Gothic tradition for 'embodying' houses and urban spaces – becomes a character in itself.⁷⁶

⁷²We have given the photographs in the figures captions based on the photographer's description (Figure 1) and the text provided under 'description' in Ritzau Scanpix (Figures 2–9). The photograph in Figure 1 was published in Somini Sengupta and Anne Barnard, 'U.N. envoy to Syria announces possible truce in Aleppo', *The New York Times* (17 February 2015), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/18/world/middleeast/syrian-forces-try-to-cut-supply-route-to-aleppo-as-hezbollahs-role-grows.html> accessed 27 September 2022.

⁷³The photographs and the comic are published in colour online and in black-and-white in the printed version.

⁷⁴Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley, 'Scopic regimes and the visual turn in International Relations: Seeing world politics through the drone', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:2 (2019), pp. 431–57; Joanna Tidy, 'Visual regimes and the politics of war experience: Rewriting war "from above" in WikiLeaks' "Collateral Murder"', *Review of International Studies*, 43:1 (2017), pp. 95–111.

⁷⁵Devetak, 'The gothic scene', pp. 624–5.

⁷⁶Gangnes, 'Hysterical reality', p. 517.



Figure 2. Syrian troops and pro-government gunmen inside the destroyed Grand Umayyad Mosque in the old city of Aleppo, 13 December 2016. © Uncredited/AP/Ritzau Scanpix.

Numerous media outlets accompanied their articles with pre-civil war images of the once thriving UNESCO-designated World Heritage site.⁷⁷ Underscoring the temporal deterioration of Aleppo, the ancient city was described as ‘unrecognisable’, ‘obliterated’, and ‘lost’.⁷⁸ What was once an important relic from the past, the Grand Umayyad Mosque of Aleppo, built in 634–36 and shown in Figure 2, becomes a powerful symbol of history vanished in the war.⁷⁹ The acclaimed Mesopotamia of which Syria is a part is attributed a status as the cradle of civilisation. Accordingly, the heritage lost in Aleppo transgresses the national boundaries of modern Syria, implying a broader loss for civilisation. The constitution of the destruction of Aleppo within a discourse of barbarism echoes that of the Gothic’s earliest application as an attributive term. Appeals to sadness and anger on behalf of a lost treasure of civilisation are supported intertextually by the international outrage produced by the targeted, systematic destruction of Palmyra by the Islamic State in 2016 and the demolition of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Afghan

⁷⁷Maryam Maruf and Kanishk Tharoor, ‘Return to Aleppo: The story of my home during the war’, *BBC* (10 June 2017), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-40194794>} accessed 8 August 2021; Masuma Ahuja, ‘What Aleppo looked like before the war’, *CNN* (13 December 2016), available at: {<https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/13/world/what-aleppo-looked-like-before-the-war-trnd/index.html>} accessed 7 August 2021; Joanna Ruck, ‘Destruction of Aleppo: Then and now – in pictures’, *The Guardian* (21 December 2016), available at: {<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/21/aleppo-syria-war-destruction-then-and-now-in-pictures>} accessed 7 August 2021; Silva, ‘Chilling photos’; Loveday Morris, ‘A tale of two cities in Aleppo: Rubble on one side, packed restaurants on the other’, *Washington Post* (19 March 2016), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/a-tale-of-two-cities-in-aleppo-rubble-on-one-side-packed-restaurants-on-the-other/2016/03/19/3758a0cc-e55e-11e5-a9ce-681055c7a05f_story.html} accessed 7 August 2021.

⁷⁸Silva, ‘Chilling photos’.

⁷⁹The photograph in Figure 2 was published in Marie Borreau and Benjamin Barthe, ‘Confusion à Alep après la capitulation des rebelles’, *Le Monde* (14 December 2016), available at: {https://www.lemonde.fr/syrie/article/2016/12/14/confusion-a-alep-apres-la-capitulation-des-rebelles_5048707_1618247.html} accessed 27 September 2022.



Figure 3. Mohammed Mohiedin Anis smokes his pipe as he sits in his destroyed bedroom listening to music in Aleppo's al-Shaar neighbourhood, 9 March 2017. © Joseph Eid / AFP/Ritzau Scanpix.

Taliban in 2001.⁸⁰ The responsibility for Aleppo's barbarous destruction has, however, a different temporal location than in the case of, for example, Palmyra insofar as Aleppo is not only a site of past civilisation, but of contemporary urban life.

The constitution of 'Aleppo' creates an abjective encounter between the Western Self and the Syrian/Aleppine Other, as the Mesopotamian civilisation is cast as a site from which the West 'was born'; situated both in contemporary Syria and the Mesopotamian past; something that *should* have been preserved. The destruction of Aleppo is a tragic testament to the West's failure in preserving this momentous site. 'We', the Western reading 'We', are unnervingly haunted by the city's former vivacity, thus sharing the loss.

The invocation of a shared temporarily and an abject relation between the Western Self and the Aleppine Other also comes through in photos that show ruins from within and those who live there, though 'life' as depicted is also uncanny. This is perhaps most clearly captured by the photograph in Figure 3 of Mohammed Mohiedin Anis, known locally as 'Abu Omar'.⁸¹ The symbolically rich articulation of Anis as 'Aleppo man' relates the image to that of 'Aleppo boy'.⁸² Both images were constituted as 'haunting' portraits, compared to works of art and held to encapsulate 'the destruction of Syria's brutal civil war'.⁸³ The uncanny atmosphere in

⁸⁰Matthew Clapperton, David Martin Jones, and M. L. R. Smith, 'Iconoclasm and strategic thought: Islamic State and cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria', *International Affairs*, 93:5 (2017), pp. 1205–31.

