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(Play)Houses of Horror: Addressing the Anxieties of the Housing Crisis

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Abstract: Among the fears rife in contemporary “Insecure Britain”,¹ the anxieties connected with the housing crisis – rise of property costs, cutbacks on welfare housing, increasing precarity of living conditions – may be among the most tangible in everyday life. It is not surprising, then, that the disruptive power of threats to home as a source of security and comfort has been at the centre of a series of recent British plays. While many of these are marked by documentary realism, incorporating real-life testimonies in order to evoke empathy with those hit hardest by the crisis, there is also a notable subset that veer to the other side of the sur/realist spectrum, reflecting on the crisis in highly stylized dystopian scenarios.

In this article, I propose the concept of ‘playhouse Gothic’ to describe Mike Bartlett’s *Game* and Philip Ridley’s *Radiant Vermin* (both 2015). Both are explorations of the affective and social implications of the housing crisis that fall into the latter category. The case studies examine how in both plays the interplay between dramatic and theatrical space foregrounds the extent to which our homes themselves are sources of insecurity. More specifically, the plays employ the mode of the Gothic in order to involve their audiences in an emotionally loaded spatial experience, thereby also inviting them to reflect on their own socio-economic anxieties and implication in perpetuating structures of inequality. The analyses take into account the dramatic texts and the set-up of concrete performances as well as reviews documenting viewers’ responses to the plays.

Keywords: Philip Ridley, Mike Bartlett, audience, Gothic, home, housing crisis, space, stage design

¹ This was a header used by the *Guardian* for a series of articles in 2014, which described a growing sense of social precarity and disillusionment with mainstream politics in Britain: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/series/insecure-britain>

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“There is no doubt as to the hot theatrical topic of the moment: the housing crisis,” writes *The Guardian*’s Michael Billington in his review of Philip Ridley’s *Radiant Vermin*, produced at the Soho Theatre in 2015. This impression was certainly influenced by the fact that just a week earlier, Billington had reviewed another opening, namely of Mike Bartlett’s *Game* (Almeida Theatre), which, like Ridley’s play, revolves around the difficulties in finding a place to live in London’s overheated housing market. But these two plays are indeed only the tip of the iceberg: Nadia Fall’s *Home* (2013), LUNG theatre’s *E15*, Sh!t Theatre’s *Letters to Windsor House* (2016), Cardboard Citizens’ *Home Truths* (2017)², Cressida Brown’s *Re:Home* (2016, a sequel to her 2005 play *Home*) and Matt Hartley’s *Deposit* (2017) are other instances of “a growing trend of theatre that makes drama out of London’s housing crisis” (Gardner).

Why, in an era not short of crises, should it be this particular one that has especially exercised the imagination of contemporary theatre practitioners? I would like to offer and explore two (not mutually exclusive, but rather inter-linked) explanations. Firstly, the housing crisis is an arena where the larger socio-economic problems that are currently besetting Western countries (see e.g. Lanchester) and the feeling of an increasing social stratification become especially tangible. Anxieties connected with the crisis – about the rise in property prices, the cutbacks on welfare housing, the increasing precarity of living conditions – affect people in many walks of life. These fears are intensified by the strong emotional value of the house as ‘home’, regarded as a central source of security and comfort. Secondly, I would argue that the housing crisis lends itself especially well to theatrical (re)presentation. This is, for one thing, because it is easily rendered as paradigmatic of larger social and economic crises: an individual house/household can be staged as a microcosm in which these conflicts are played out. Accordingly, housing crisis plays often tap into the various dramatic traditions that have centred on domestic spaces to express broader social conditions, such as the naturalist family dramas of Ibsen and Chekhov and the kitchen sink realism of the 1950s and 60s.³ Moreover, theatre is ideally suited to reflect on the fact that distributions of space are both an expression of and determined by power relations. In particular, the physical co-presence of performers and audience in one room can be employed in order to explore such hierarchies and processes of exchange. In more general terms, dramatic space, which is represented

² A cycle of nine short plays written by different playwrights and performed by Cardboard Citizens, a company dedicated to making theatre involving homeless people.

³ For a sustained discussion of the history of representations of home on the European stage in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Grene.

on stage as part of the storyworld, is set into relation with theatrical space, i.e. the layout and interior design of the auditorium where the performance takes place.

In the following, I will show how Bartlett's and Ridley's plays use the affective potential of dramatic and theatrical space in order to probe the anxieties of the housing crisis. In so doing, I am building on William C. Boles's comparison of the two plays in the pages of this journal (Boles, "Theatricalizing"). However, where Boles focusses mainly on plot and character to examine the plays' topicality, my argument will be that it is in their particular staging of home as a socio-economically and affectively charged space – and in their way of positioning the audiences in relation to what is happening on stage – that *Game* and *Radiant Vermin* can lay their claims to social and political relevance. More specifically, they represent a style that (despite the apparent differences between the two plays) I would like to label 'playhouse Gothic.' The emotional politics of this style can best be described in contrast to those of another type that has prominently been used to confront the housing crisis, namely the documentary realism of the verbatim tradition. Plays like *Home* and *E15* have incorporated real-life testimony from people of the lower end of the social spectrum, calling for sympathy for those hit hardest by the crisis and countering the fear of a 'feral underclass,' as it was, for example, evoked by media reports in the context of the London riots (see Birke, "Economies"). Bartlett's and Ridley's plays, by contrast, elicit a type of response that is closer to Brian Massumi's definition of affect as a "prepersonal intensity" (xvi). They seek to expose the audience to those experiences of "unformed and unstructured potential" that theorists have labelled "affect," and juxtaposed with the more clearly defined "feelings," which have been "checked against previous experiences and labelled" (Shouse 5; 3). Verbatim plays, one could say, often seek to enlist their audiences' feelings in favour (or sometimes also in opposition) of their characters' points of view. *Game* and *Radiant Vermin* have a different emotional agenda. They also elicit strong responses, but as many reviewers' responses testify, these to a large extent depend on shock tactics. Thus, their dominant appeal is to affect rather than to feeling and does not so clearly entail an investment in the fears of the characters. It is left to the spectators to translate the experiential impact of the plays' horror scenarios into reflections on their own socio-economic anxieties on the one hand, and on their own implication in perpetuating structures of inequality on the other.

This effect, to a large extent, is tied to the way in which both plays draw on and transform what is maybe the most iconic type of affect-inducing space in English literary history: Gothic space. Derived from a style of architecture and developed in 18th-century novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the literary Gothic makes space, typically a castle or castle-like structure, the centre of the action. While in the

contemporary plays, the trademark crumbling walls, looming towers, labyrinthine corridors and menacing vaults of the Gothic castle are replaced by the conveniences of the modern-day 'dream home,' the settings share with their Gothic predecessors the way in which they, as Emma Clery puts it for *The Castle of Otranto*, "dominate [...] the narrative as both a physical and psychological presence" (xv). Very obviously in Bartlett's, but more obliquely also in Ridley's play, a key aspect is the Gothic "atmosphere of oppression created by the place, and the way it emphasizes the powerlessness of the characters, manipulated by forces they only dimly comprehend" (xv).

Gothic space is affectively loaded in a double sense. For one thing, it is inextricably linked to the emotional state of the characters it surrounds. Most prominently, it induces (and reflects) anxiety, defined in modern psychological terms as "the tense, unsettling anticipation of a threatening but vague event; a feeling of uneasy suspense" (Rachman 3). While Gothic characters often also experience *fear*, a "reaction to a specific, perceived danger, to a threat that is identifiable" (3), the point of Gothic space is precisely to extend this sensation into the more "pervasive and persistent" (3) state of *anxiety*. Secondly and just as importantly, Gothic space is geared towards affecting the *recipient* as intensely as possible.

Given the close connection between Gothic, space, and experience, it may seem a bit surprising that in the increasing number of scholarly considerations of the Gothic not only as a literary-historical period, but also as a transhistorical and transmedial genre label, drama plays only a small role, compared to fiction and film (Palgrave's *Handbook of the Gothic* [1998], Blackwell's *New Companion to the Gothic* [2012] and *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic* [2017] and are just a few cases in point). After all, drama could be regarded as the most spatially oriented literary form of all. Part of the reason may be that within drama studies, 'Gothic' is comparatively seldom used as a category. As Jeffrey N. Cox points out in his magisterial introduction to *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789–1825*, this is even true of literary-historical surveys of drama, even though as a counterpart to the Gothic novel, Gothic drama was immensely popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Cox offers a sophisticated analysis of how the genre's "sensationalist emotional appeal," which "calls upon neither sentiment nor emotional sensibility but the passions" (14), is adapted to the theatre of this period, tapping into contemporary socio-political concerns as well as responding to the development of the theatre as an institution and environment. In my own application of the Gothic as a transhistorical category, I similarly want to focus on its transmedial reach as well as its media-specific implications in order to analyse one of the latest twists in British theatre's engagement with the social anxieties of its time.

My readings of the representation of space in the dramatic text and the stage directions are complemented with analyses of the original productions of the two

plays and their reception. The examination of the latter is based on a corpus of viewing responses published online – some as reviews for mainstream media like *The Guardian*, some in less established online magazines or private websites and blogs. Overall, I have compiled 14 reviews of the production of *Game* at the Almeida Theatre, London (23 February–04 April 2015) and 21 of *Radiant Vermin*, 9 of these of the original production at the Soho Theatre, London (10 March–12 April 2015) and 12 of this production’s run at the *Brits Off-Broadway* festival in New York (June 2–July 3 2016).

“For Voyeurs, not Theatregoers”: Spatial Hierarchies as Sensation in *Game*

In Mike Bartlett’s *Game*, the housing crisis is staged in the style of a future season of the *Big Brother* TV show – as it would look if Stephen King were in charge of writing the script. Ashley and Carly are a young couple who cannot afford their own place. They therefore accept a private corporation’s offer to move into a spacious house that features luxuries like a state-of-the-art kitchen and a hot tub. In exchange, they consent to being under observation by the firm’s customers, who pay a considerable fee for the opportunity to stalk the couple from behind one-way glass walls and take shots at them with tranquilizer guns. The first five scenes of the play show how Carly and Ashley move into the house and try to get used to the conditions. Scene six to nine are set seven years later and culminate in the couple’s decision to move out and into an uncertain future, acknowledging the negative impact their housing ‘situation’ is having on their son Liam, who was conceived and born in the house.

Boles (“Theatricalizing”) argues that the play critiques contemporary British society both for regarding the poor as a threat and for converting them into medial commodities (he names shows such as Channel 4’s *How to Get a Council House*) – and that the stage design plays a central role in this. My argument will be that above and beyond this call for empathy for the position of the poor, the play invites its audience both to let themselves be affected by the atmosphere of anxiety pervading the play, and, in a potential second step, to perform a quite complex and in part contradictory reflection on their socio-economic and ethical implications in the inequalities underlying the housing market. The spatial design is indeed a key feature for this effect – in particular, as I will show, through the way in which it updates and transforms the Gothic.

The action of the play is split up between two different types of dramatic space: there is the inside of the house, where Carly and Ashley go about their

daily business, and there is an area surrounding this house – the “hides” (Bartlett 7), from where the paying customers follow the couple’s movements, waiting for a good opportunity to take a shot. Through this spatial hierarchisation, the seemingly idyllic interior of the house takes on Gothic qualities, in particular as calculated to engender a “fearful sense of enclosure” (Baldick xix), which due to its pervasive and persistent character should probably better be labelled an ‘anxiety.’ The house entraps the characters in a way that is reminiscent of the comfortably furnished chamber allotted to Ann Radcliffe’s Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*: that room features a mysterious second door, which can be bolted from the outside, but not the inside, thus restricting Emily’s movements while at the same time exposing her to intruders (see Radcliffe 235). Ashley and Carly are subject to the same mixture of confinement and exposure, exposure both to surveillance and to violence. *Game* drives home this point in a less than subtle way in a scene where the punters take shots at the couple each time they are about to kiss or initiate sex (see Bartlett 31, 32, 36). As in Radcliffe’s novel, the apparent homeliness of the space serves to foreground the sense of menace created by the constant possibility of invasion, and those areas that are supposed to be the most intimate – the bed, the hot tub – turn out to be where the characters are most vulnerable. The play thus makes use of the emotional appeal of culturally engrained conceptions of home as a safe and nurturing space to frame a critical commentary on the politics of the housing crisis. It is a memento of how a lack of secure and sustainable living conditions is not just an inconvenience, but a deprivation of basic human rights (as spelled out, for example, in article 25 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

The soul-destroying impact of these conditions is epitomised in a spatial prop that is introduced in Scene 7: a cardboard box, which the seven-year-old Liam has chosen as a permanent hiding place. The box signifies the stark realities underneath the gleaming surfaces of the expensively furnished ‘dream home.’ It reminds us of the characters’ entrapment. By virtue of its association with mobility (moving supplies) and with homelessness,⁴ the box also once again points to the protagonists’ precarious socio-economic position. This aspect is further foregrounded by the suggestion that the box is the only place in the house where the child has some sense of security. His parents worry about this, knowing that it is against the rules of the contract, which demands full exposure. They see themselves forced to make Liam available to the punters, first pondering cutting holes into the box (53), then ripping away the whole box (58). Liam’s traumatization

⁴ The name “Cardboard Citizens” for the homeless theatre group mentioned above works with the same association.

and the agony on the part of his parents, who feel they have to choose between protecting their child in the present and securing a future for him, resonate with the often-voiced concern that the housing crisis is a problem that especially hits the young generation (see e.g. Green 63–77; Smith).

It is hard to miss the point that the spatial hierarchy between the watched and the watchers can also be read as a *mise en abyme* of the act of theatre-going. The original production at the Almeida Theatre (directed by Sacha Wares) featured a stage design (designer: Miriam Buether) that diverged from the usual separation into stage and auditorium, which further emphasized this parallel. Members of the audience were divided into four groups and ushered into four zones surrounding the central display of the house. They were thus, in a manner of speaking, themselves being positioned in the hides, sharing the allocated space with the actors playing the firm's customers. As the reviews testify, this handling of theatrical space was what most impressed theatregoers about the play – both in a positive and in a negative sense. Its main effect was to elicit an alignment with the different spheres of experience depicted in the dramatic space, i.e. on the level of the play's action.

For one thing, the collapsing of dramatic and theatrical space enhanced the reception-oriented aspect of the Gothic effect, eliciting maximum affect from the audience, inviting them to share the protagonists' sense of being overwhelmed or threatened. Where novels work with aspects such as narrative perspective in order to evoke such an affective involvement, *Game* utilizes the spectators' physical presence and involvement in the scenario. As one reviewer puts it: "I was deeply moved not only by what I saw, but what I *experienced*" (Angela Clarke Blog, emphasis DB). Of the 14 reviews I examined, five start with rather extensive descriptions of entering and being in the theatrical space, written in the first person, testifying to the reviewers' sense of personal involvement. "Uncomfortable" and "disconcerting" are two of the most frequent adjectives. They are used not only to describe a reaction to what happens to the characters, but also to what happens to the spectator him- or herself, not least their *physical* discomfort. Reviewers mention a broad range of elements involving different senses: the hard benches (Billington, Kellaway, Sierz), the unusually close proximity of fellow viewers (Rutkowski) and the stale air (Kellaway), having to listen to the dialogue through cumbersome headphones (Boles, Fisher, Rev Stan, