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The Ghost Dollhouse of Dixie

Dead Places, Hauntology and the Uncanny in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) and its 2018 TV adaptation by Jean-Marc Vallée. These works cover the dark parable of Camille Preaker, a Southern émigré who is forced to go back south to face the demons of her story – and of the vaster Southern history. The homecoming turns out to be characterized by a disturbing overlap of time gone and time present – or better, of a past corroding the present – which the series present in a more distinctively Southern gothic style when compared to the novel. Coherent relations between time and space are disjointed by Camille's past traumas and memories, resulting in a painful existential dislocation and a dialectics of constraint that questions and dismantles the traditional white Southern sense of place, bringing to light the complex conflict between a Southern and a postsouthern reality that results in a renewed ensnarement. To map Camille's hallucinating and painfully concrete descent into the South, the essay analyzes the interconnected roles of time, space, and how they reflect and are reflected by Southern society as portrayed in the novel and series, showing how they project a dead – and deathly – chronotope that encompasses the protagonist's story, the region's history, and its faux-historical resurgences.

Keywords

Gothic, Uncanny, Hauntology, Southern Literature, Sharp Objects

I've been thinking about making tracks
But the only road I know
It's going to lead me back
I'm stuck in the South
(Adia Victoria, "Stuck in the South")

Introduction: Stuck in the South?

As Martyn Bone has shown, the ubiquitous, if underdefined, concept of the Southern sense of place in literature "derives substantially from the Agrarians' idealized vision of a rural, agricultural society" (vii), and as such, I might add, in its declared segregationism it is chiefly a white, exclusionary, and openly racist construct.[1] The Southern Agrarians' anti-modern manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) leaves no doubt about the kind of rural idyll the Vanderbilt group envisioned for their South: a pastoral antebellum reverie not unlike Margaret Mitchell's revisionist, Lost Cause epic *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Indeed, as Paul V. Murphy has pointed out, "[a]t the heart of Agrarianism was the question not only of *where* do I stand, but also, *who* belongs?" (10; emphasis added). Still, in spite of its purported devotion to a white-devised (when not openly neo-Confederate) cognitive geography, Southern literature written by white authors abounds with examples in which the *genius loci* revered by the Agrarians and their acolytes is questioned and exposed.

Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961) is a good example of a novel set and written in the South that problematizes the relationship between white Southerners and the region's dominant psycho-geographical landscape. Bone again describes Percy's novel as "a proto-postsouthern

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1 The Twelve Southerners (also known as The Southern Agrarians) were a group of scholars based at Vanderbilt University who, in 1930, published *I'll Take My Stand*, a manifesto advocating for an agrarian South against the encroaching industrialization in the region. Among them, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren (who would later distance himself from the group). The collection of essays remains infamous for its romanticized, nostalgic defense of the Old South and the Lost Cause of the Confederacy.

literary representation of a changing social geography" (55), defining its protagonist, Binx Bolling, as a man who rejects "mythical idea[s] of a southern history and identity," and relocates himself outside the traditional white Southern social geography (64), only to find himself "yearning [...] for an identifiable 'southern' traditional culture" at the end of the novel (72). Bolling seems to be stuck in the South. Or, more precisely, in a certain vision of the South. Caught in the process of leaving worn-out and, consequently, dangerous ideological constructs behind, and trying to find new paradigms capable of entrenching the individual in the fast-changing social landscape of the postsouthern age,[2] he ultimately recedes into its Old-Southern aristocratic roots – a move symbolically equivalent to an abjuration of life, the embrace of a dead space-time and ultimately of death itself.

Following Fredric Jameson's useful theorization, we could say that Bolling's cognitive mapping is unable to foster a fully functional "situational representation" (*Postmodernism* 51) because of the interference between conflicting geographies and ideologies – or conversely by their baffling absence. The lack of identification with the Old-South ethos often coexists with the inability, or unwillingness, to reject such metanarrative on the grounds of its capacity to at least provide some sense of belonging, some alignment. This results in a refusal to navigate the disorienting cognitive mapping of postsoutherness, in a failure to go beyond it and discover new meaningful ways of relating to the region's contemporary social and ideological geography. What arises is an existential paralysis easily seduced by the allures of a mythical past that can reveal itself as a consuming entrapment rather than a safe womb.