⁸¹The photograph in Figure 3 was published in 'Aleppo man: The story behind the viral photograph symbolising six years of Syrian civil war', *Independent* (15 March 2017), available at: {<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/aleppo-viral-photograph-old-man-story-behind-syria-civil-war-six-years-mohammed-moheidin-anis-abu-omar-joseph-eid-a7630691.html>} accessed 24 May 2021.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

the image is easier seen than said; a mostly visceral experience in which the homely is invoked through the observer's literal presence in a home, even one of its most private spaces: the bedroom. Though now badly damaged, it is not difficult to imagine what the room would have looked like before the war. The furniture, high ceilings, and cherishing of music all connote wealth and prosperity. The scene becomes abstruse insofar as it emulates the ordinary in an abnormal setting. This subtle mixture of the ordinary and foreign invokes the core uncanny experience of something being *off*. Anis sits on a wrecked bed covered in debris smoking his pipe and listening to music; clothing and books placed on damaged furniture; windows shattered blurring the boundary between inside and outside.⁸⁴ Anis's symbolic status goes further than being a singular instance, in which the desolate ruin is populated with life. He serves symbolically as a stark reminder of what Aleppo and its inhabitants were and have since become and, concurrently, constitutes the city as a place of eerie familiarity. As a point of contestation towards those representations that would cast 'Aleppo' as something radically far away, Anis provides testament to the viewer that the post-apocalyptic and desolate ruins of Aleppo are a *living* hell and home; deteriorated beyond recognition, but somehow still (t)here.

Ghostly children: The Gothic constitution of civilian suffering

There is a high proportion of images showing civilian suffering, human detail, and morbid content in the coding. Even higher is the proportion of images of children. Combining these codes produces striking scenes of dead and injured children with associations to the Gothic.⁸⁵ As Erica Burman puts it, 'Images of unhappy, suffering children are ... deeply disturbing to that inner self we struggle to maintain.'⁸⁶ The child is the quintessential embodiment of innocence, 'without political subjecthood of their own, so that their presence obliges adults to undertake action on their behalf.'⁸⁷ As a political subject, the child is often ascribed a particular emotional status, as an instigator of compassion and pity and a powerful symbol of the future. Western discourse has historically involved a colonial paternalistic articulation of the Global South – as place and as parents – as incapable of taking proper care of 'its' children.⁸⁸ The Gothic child, as constituted within the Western coverage of 'Aleppo', resonates with this discourse to a large extent; crucially though, the ghostly child has a particularly aptitude for haunting the viewer.

The Gothic child comes through strikingly in the iconic depictions of Omran Daqneesh (Figure 4).⁸⁹ The photograph resonates intervisually with the Gothic in its composition displaying Daqneesh as a ghost-like, translucent, and bloodied figure, shell-shocked and mute. Daqneesh is devoid of context except for the dust and blood: there are no other signifiers to the war around him or to adults that might care for him. The scene bears a strong familiarity to ambulances elsewhere and the T-shirt featuring CatDog, an American animated Nickelodeon series, would be recognisable to some Western viewers.

Media outlets described Daqneesh as a 'ghost' and named him a symbol of the 'horror', 'haunting', or 'harrowing' tragedy of 'Aleppo'.⁹⁰ The injuries inflicted on this 'little boy sitting

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Diane Long Hoeveler, 'The secularization of suffering: Toward a theory of Gothic subjectivity', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 35:3 (2004), pp. 113–17.

⁸⁶Erica Burman, 'Innocents abroad: Western fantasies of childhood and the iconography of emergencies', *Disasters*, 18:3 (1994), p. 240.

⁸⁷Berents, 'Politics, policy-making', p. 596.

⁸⁸Vanessa Pupavac, 'Misanthropy without borders: The international children's rights regime', *Disasters*, 25:2 (2001), pp. 95–112; Burman, 'Innocents abroad', p. 240; Manzo, 'Imaging humanitarianism'.

⁸⁹As a discrete iconic image, the scene of Omran Daqneesh in the ambulance has been published in slight variations. One version can be found at Barnard, 'How Omran Daqneesh'.

⁹⁰Barnard, 'How Omran Daqneesh'; Sarah Larimer and Lindsey Bever, 'The stunned, bloodied face of 5-year-old Omran Daqneesh sums up the horror of Aleppo', *The Washington Post* (18 August 2016), available at: {<https://www.washingtonpost>.



Figure 4. Five-year-old Omran Daqneesh sits in shock, bloodied in the back of an ambulance after surviving a regime air-strike in Aleppo, 17 August 2016. © Amc/Polaris Images/Ritzau Scanpix.

alone' whose 'legs [are] too short to reach the floor'⁹¹ are constituted as 'medieval' and 'cruel'.⁹² Daqneesh's familiarity is captured discursively, too, as he is described as 'everychild' or 'your child'.⁹³ Using textual signifiers, native to the Gothic, directs the reader towards an ambiguous emotional register: it concurrently dwells in a melancholy produced by the inability to stave off tragedy *and* appeals to a call for political action and assignment of ethical responsibility. The photo is uncanny, eerie, and unsettling, thus encouraging an abject reaction and, perhaps due to the abject's aptitude for eliciting twisted desire and fascination, 'you can't stop watching'.⁹⁴ Daqneesh's appearance exacerbates the horrifying and macabre scene in Aleppo as a perversion of social order especially as this photo is linked to other images that in more explicit ways show mangled bodies and death.

com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/17/the-stunned-bloodied-face-of-a-child-survivor-sums-up-the-horror-of-aleppo/} accessed 26 June 2021. Insider Staff, 'Seeing orange'.

⁹¹UNICEF, 'Photo of boy pulled from rubble reminder of "unimaginable horrors" Syrian children face', *UN News* (19 August 2016), available at: {<https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/08/537042-photo-boy-pulled-rubble-reminder-unimaginable-horrors-syrian-children-face>} accessed 14 May 2021; Elizabeth Chuck, 'Brother of Omran Daqneesh, boy who became the symbol of Syria's suffering, dies', *NBC* (20 August 2016), available at: {<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/aleppos-children/brother-omran-daqneesh-boy-who-became-symbol-syria-s-suffering-n635121>} accessed 14 May 2021.

⁹²Stephanie Höppner, 'Children in Aleppo: "I'd rather die"', *DW* (23 October 2016), available at: {<https://www.dw.com/en/children-in-aleppo-id-rather-die/a-36129033>} accessed 4 July 2021; Karen Attiah, 'Opinion | Omran Daqneesh and the world's pathetic failures on Syrian refugees', *Washington Post* (18 August 2016), available at: {<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/08/18/omran-daqneesh-and-the-worlds-pathetic-failures-on-syrian-refugees/>} accessed 4 July 2021.

⁹³Barnard, 'How Omran Daqneesh'; Chris Harris, 'How children are still dying at sea one year on from Alan Kurdi and that photo', *Euronews* (1 September 2016), available at: {<https://www.euronews.com/2016/09/01/how-children-are-still-dying-at-sea-one-year-on-from-alan-kurdi-and-that-photo>} accessed 19 May 2021.

⁹⁴Peggy Noonan, 'A wounded boy's silence, and the candidates', *The Wall Street Journal* (25 August 2016), available at: {<https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-wounded-boys-silence-and-the-candidates-1472168178>} accessed 4 July 2021.



Figure 5. Body of child carried after being pulled out from under the rubble of a building following a bombardment on the al-Marja neighbourhood in Aleppo, 23 September 2016. © Ameer Alhalbi/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix.

The most striking political response to the iconic photo came from US President Obama who described how he had received a letter from a six-year-old American boy who had asked if he and his family could adopt Daqneesh.⁹⁵ Obama continued by stating that we should ‘Imagine the suffering we could ease, and the lives we could save, and what our world would look like if, seeing a child who’s hurting anywhere in the world, we say, “We will give him a family and he will be our brother.”’⁹⁶ Despite Daqneesh’s parents being alive,⁹⁷ his representation as a mute ghost, as ‘individual, decontextualized, without parents or guardians’ is ‘ventriloquated’ by the then president such that his suffering reaffirms a sense of Western (American) superiority *vis-à-vis* the Gothic Aleppine Other.⁹⁸

Daqneesh’s haunting of ‘us’ went beyond his own immediate rescue to those other children in Aleppo *not* making it out of the rubble alive. The ghostly presense of the child in Figure 5 is assisted textually by the absence of a name being attached to the body.⁹⁹ As Auchter points out, providing a name to those shown in photographs of atrocity is significant for the humanisation of those depicted.¹⁰⁰ The child’s face is paled by debris, visually similar to imagery of Syrian

⁹⁵Ibid.; Nicole Puglise, ‘Obama cites letter from child offering home to young Syrian refugee’, *The Guardian* (22 September 2016), available at: {<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/22/obama-letter-alex-syrian-refugee-child>} accessed 4 July 2021.

⁹⁶Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama at Leaders Summit on Refugees’, The White House (20 September 2016), available at: {<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/remarks-president-obama-leaders-summit-refugees>} accessed 14 September 2021.

⁹⁷Daqneesh’s father expressed uncertainty in 2017 on Syrian state news media on whether Russia or Syria were responsible for the attack. Mortensen and Mollerup, ‘The Omran Daqneesh imagery’, p. 270.

⁹⁸Berents, ‘Apprehending’, p.148; Christophe Wasinski, “Post-heroic warfare” and ghosts: The social control of dead American soldiers in Iraq’, *International Political Sociology*, 2:2 (2008), p. 121; Manzo, ‘Imaging humanitarianism’.

⁹⁹The photograph in Figure 5 was published in Ben Hubbard, “Doomsday today in Aleppo”: Assad and Russian forces bombard city’, *The New York Times* (23 September 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/24/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria-airstrikes.html>} accessed 27 September 2022.

¹⁰⁰Auchter, *Global Corpse*, p. 137.

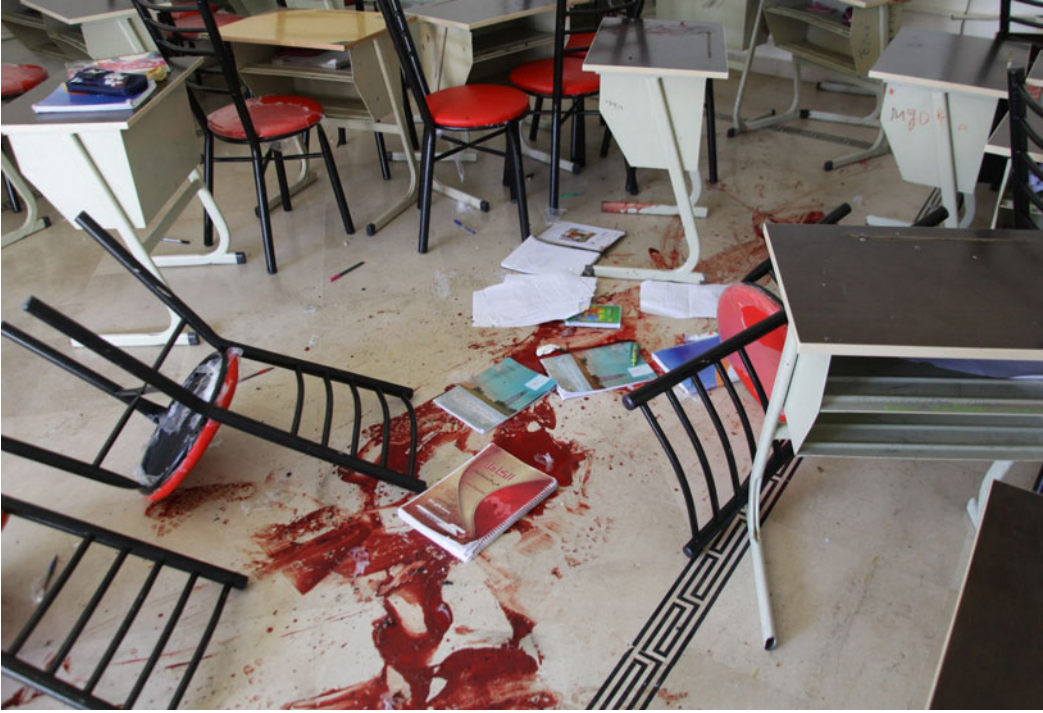


Figure 6. Bloodstained floor of a classroom following rocket attacks in the Shahba neighbourhood in the government-held side of Aleppo, 27 October 2016. © George Ourfalian/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix.

children post chemical attacks; head tilted to the side as if the child was sleeping. The child's limb body is wrapped in a contrastingly coloured shawl; a motherly object that acquires an uncanny status through its use as a burial shroud. What may instinctively be read as a homely object of affection becomes a marker of foreignness through its placement in a heartrending scene, hinting at a gendered absence of a mother. Buried alone in the rubbles, the child's retrieval by a group of people is reminiscent of a reverse burial; the making of an undead figure coming back to haunt the world. Located within the larger visualisation of 'Aleppo' the image provides a visual reminder of how the ruins are embodied. How others were buried within them; how the crushing of buildings combines 'Human and non-human matter, indistinguishable from one another'; how the dust on the child's face might bear traces of other deaths.¹⁰¹

Haunting in the Gothic tradition draws powerfully on the unseen. This enables an understanding of uncanniness as arising from what can be deduced to have happened before and outside the frame in Figure 6.¹⁰² Here we see a junior school classroom, complete with school desks, pencil cases, and other school equipment, contrasted by the arrangement of interior and books, and a large trail of blood running through the centre of the frame hinting at a violent occurrence. The absence of children in the photograph come into view through its localisation in a recognisable, even decontextualised, representation of a classroom. Were it not for the title of the news story or

¹⁰¹Debrix, *Global Powers*, p. 128.

¹⁰²The photograph in Figure 6 was published in Robert Fisk, 'Massacre of innocents: As Syria and Russia bombard eastern Aleppo children are also dying in the west of the city', *Independent* (29 October 2016), available at: {<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-aleppo-conflict-latest-innocent-children-killed-isis-assad-russia-nusra-a7385791.html>} accessed 7 August 2021.

perchance the Arabic letters on some of the books, the spectacle might as well be read as an American school shooting given the ubiquity of such incidents in Western media coverage.¹⁰³ The caption of the photograph as printed by the *Independent* informed that six children had been killed in a shelling. Yet, the impact of the armed attack on an assumed place of civilian safety – a school – is eerily suggestive rather than explicitly shown. The bodies are gone, a bloody footprint under one of the toppled chairs standing in as a signifier.

As the child holds the potential to embody a broader notion of ‘the future’, its death becomes a (haunting) marker of (adult) deficiencies. The dead or maimed child temporally delineates Aleppo from social order through the preclusion of any prosperous future for the city, constituting instead a potential for (further) decay. However, civilian suffering – as embodied by familiar, yet abject children to the Western observer – holds the uncanny potential to transgress the boundaries of ‘Aleppo’ because they cannot be entirely cast away. The West – while appalled and sickened – is also implicated in the failure to protect or rescue the prime symbol of innocence: the (every)child.

Spectral dictators: Concealment, terror, and the inhumane

A foundational component of the Gothic and its political implications lie in its preoccupation with unspeakable, foul, and otherworldly figures – monstrosities – that terrorise its universe, for example, in the constitution of Saddam Hussein as a governor of a ‘house of horrors’ or Bin Laden as ‘ghost’.¹⁰⁴ Throughout the Syrian war, al-Assad has been similarly constituted. For instance, he was referred to by then US president Donald J. Trump as ‘evil’, ‘an animal’, a ‘butcher’.¹⁰⁵ The latter articulation becomes particularly potent through its intertextual relation to the prior motifs, in which uncanny and (un)dead children – those innocents ‘slaughtered’ by the regime – return through vivid depictions to haunt the site.¹⁰⁶ A similar attribution of radical Otherness came through in the then French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius’s description of al-Assad’s regime as one of ‘death and blood’.¹⁰⁷

Despite his frequent mention by name, as the ‘Syrian state’, or commander of the ‘Syrian forces’ in news articles, al-Assad remains an ominous presence – a rare sight – that permeates the Gothic scene in Aleppo from off-canvas. Al-Assad features as an ‘underexposed other’; a shapeless, invisible, and spectral figure.¹⁰⁸ He is depicted in his physical form only once in our data, otherwise made visible as a face on a poster. In these posters, al-Assad takes on many characters: father of the nation, resolute soldier, bearded or clean-shaven, alone or with his family; on government buildings, roundabouts, schools, shops.¹⁰⁹ Like a shapeshifting ghost, al-Assad conditions the viewer to experience a different subset of the Radcliffian Gothic register: terror, that is, dreadful anticipation and unease; as a dark indomitable force that terrorises the city. Still, he fails to conform visually to a monstrous Other looking like a combination of Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Devetak, ‘The gothic scene’, p. 636.

¹⁰⁵Dan Merica and Richard Roth, ‘Trump on Assad: “That’s a butcher”’, *CNN* (13 April 2017), available at: {<https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/12/politics/donald-trump-bashar-al-assad-butcher/index.html>} accessed 7 August 2021.

¹⁰⁶Frederik Pleitgen, ‘From stalemate to slaughter: On Aleppo’s front line’, *CNN* (12 February 2016), available at: {<https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/11/middleeast/aleppo-syria-military/index.html>} accessed 8 August 2021; ‘Aleppo: Pro-government forces slaughter at least 82 civilians while closing in on Syrian city, UN says’, *Independent* (13 December 2016) available at: {<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/aleppo-latest-battle-un-syrian-army-forces-government-regime-kill-civilians-massacre-assad-russia-a7471416.html>} accessed 8 August 2021.

¹⁰⁷John Irish and Patrick Vignal, ‘France to propose U.N. Chapter 7 provision on Syria’, *Reuters* (13 June 2012), available at: {<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-france-idUSBRE85C0VR20120613>} accessed 19 August 2021.

¹⁰⁸Devetak, ‘The gothic scene’, p. 636.

¹⁰⁹Rami Al-Bustan, ‘D’Alepe à Damas, des vies en ruines’, *Le Monde* (5 March 2021), available at: {https://www.lemonde.fr/m-le-mag/article/2021/03/05/d-alep-a-damas-des-vies-en-ruines_6072124_4500055.html} accessed 7 August 2021.



Figure 7. A poster of Bashar al-Assad on a road out of Aleppo, 29 November 2017. © Irish Independent/Evhr_02016269/Ritzau Scanpix.

and Uncle Sam in the iconic ‘I Want You for U.S. Army’ in Figure 7¹¹⁰ or a forgettable accountant in Figure 8.¹¹¹

Amid the rubbles of the city, the unrelenting presence of al-Assad serves as a stern reminder of a regime that has brutally ruled Syria for more than two decades, embarking from May 2021 on its fourth term. Al-Assad is elevated to a position of control and authority; an unrelenting governor whose face – even in the midst of devastation – remains intact, exalted, and on display; watching over those who inhabit the city (Figure 9). Through his (almost exclusive) appearance in such posters, al-Assad transcends his bodily form, thus obtaining a more-than-human quality.

If al-Assad haunts Aleppo as a monstrous and ghostly figure, the visual depictions of military forces seem to combine the macabre with visibility and explicit morbidity. Depictions of Syria’s state forces – often blurred, masked, or enclosed within military vehicles – make tangible that the destroyed city, mangled children, and bloodied scenes are not the product of one man’s actions alone.¹¹² Figure 8 shows one of the few cases in which the faces of state forces are shown. Yet, even here, they are blurred, and the camera’s lens is fixated on a poster of al-Assad that seems out of place, as if it were added in post. The image invites an uncanny response showing al-Assad in a disturbingly mundane fashion, clad in a suit; his limbs hidden by the bodies of state forces, as were they an extension of his body. Juxtaposed against the civilian combatants – opposed to al-Assad – who also feature frequently, but are ambiguously depicted as heavily

¹¹⁰We use the photos in Figures 7 and 9 instead of the one in our dataset for which we were unable to obtain permission to include it. That photo is published in Al-Bustan, ‘D’Alep à Damas’. The photograph in Figure 7 was taken by Mark Condren.

¹¹¹The photograph in Figure 8 was published in Laure Stephan, ‘A Alep, un an après, la vie renaît dans les ruines’, *Le Monde* (23 December 2017), available at: {https://www.lemonde.fr/syrie/article/2017/12/23/a-alep-un-an-apres-la-vie-renaît-dans-les-ruines_5233876_1618247.html} accessed 27 September 2022.

¹¹²Benjamin Barthe, ‘Syrie: à Alep, un carnage parmi les civils en fuite’, *Le Monde* (1 December 2016), available at: {https://www.lemonde.fr/syrie/article/2016/12/01/a-alep-la-fuite-sanglante-et-chaotique-des-civils-sous-les-bombes_5041193_1618247.html} accessed 7 August 2021; ‘Aleppo: Syria’s key battleground’, *BBC* (1 December 2016), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-37307643>} accessed 7 August 2021; Anne Barnard, ‘“I saw my father dying”: A view from Aleppo’s government-held side’, *The New York Times* (4 November 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/05/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria.html>} accessed 7 August 2021.



Figure 8. Syrian soldiers walk past a portrait of al-Assad near the square of Saadallah al-Jabiri during a government celebration marking the first-year anniversary of retaking northern Aleppo, 21 December 2017. © George Ourfalian/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix.

armed figures dressed in everyday wear,¹¹³ these blurred de-faced state troops represent an unnerving sight. ‘Assad’s forces’ appear as (former) humans, corrupted by and complicit in the regime’s brutality, as exemplified by comparison with the mythical ‘harbingers of death’; harbingers of al-Assad’s brutality.¹¹⁴

Although al-Assad has been subject to condemnation, sanctions, and air strikes, he has also been tolerated as a necessary evil in the fight against Islamic State and a descent of Syria into further disintegration. He maintains his watch over those civilians who are still repressed through his control of those in service to him. Despite periods of immense domestic and international pressure ‘Against all the odds, the monster has won’, and his tight grip on Aleppo is unwavering, inescapable, and uncontainable.¹¹⁵

Drawing Aleppo (Man): A critical, Gothic comic

We now extend our analysis through a comic we created. In doing so, we find the two questions Sarah Naumes asks narrative IR to address helpful for formulating a critical standard that ‘comics

¹¹³Louisa Loveluck, ‘Russia, China veto U.N. proposal to stop deadly violence in Aleppo’, *Washington Post* (5 December 2016), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/rebels-refuse-to-pull-out-of-aleppo-as-assads-forces-close-in/2016/12/05/26433e1c-baee-11e6-91ee-1adddf36cbe_story.html} accessed 7 August 2021; Associated Foreign Press, ‘L’armée syrienne stagne et continue de bombarder Alep’, *Le Monde* (28 July 2012), available at: {https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2012/07/28/a-alep-l-assaut-a-commence-selon-une-ong_1739545_3218.html} accessed 7 August 2021.

¹¹⁴Christoph Reuter, ‘Syria: Idlib province gets new lease on life’, *Der Spiegel* (28 September 2018), available at: {<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/syria-idlib-province-gets-new-lease-on-life-a-1230480.html>} accessed 7 August 2021.

¹¹⁵‘Syria will poison the region for years to come’, *The Economist* (5 September 2019) available at: { <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/09/05/syria-will-poison-the-region-for-years-to-come?fsrc=scn/tw/te/bl/ed/syriawillpoisontherregionfor-yearstocomeassadshollowvictory>} accessed 7 August 2021.



Figure 9. A poster depicting Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in the Old City of Aleppo – a Syrian army soldier stands guard in the foreground, 31 January 2017. © Ali Hashisho/Reuters/Ritzau Scanpix.

IR' should meet. Naumes pushes researchers to address whether (creative) work 'bring[s] to light contradictions that may otherwise be ignored' and 'make[s] room to incorporate those who have been otherwise excluded from political science discourse'.¹¹⁶ We also take Rhys Crilley's encouragement on board that creative IR projects 'should be concerned with making good quality art and cultural artefacts' as this increases their capacity for political impact within and beyond IR.¹¹⁷

First, the medium of the comic is defined as a constellation of images that includes more than one image (panel) where panels are arranged such that there is horizontal as well as vertical movement. A comic involves a narrative as the reader moves from panel to panel and from page to page though in principle a comic can be just one page. The gutter between panels is both a space of absence and one where 'readers get involved in the production of meaning'.¹¹⁸ Editorial cartoons, singular drawings, and memes are thus very different media than the comic in terms of their semiotic-narrative structure. We chose to centre our narrative on the uncanny icons analysed above. This allowed us to work critically not only with what the photos show (and what might be a Gothic haunting outside the frame), but what they could have shown if we look past the photographs allowing those who live in Aleppo to take us through their city. We were inspired also by how comic artists like Hermann and Art Spiegelman have remediated iconic photojournalistic images to provide critique of Western inaction in the Bosnian war or convey the continuing trauma of Holocaust survivors and their families.¹¹⁹ Given the limited space of

¹¹⁶Sarah Naumes, 'Is all "I" IR?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:3 (2015), p. 822.

¹¹⁷Rhys Crilley, 'Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics', *International Studies Review*, 23:1 (2021), p. 174, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁸Frank Möller, *Visual Peace: Images, Spectatorship, and the Politics of Violence* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 170.

¹¹⁹Hansen, 'Reading comics', pp. 593–5; Redwood and Wedderburn, 'A cat-and-Maus game', p. 604.

a journal article, we thought that basing the comic on photographs that were already familiar would increase the readability as compared to if an entirely new set of scenes and motifs were introduced.

Our choice to base the comic on the published photographs led us to ethical considerations particularly about how those present in the photographs were to be narrated and depicted. Though the characters in the comic are based visually on photographic representations of faces, bodies, and scenes, we should stress that they are fictional and so are their movements across sites in Aleppo. We wanted to challenge the namelessness of the dead child, yet also had ethical concerns about claiming a particular name. The comic is leaving their name ambiguous as Omran Daqneesh calls out the name of a girl whose fate he is unsure of without actually concluding that 'Amina' is the dead child who appears in the subsequent panel. While our comic aims to accentuate Gothic elements from the photos analysed above, we also did not want to invoke a splatter Gothic aesthetic filling the frames with graphically decaying corpses, bloodsucking vampires, zombies tearing flesh off bones, and graphic violence more generally. Even if there is a tradition for artistic license to use photographs to create fictional characters (and for fiction to be based on historical characters more generally), we had concerns about situating ours into a splatter Gothic universe. Such an aesthetic might also run the risk of invoking a binary logic of Self-Other with Aleppo cast as a site of radical difference to 'the West', rather than one where more complex relations of abjection could be found. Thus, we chose a more subtle, less explicitly graphic way to convey horror, abjection, haunting, and the uncanny.¹²⁰

Second, as we base our comic around published photographs one might argue that our comic does not show 'those who have been otherwise excluded'. Yet, it is important not to understand 'exclusion' in narrow, mimetic terms, that is, that those in Aleppo are 'included' simply by being photographed. Visual exclusion can happen through a narrow visual register that does not show the full range of agency for example. The faces of Mohammed Mohiedin Anis in Figure 3 and the child and adults in Figure 5 are turned away or invisible. We wanted to include panels where those in Aleppo were drawn such that their gaze directly meets that of the viewer suggesting a more agentic representation. Connecting the gazes from Aleppo to the narrative structure of the comic, the reader is invited to (re-)enter Aleppo and be reminded of the political and ethical responsibility that one must embrace.

Third, in terms of bringing to light contradictions, we wanted to accentuate that 'Aleppo' was, as one reviewer of this article put it, 'a living hell' *and* also a place of similarity. We have incorporated the cluster bombing of Aleppo which was not shown in the photographs. In one of the panels, a helicopter is breaking the frame visualising the violence as so pervasive that it cannot be contained. Incomprehension and trauma produced by war is conveyed – with inspiration from Marjane Satrapi – through the use of a blackened panel.¹²¹ This way of working visually with what is *not* seen, but what is left for the reader to imagine resonates strongly with the Gothic tradition's penchant for the unseen. Other elements show 'Aleppo' as a place where people still live and the comic starts with a recognition of familiarity and wonder at a UK morning breakfast table. The tour of Aleppo takes us back to the recent past when the city was one of tourists and the everydayness of going to school. We seek to visualise how 'Aleppo' is not simply a place of radical Otherness, but a site of abjection with a past and a present which the West is and should be unable to fully 'cast off'.

Fourth, in terms of artistic standards, the medium of the comic calls for a consideration of the quality of the drawing as well as of the narrative structure. In addition to our construction of the narrative, we made a series of comic semiotic choices to underscore our substantial ambition to speak to the themes of in/exclusions and contradictions. We use fake gutters to show the recent

¹²⁰ Another option would have been to choose a 'de-Gothicising' style presenting 'the real war'.

¹²¹ Hansen, 'Reading comics', p. 590; Hillary Chute, 'The texture of retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36:1–2 (2008), pp. 92–110.

temporality of the war and the breaking of the frame by the bombing helicopter and the black panel to signify the degree of violence and trauma. To heighten the personalised and embodied address of the reader, our only use of text is as direct speech made by the characters. We do not feature as narrators in the comic nor do we include background text to explain the history of Aleppo. Our comic is produced in colour as this enables us to visualise the move from a grey newspaper photograph of Aleppo to the site of Aleppo.¹²² The colour red continues through the comic in the form of blood and is also metaphorically used in the blood red sky from which cluster bombs fall. Colour also assists in bringing out a Gothic visuality, by underscoring the paleness of dead children, for example, or to depict the sky as gloomy.¹²³

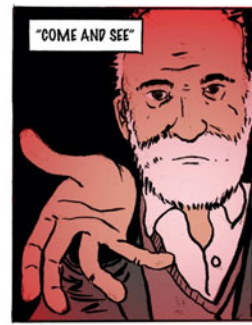
Finally, we have given our comic the title *Aleppo Man: A Gothic Tale for IR* to indicate its location within this article. We hope that the comic would be accessible to readers beyond IR, though we expect them to read it differently from those who encounter the tale within the context of this article.

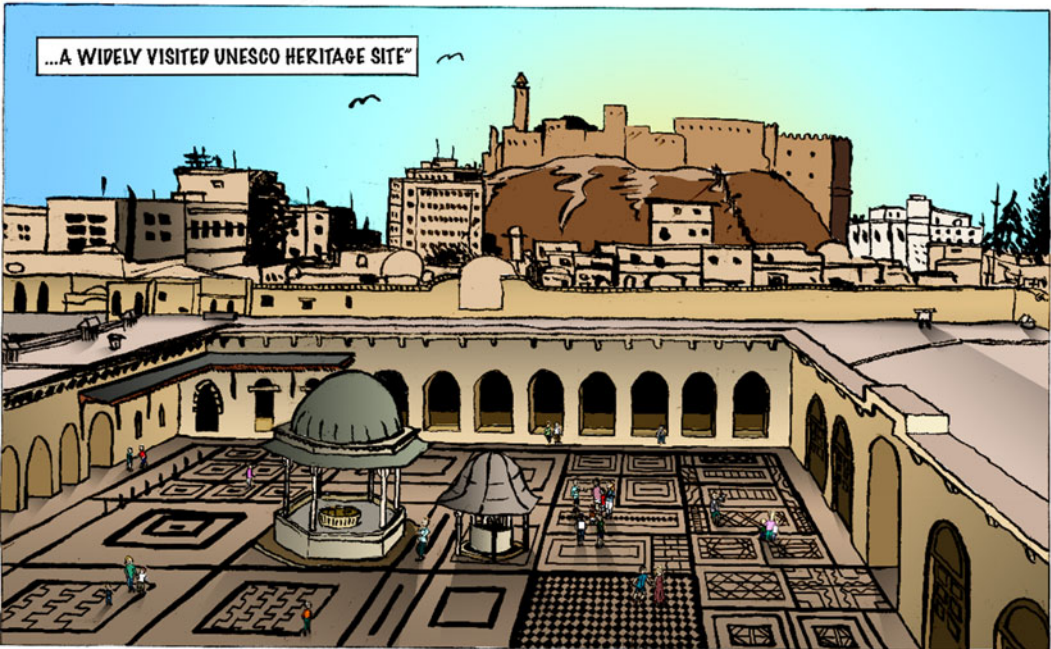
¹²²The comic is published in colour in the online version of the article.

¹²³Xavier Guillaume, Rune S. Andersen, and Juha A. Vuori, 'Paint it black: Colours and the social meaning of the battlefield', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:1 (2016), pp. 49–71.



A GOTHIC TALE FOR IR Aleppo Man







"AS SATRAPI PUT IT: 'NO SCREAM IN THE WORLD COULD HAVE RELIEVED MY SUFFERING AND MY ANGER.'"

"SHE FILLED THE FRAME WITH BLACK, AS IF TO COVER HER EYES TO THE UNFATHOMABLE"

"...HOWEVER, OUR EYES CAN'T STAY SHUT..."

*Satrapi, Marjane (2009) *Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 142.







Conclusion

If media coverage of war draws on a Gothic tradition, then we have a scholarly responsibility to unpack the role that textual and visual archetypes and themes central to this tradition play for stabilising – and destabilising – how ‘we’ understand those wars. Their widespread use in Western news media coverage of the war in Aleppo provides an indication that the Gothic is a tradition that is very much alive. Journalists do not simply describe what they see, they choose particular representations that make sense to them and (presumably) their readers. Through the use of ‘ghosts’ and ‘hauntings’ contemporary Western news media discourse is reproducing the Gothic as a wider sensible orientation. The Gothic draws on the intertwining of fascination and repulsion, of fear and desire, of the urge to look away and the drive to look anyway. Haunting is a central theme of the Gothic literary tradition, of Gothic cinema, and in the discourse representing the meaning of the iconic photograph of Omran Daqneesh to consumers of Western news media. Gothic discourse can be mobilised to call for action. The constitution of al-Assad as an evil in charge of a regime of ‘blood and death’ was linked to the need for a more robust Western policy punishing him for the violence he authorised. This call was countered by others who pointed to the complexity of the larger Syrian war – including the need to wage war against the Islamic State, an opponent of al-Assad too – and the dangers of embarking on another Middle Eastern intervention. As the battle for Aleppo went on and al-Assad resumed control of Aleppo, the Gothic discourse became one of mourning over actions that should have come, monuments that should have been safeguarded, and children who should not have died. More than a decade after the war in Syria began, al-Assad is still in place. Our critical comic is drawn and narrated in the attempt to remind ‘us’ of the ‘living hell’ of the war in Aleppo. It uses Gothic – and non-Gothic – themes and archetypes to have the gaze of ‘us’, who have watched those in Aleppo, have our gaze returned.

Studies of the Gothic, including Gothic visualities and their political significance, should always be situated in relation to a particular audience and how it might have been acculturated to the Gothic tradition. The concept of Gothic potentiality captures how particular visual motifs and scenes can be seen and understood as uncanny Gothic icons through discourse that brings out and ‘anchors’ a Gothic ‘reading’. Intervisual links to imagery that are already recognised as Gothic can also assist in the constitution of images as uncanny icons. Even if one accepts that Freud’s concept of the uncanny and Kristeva’s concept of the abject are relevant beyond the times and places when they were first developed, they do not determine which images will be invoking the uncanny or the abject in a particular context.

Our focus has been on the Anglo-Saxon Gothic tradition and on Western media coverage. We are hopefully optimistic that our theoretical approach to Gothic visualities in IR might be helpful for analysing non-Western contexts, too, though whether our optimism holds up to closer theoretical and analytical scrutiny has to await future study. Our empirical findings are clearly much more context specific. Taking context seriously involves delving into particular Gothic traditions, including where relevant how the Anglo-Saxon tradition has been translated and modified. There is a lot of potential work on Gothic visualities that could be carried out. Let us close by mentioning just two. First, in terms of extending the study of Aleppo, it would be productive to see if a (Russian) Gothic constitution of ‘Aleppo’ was found within Russian media as well given the prominent role of Russia in the Syrian war, including the bombardment of Aleppo and the Gothic tradition in Russian literature.¹²⁴

Second, sadly, after we first submitted this article, the invasion of Ukraine ensued. Innumerable images and other ‘living hells’. As with ‘Aleppo’, there are ruins and heartbreaking, horrific accounts of people buried within them, and dead and dismembered bodies echoing a Gothic visuality. More so than in our data, gender might stand out as a theme in Evgeniy Maloletka’s iconic photo of an injured pregnant woman carried out from a maternity hospital

¹²⁴Karagulova and Megoran, ‘Discourses of danger’, pp. 33–4.

in Mariupol, and in the photos from the massacre in Bucha where men and women lie dead in the streets. A sign that gender and sexuality, a central theme in the Gothic tradition, is in need of closer analysis, too.¹²⁵

Acknowledgements. This article first began as an assignment written by Frederik Carl Windfeld and Marius Hauge Hvithamar for a course on images, visibility, and international politics taught by Lene Hansen at the University of Copenhagen in the spring semester of 2021. The final article is very much a collaborative effort, in which we have all contributed to the writing and the coding. Marius Hauge Hvithamar has been the drawer and colourist of the comic and we have all been involved in the creation of the comic's storyline and its semiotic structure. We are extremely grateful for the detailed, critical, and constructive comments from the editors of *Review of International Studies*, the four anonymous reviewers, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Dean Cooper-Cunningham, Emilie Fabricius Eriksen, Constance Elaine Duncombe, Kristin Anabel Eggeling, Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Matthias Humer, Simon Polichinel von der Maase, Anna Helene Kvist Møller, Amalia Charlotte Pape, Johan Klint Sandberg, Maja Iillum Stolz, and Anne-Mette Sundahl. Lene Hansen's research for this article was carried out as part of the project on 'Bodies as Battleground: Gender Images and International Security' funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark, Grant No. 7015-00093B.

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¹²⁵Gentry, 'The mysterious case'.

Appendix 1. Cohen's Kappa scores

Table A1. Cohen's Kappa.

Category	Cohen's <i>k</i>
Ruins	.68
Bashar al-Assad	.89
Deceased	.71
Suffering civilians	.57
Military forces	.77
Human figure(s)	.84
<i>Alone</i>	.80
<i>Small group</i>	.70
<i>Large group</i>	.59
Human detail	.54
Morbid content	.51
Children	.84
Women	.72

Note: Cohen's suggested interpretation of *k* is the following: values of $k \leq 0$ as *no agreement*; 0.01 to 0.20 as *none to slight agreement*; 0.21 to 0.40 as *fair agreement*; 0.41 to 0.60 as *moderate agreement*; 0.61 to 0.80 as *substantial*; and 0.81 to 1 as *almost perfect agreement*.

Appendix 2: Variation in codes between Western news outlets

Table B1. Coding of 457 images from Western news outlets.

	~ News Outlets ~										
	CNN	BBC	NY Times	Guardian	Fox News	Washington Post	Independent	Danish Radio	Der Spiegel	Le Monde	All images
Motifs											
Ruins (R)	19(40%)	27(56%)	21(47%)	32(68%)	25(58%)	33(72%)	23(50%)	29(66%)	29(60%)	34(79%)	272(60%)
Bashar al-Assad (A)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(2%)	0(0%)	2(5%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	2(5%)	0(0%)	6(14%)	11(2%)
Deceased (D)	2(4%)	0(0%)	6(13%)	1(2%)	6(14%)	3(7%)	1(2%)	1(2%)	3(6%)	2(5%)	25(5%)
Suffering civilians (S)	15(32%)	15(31%)	15(33%)	11(23%)	12(28%)	8(17%)	10(22%)	15(34%)	8(17%)	7(16%)	116(25%)
Military forces (M)	4(9%)	4(8%)	8(18%)	8(17%)	10(23%)	7(15%)	9(20%)	6(14%)	5(10%)	7(16%)	68(15%)
Human figure(s) (H-/ +)	34(72%)	32(67%)	35(78%)	36(77%)	31(72%)	39(85%)	34(74%)	37(84%)	28(58%)	26(60%)	332(73%)
Alone (-)	10(21%)	8(17%)	7(16%)	12(26%)	5(12%)	10(22%)	7(15%)	17(39%)	7(15%)	4(9%)	87(19%)
Small group (l)	14(30%)	13(27%)	10(22%)	17(36%)	18(42%)	21(46%)	16(35%)	12(27%)	15(31%)	13(30%)	149(33%)
Large group (+)	10(21%)	11(23%)	18(40%)	7(15%)	8(19%)	8(17%)	11(24%)	8(18%)	6(13%)	9(21%)	96(21%)
Human details (Hd)	8(17%)	9(19%)	10(22%)	9(19%)	5(12%)	14(30%)	16(35%)	10(23%)	6(13%)	6(14%)	93(20%)
Morbid content (Mc)	9(19%)	13(27%)	10(22%)	8(17%)	10(23%)	6(13%)	14(30%)	11(25%)	7(15%)	6(14%)	94(21%)
Children (Ch)	18(38%)	15(31%)	14(31%)	21(45%)	10(23%)	16(35%)	15(33%)	9(20%)	11(23%)	7(16%)	136(30%)
Women (Wo)	6(13%)	8(17%)	6(13%)	9(19%)	8(19%)	5(11%)	5(11%)	3(7%)	5(10%)	6(14%)	61(13%)
<i>n</i>	47(10%)	48(11%)	45(13%)	47(10%)	43(9%)	46(10%)	46(10%)	44(10%)	48(11%)	43(9%)	457(100%)

Note. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.