In the pages that follow, I focus on this sense of entrapment as it is depicted in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) and its 2018 TV adaptation created by Marti Noxon and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. These works cover the dark parable of Camille Preaker, a Southern émigré with a history of emotional abuse resulting in a present of self-harm and addiction, who

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[2] A thorough discussion of the postsouthern condition is beyond the scope of this essay. For an in-depth analysis of postsoutherness and its implications for literature see Bone; Romine; Petrelli.

is forced to face the demons of her own past – and the vaster Southern past. A struggling journalist (working for the Chicago's *Daily Post* in the novel, and the *St. Louis Chronicle* in the series), she is sent back to the small town she grew up in, located in the Missouri bootheel, to cover the murder of a young girl and the recent disappearance of a second one (who will soon be revealed to be another victim of a serial killer). There, a broken community and a broken upper-class family await her.

The homecoming turns out to be characterized by a disturbing overlap of past and present – or better, of a past corroding the present – which the series presents in a more distinctively Southern gothic style as compared to the novel. Coherent relations between time and space are disjointed by Camille's past traumas and memories, resulting in a painful existential dislocation that is, somewhat paradoxically, imposed on the protagonist right as soon as she rejoins her Southern locale. The urgent, semi-conscious (and conflicted) need to reconnect with her home, and even to let the native soil undo her, clashes with the urge to break free from the suffocating family and memorial ties she had tried to cut by moving to the urban North, creating a dialectic of constraint that questions and dismantles the traditional white Southern sense of place, bringing to light the complex conflict between a Southern and a postsouthern reality that results in a renewed ensnarement. To map Camille's hallucinatory and painfully concrete descent into the South, I will analyze the interconnected roles of time and space, and how they reflect on, and are reflected by, Southern society as portrayed in the novel and series, showing how they project a dead – and deathly – chronotope that encompasses the protagonist's story, the region's history, and its faux-historical resurgences.

An Ode to Confederate Death

To understand how *Sharp Objects* delves into the dangerous limbo at the intersection of a waning Southern identity and postsouthern alienation, it is useful to focus on its construction of place. Wind Gap, Camille's hometown, is

> at the very bottom of Missouri, in the boot heel. Spitting distance from Tennessee and Arkansas [...]. It's been around since before the Civil War [...]. It's near the Mississippi, so it was a port city at one point. Now its biggest business is hog butchering. About two thousand people live there. Old money and trash. (Flynn 3-4)

Although brief, this introduction to Wind Gap already outlines the history of a Southern space that has moved into a postsouthern status. Postsoutherness is intimately related to the shift from a traditional rural society like the one championed by the Twelve Southerners to one largely defined by contemporary capitalist modes of production, to the point that, as industrialization took over, the white genteel rural South re-imagined the region as "as a site of resistance to capitalism's destruction of 'place'" (Bone 5).

The quaint town of Wind Gap has left its *Life on the Mississippi* days behind to become an important hub of the meat packing industry. "Find a poor person in Wind Gap, and they'll almost always tell you they work at the farm," Camille says, "a private operation that delivers almost 2 percent of the country's pork. [...] For the sake of full disclosure, I should add that my mother owns the whole operation and receives approximately $ 1.2 million in profits from it annually. She lets other people run it" (Flynn 62). Wind Gap is thus a completely dis-placed town: the traditional land-based Southern ethos has been swept away by industrialization – and Camille's family is the main force behind this change.

Adora Crellin, Camille's neurotic and unaffectionate mother, is a wealthy industrial capitalist that nonetheless refuses to acknowledge herself as such, as the rejection of her role as head of the operation reveals. She lives instead in a delusional Old-Southern aristocratic world she created within the walls of her mansion, a house "replete with a widow's walk, a wraparound veranda, a summer porch jutting towards the back, and a cupola" (28) – a virtual antebellum relic. It is an enclave of a time long gone, but also a space paralyzed by trauma: the history of the South and the story of the Preaker-Crellin family coexist, frozen within these rooms.

Camille sinks into her mother's real-life diorama, a twofold reconstruction of both a faux-idyllic family life and a quasi-mythic

Southern past. These interwoven dimensions have a common provenance in loss. In fact, Adora's obsession with a time lost has been exacerbated by the loss of her second daughter, Marian, to a mysterious sickness. Her desperate determination to keep at least a trace of her existence alive pushed her to turn her home into a shrine. Interestingly enough, this memorial embalming goes pari passu with Adora's efforts to preserve her family's (and Wind Gap's) Southern identity, whose disappearance is compared, tellingly, to undergoing a trauma comparable to that of losing her own child. Adora's impossible desire to stop the passing of time and death itself is clearly projected on to her house, and more specifically on her most prized possession: an ivory inlaid floor she inherited from her great-great grandmother. "It was supposed to last forever," Adora says, "and it has, just…Things fall apart awful quick" ("Closer" 29:48). We learn that the floor has also been featured in a magazine, where it was described as "The Ivory Toast: Southern Living from a Bygone Time" (Flynn 234), making it a synecdoche for the Preaker-Crellins' and Wind Gap's memorialization (or rather, mummification) of the past.

Just like Adora's house, the town is presented as having a strong Southern heritage – a feature only suggested in Flynn's novel but thoroughly developed in the series with interesting results. The first mayor of Wind Gap was Millard Calhoon (Zeke Calhoun in the series), a Confederate hero who

> shot it out with a whole troop of Yankees in the first year of the Civil War over in Lexington, and single-handedly saved that little Missouri town. (Or so implies the plaque inside the school entrance.) He darted across farmyards and zipped through picket-fenced homes, politely shooing the cooing ladies aside so they wouldn't be damaged by the Yanks. (20)

A tongue-in-cheek description of a farcical hero, but "a hero nonetheless" (20): precisely the kind of obscure historical figure upon which a small town can build its mythical past, in order to participate in the Lost Cause narrative and to escape the anonymous netherworld of the rural Midwest lurking outside of this Southern enclave.

Wind Gap's Southern roots and the Preaker-Crellin family gain even more historical depth in Noxon and Vallée's adaptation. The series cleverly elaborates on the novel's often sketched-in elements of Southerness, and in doing so it works more as a complementary piece than as a straightforward adaptation. This is especially evident in a scene from the TV show that does not figure in Gillian's novel. In episode five, we witness the much-anticipated celebration for Calhoun Day, held in Adora's backyard and proudly sponsored by her. The Crellins' house is already a quintessentially Southern Gothic mansion replete with columns, halls and corridors in which Camille's painful memories materialize as ghostlike apparitions. But the narrator's ghosts are not the only specters haunting this place. Adorned with Confederate flags and populated by people dressed as soldiers, Southern gentlemen and Southern belles all sipping mint juleps and acting as perfect and perfectly fake plantation aristocrats, the house turns into a sunbathed phantasmagoria straight out of the Civil War.

The story behind Calhoun's Day is told by Camille:

> Zeke Calhoun, our founding pedophile, he fought for the South. His bride, Millie Calhoun, she was my great, great, great grandvictim or something. She was from a Union family. One day the Union soldiers come down here to collect hubby dead or alive. But brave Millie, who is with child, she refuses to give Zeke up. She resists. But it's how she resists that people in this town just love. The Union soldiers, they tied her to a tree. Did horrible things to her. Violations. But Millie never said a word. Lost the baby, the end, applause. ("Closer" 25:12)

It is quite revealing that, in celebrating their heritage, the Preaker-Crellin family and the town of Wind Gap are actually restaging a traumatic event that, from a hermeneutical point of view, turns into a metacommentary of sorts revealing where the town really stands.[3] W.J. Cash sardonically

[3] My use of the term "metacommentary" is mediated from Fredric Jameson, who, comparing its function to Freudian psychoanalysis, defines this hermeneutical process as "a laying bare, a restoration of the original message, the original experience, beneath the distortions of the censor" (Jameson, "Metacommentary" 16); the "censor" being in this

writes that the Southern woman was considered "center and circumference, diameter and periphery, sine, tangent, and secant" of all Southern affections (86), and as such came to be identified "with the very notion of the South itself" (116) by the white dominating class. Cash also writes about the "rape complex" (115) that developed around the Southern white woman, a delusional paranoia in which the plantation aristocracy sublimated its own ongoing demise after the Civil War.[4] Adding this scene to the original plot, Vallée and Noxon lay bare how the reenactment of the grisly (and maybe invented) scene of Millie's violation, the apex of Wind Gap's annual rejuvenation of its Southern ties, is a celebration that, following Cash, is better understood as a glorification of the death of the Old South. Behind the allegiance with the rural antebellum ethos lies then an unconscious devotion to necrosis, a renewed connection with a space and a time that are not simply gone, but dead; or better, deadly.

Charles Reagan Wilson writes that "'sense of place' as used in the South implies an organic society [...]. Attachment to a place gives an abiding identity because places associated with family, community, and history have depth" (1137). A definition that echoes Eudora Welty's "Place in Fiction," where the writer posits that "place has a more lasting identity than we have, and we unswervingly tend to attach ourselves to identity" (42), also adding: "[i]t is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are [...]. Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too" (54). In light of these considerations, it is possible to see how Camille, Adora, and Wind Gap as a whole participate in the construction of a sense of place, and of an identity, rooted in death, and able only to replicate death. The rape of Millie Calhoun then becomes not only an archetype for the Preaker-Crellin family's long history of administered

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case the white agrarian discourse on Southern history.

[4] Cash talks about the rape complex in conjunction with the abolition of slavery, clearly marking it as a racist fantasy enabled (or empowered) by African American emancipation, as "white anxieties about black autonomy articulated in paranoid scenarios" (Donaldson 262). But he also points his pen at the Yankee as the root cause of such widespread fears about rape. It is possible to say, then, that *Sharp Objects'* rape scene directly addresses the Union's "violation" of the Southern aristocratic sense of sovereignty embodied by the Southern woman.

and self-inflicted harm, but, thanks to the symbolic overlap of the white woman with the antebellum South, an arche-trauma that Adora, Camille, Amma (Camille's teenage half-sister), and everyone else in Wind Gap, endlessly revive and re-inscribe into the present.

Focusing on the character of Amma proves useful to elucidate how *Sharp Objects* is not so much depicting a social geography helplessly stuck in a death cycle, but one actively and enthusiastically consecrating itself to it. The story's final plot-twist reveals Amma as the killer behind the girls' murders, making her the most evident perpetuator of the deathly atmosphere surrounding Wind Gap. Her symbolic role in the novel as the main incarnation of a new South haunted by an unescapable death drive is suggested by the role she plays on Calhoun Day. Always provocative and rebellious, Amma drops acid with her friends before jumping on the garden stage to impersonate the main character of the performance: Millie. We watch her, pupils dilated, as she seems to take pleasure from the awkward (and disturbing) simulated rape that the schoolchildren portray on the scene for the delight of the public. The great gusto with which she brings back from the past her ancestor's violation is a clear sign of the psychological short-circuit through which the Preaker-Crellins and Wind Gap reaffirm their Being-in-the-Southern-world. In the now clear connection with the death of the Old South, which is only ostensibly commemorated but actually consigned to its grave, her total abandonment to this yearly reiteration of past trauma acquires all the traits of an uncanny repetition.

As Sigmund Freud's seminal "Das Unheimliche" elucidates, the "compulsion to repeat" is precisely one of the mechanisms capable of generating the feeling of the uncanny, and, more relevant for the sake of this discussion, this compulsion is strong enough to override the pleasure principle (238), revealing itself as the expression of a deep-seated death drive. Freud will expand on this idea in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but the grounds of his theorization of the death drive are already laid out in nuce in "The Uncanny." At this point, Amma's heartfelt acting, and Wind Gap passionate involvement with Calhoun Day are better reframed as a white Southern *jouissance* barely disguised as a triumph of antebellum virtue.

In the TV series, the frailty of this disguise is subtly reinforced by bad

acting and ambiguity. When the brave maiden is freed by the fearless Zeke Calhoun and his Confederate soldiers, the actors form a front-stage choir to sing the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* – a strange choice indeed since the lyrics of the song were composed by Julia Ward Howe, active anti-slavery activist and fervent Union supporter (her husband Samuel was among the Secret Six who supported John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry). Or better, a choice that once again points at the true meaning of the play: to celebrate a funeral for the Old South. But still, people don't seem to notice what the reenactment is hiding and cannot help participating in it. Even Camille, who is clearly and sardonically detached from the event as her previous remarks make clear, chooses to dress up and blend in nonetheless, and, in spite of her disenchantment, she also appears to be fascinated by the play. No one seems to be immune from the hidden desire for destruction sublimated in the scene.

A close reading of the Calhoun Day scene is necessary to highlight how *Sharp Objects*' postsouthern locale expresses a sense of place entirely defined by death: the story of Camille's family and the town of Wind Gap is unconsciously bent on the self-eradication of life from a place that was ideally congenial to their thriving as descendants of the mythical rural South. Calhoun Day reveals the precarious condition of Wind Gap as a town unable to exist in a postsouthern space. Its inhabitants' frail grasp on their actual present highlights the disjointedness of the chronotope they inhabit, demonstrating in turn how this society's response to the changing Southern geography is not only the desire to retreat into a mythical past, but to self-destruct. This clumsy, kitsch festival from a maladjusted little town, barely veneering the desire for death that lies at its core with a thin layer of nostalgic revisionism, is the most powerful image of the characters' alienation from the contemporary South, the profound uncanniness of their historical, spatial and ontological condition.

Southern Hauntologies

Having taken a close look at what I believe to be a key-scene in understanding *Sharp Objects*' relationship to the South, let us now go back

to its chronotope – or, more generally, its storyworld – to see how both the novel and the series depict white Southern society as trapped in an inescapable existential paralysis. I previously defined *Sharp Objects*' post-South as a hybrid space equally composed of a Midwestern post-industrial reality (more tangible in the novel than in the series) and sudden openings upon an antebellum undertow that is both dormant and powerful at the same time in the way it shapes the characters' lives, or better, in the way it swallows them up in a past that turns into a tomb. The symbolic role of Amma as the designed sacrificial victim through which the death of the antebellum South is enacted demonstrates how the character is haunted by her ancestor's story. But, as I mentioned before, the whole town seems to be haunted by the ghosts of its past, turning the story into an uncanny phantasmagoria that repeats itself, directed towards its own demise. It is a South defined by its "submission to empty repetition of past cultural modes," by the performance of "past citations of what signifies southernism" (Anderson et al. 5).

Neither the novel nor the series express a solid sense of the here-and-now, something that might be expected from the supposedly pastoral chronotope projected by the Old-Southern rural vision that Wind Gap so enthusiastically promotes. The "organic fastening-down," the "grafting of life and its events to a place" that Mikhail Bakhtin associates with the idyll (225) is, in fact, inverted in a perverse incarnation of itself since the only thing that is actually grafted on to this place is death. If the "blurring of all the temporal boundaries" Bakhtin writes about (225) somewhat resembles Wind Gap's time out of joint, there is no trace of the reassuring ahistoricism that characterizes pastoral landscapes: as Calhoun Day makes abundantly clear, cyclicality here merely signifies necrosis and oblivion.

Flynn's novel is already imbued with this gothic atmosphere of entrapment, mainly exemplified by the continuous and tormenting presence of a history that reappears in the present interrupting its linear unraveling. But it is once again Noxon and Vallée's series that makes this haunting of history explicit. The series demonstrates a desire to fissure the characters' reality, and it does so through the continuous disruption of a coherent timeframe by the intrusion of Camille's past – and especially of memories of her dead little sister Marian – in the form of ghosts that suddenly appear

in Adora's mansion. Silent, peripheral, these figures nonetheless inhabit the protagonist's present with a weight that is sometimes heavier than that of some of the flesh-and-blood characters.

Camille is suspended between the world of the dead (dead people and dead moments) and the world of affairs, between the Midwest (be it Chicago or St. Louis) and the South, but she is not the only one suffering from this suspension. Her mother too lives in what, borrowing from Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of *The Sound and the Fury*'s temporality, we could describe as a "vitesse glacée" (67), a paradoxical frozen speed in which time moves forward without actually progressing. Paralyzed by the trauma of having lost her second child, and unable to relinquish the delusional masquerade of aristocratic Southerness she has built all her life around, she too demonstrates a precarious hold on reality.

Mother and daughter, so cold and distant throughout most of the story, are joined together by "a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call 'reality,'" an attitude that makes them both "outcast[s] in [their] own time" (Fisher, *Ghosts* 24). It is the failed mourning of the family's dearly beloved younger member, reflected in the general failure to mourn the death of traditional Southern society, that causes this existential dislocation and the subsequent obsession with death. Mark Fisher calls this attitude a "hauntological melancholia," brought about by the refusal to "give up the ghost" (as is the case with Adora and her dead daughter), or conversely to the ghost's reluctance to give up on us (*Ghosts* 22) – exactly what happens with Camille, haunted by the specter of her dead sister. As long as such dialectics is at play, the characters are denied the full possibility of both a present and a future, trapped in patterns of sterile, destructive repetition. And, although Flynn's story is more closely focused on the Preaker-Crellins and the toxic relationship they establish with one another, Vallée and Noxon's vital addition to the plot in the form of Calhoun Day allows us to safely affirm that this same logic characterizes Wind Gap's relationship with its history and its locale.

Sharp Objects' narrative, then, belongs to a hauntological storyworld, to a space-time marked by "anachronism and inertia" caused by the "slow cancellation of the future" (*Ghosts* 6). I am not interested here in elaborating the manifold implications of hauntology as first analyzed by Jacques Derrida

in his *Specters of Marx* (1993), but rather I would like to focus specifically on Mark Fisher's time-oriented take on this concept. Still, in both Derrida's and Fisher's approaches, hauntology is inextricably related to the crumbling down of a master narrative that deprives society of a discernible telos, whose absence in turn causes the vanishing of a cultural and historical trajectory. The narrative Derrida and Fisher mourn is one offering an alternative to late capitalism's onslaught on contemporary society, and, although the Old South certainly did not express a leftist (still less a Marxist) resistance to contemporary modes of production, the hauntological cancellation of the future is still able to describe this culture's reaction to industrialization. Building on Derrida, Fisher describes hauntology as arising specifically in conjunction with neoliberal democracy's "end of history" (using Francis Fukuyama's definition), with the inability to see another way forward when all the other paths towards the future have disappeared. In the case of the South, the Agrarians' rejection of capitalism, and their anachronistic resurrection of ruralism in the face of modernization, not only instilled in the white aristocratic South the fearful realization that their world had come to an end, but – again – engendered a desperate need to retreat into a past that whose actual dimension had been blurred and transfigured into the realm of myth.

It is the inability of this myth to function as a proper haven – no matter how distorted – from the inevitable fall into the displacement of the post-South that transform the delusional antebellum reverie in which Wind Gap aspires to exist into a gothic trap from which death is the only way out. Let me reference Calhoun Day's flimsy *mise-en-scène* one last time in order to emphasize how the *Sharp Objects*' series seems to be acutely conscious of the cultural contradictions of the culture it depicts. As I have mentioned before, the little festival is already a flickering trace of the town's past, but this does not stop the people from being emotionally involved in it. Throughout this faux-historical reenactment, the camera focuses on the people of Wind Gap: together with people dressed in full Confederate uniforms and ethereal Southern belles with parasols, we can see regularly dressed women and men, stereotypical rednecks wearing Ray-Bans and sleeveless shirts adorned with the Stars and Bars, and policemen overseeing them all. Reading this scene through the lenses of hauntological

melancholia makes the town's resurrection of the past even more artificial than it already is, exposing not only the Southern sense of place Wind Gap is trying to conjure up as a cheap prop in an irrevocably modernized world, but the whole operation as factually unable to even function as a temporary escape from the present.

In fact, according to Fisher, to actually classify as hauntology, an "existential orientation" needs to somehow reveal itself as such, not allowing for the "illusion of presence" (*Ghosts* 21), but actually laying bare the melancholic, retrospective attitude that characterizes it. In other words, a proper hauntological melancholia – like the one I believe characterizes *Sharp Objects* – always comes with metacognition. Fisher writes how the perfect example of hauntological melancholia is the crackling of a vinyl record. "Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint. [...] We aren't only made aware that the sounds we are hearing are recorded, *we are also made conscious of the playback systems we use to access the recordings*" (21; emphasis added). The hauntological drive of *Sharp Objects*, which already manifests itself in the series (and the novel) through the persistence and repetition of dead olden days in the characters' everyday life, is further reinforced by the opening titles, in which blurred cuts from Camille's past and present are appropriately set to the retro music of a crackling vinyl. Transferring the music metaphor Fisher uses to a properly cultural-historical dimension, the deliberate way in which the series insists on the disingenuousness of Wind Gap's dreams of the Old South further brings into focus their true reality as the expression of "the South of a consumption-based economy – the South of the museum, the reenactment, the themed space and the tourist destination" (Romine 5). In light of this consideration, the death drive at the heart of *Sharp Objects* I have discussed in the previous section can also be understood as the symptom of a contemporary South that, forced to exist in an era dominated by capitalistic modes of consumption and deprived of a direction forward, is now trying to devour itself in an effort to get out of out of this cul-de-sac.

Reprise and Conclusion: A Pretty Uncanny Little House

Through the story of Camille and the intertwined history of her family and of the town of Wind Gap, *Sharp Objects* suggests that "going back home" – be it the protagonist's mundane journey or the town's desperate spiritual search for its true dimension – is sometimes synonymous with undoing. The overlap of death and home is quite clear when it comes to Adora and her warped sense of motherhood: the only way through which she seems capable of showing affection for her daughters is to care for them when they are sick. "I turned back over, let my mother put the pill on my tongue, pour the thick milk into my throat, and kiss me," a sick Camille recounts, reporting a truly unexpected gesture of love from her otherwise glacial mother (Flynn 248). But, in yet another disturbing twist, the novel reveals how Adora suffers from Munchausen syndrome by proxy: she is the one responsible for her younger daughter's death and for the frequent illnesses that befall Amma throughout the story, and she almost kills Camille too – a fate that the protagonist seems to embrace before being saved by the police. Just like Wind Gap and its obsession with the antebellum South, the only attachment Adora can develop is one steeped in death.

The compulsive repetition of her daughters' poisoning makes Adora another example of the uncanny death drive from which Wind Gap cannot escape. But, as Freud (and Fisher after him) posit, together with repetition, the other main process at the heart of the uncanny is doubling (Freud 234; Fisher, *Weird* 9). And, to make *Sharp Objects*' descent into uncanniness complete, the murder mystery that the novel uses as an excuse to explore family and cultural trauma is a particularly meaningful example of doubling. Amma's beloved dollhouse, a painstakingly faithful reproduction of her mother's mansion, gives us one last, powerful spatialized symbol of the inextricable connection that Wind Gap, and the Preaker-Crellins in particular, have with death.

While Camille's relationship with the place she inhabits is antagonistic (at least, up to a certain extent) and Adora's is delusional, Amma's is mimetic. This ability to perfectly blend in with her surroundings reveals a rather sophisticated cognitive mapping of the Old-South phantasmagoria she moves in and is in turn expressed in her obsession with meticulously recreating her

living space in the sophisticated dollhouse she plays with nonstop. "[S]he worked on her Adora dollhouse most hours of the day" (Flynn 313), Camille says. "The dollhouse needed to be perfect, just like everything else Amma loved" (320). Amma is clearly too old to really care for dollhouses (she is already into sex, drinking, and drugs, looking way more uninhibited than her older sister), but she still spends hours furbishing her own to turn it into a perfect double of the mansion. Given her unflinching dedication, we could say (after Fisher) that the uncanny for her is not simply a feeling, but rather a mode of perception and a mode of being (Fisher, *Weird* 9).

The dollhouse, already an inherently uncanny element because of its being a doppelgänger of the story's main setting, hides a secret so frightening that the series (but not the novel, that adds a short epilogue to the revelation) abruptly ends when Camille, looking into it, realizes that the replica of her mother's prized ivory floor has been built by Amma with the splinters of the teeth she pulled out of her victims' mouths after she strangled them. The solution of the murder mystery had been hidden in plain sight for all this time. A philologically accurate reification of the Freudian *unheimlich* – an element both familiar and different from itself – the dollhouse turns the resurging traces of the past that haunt Wind Gap into actual human remains: ossified, grotesque, and lacerating symbols of an ineluctable, devouring connection with a sense of history – and more generally a sense of place – out of which only a house of horrors can be built.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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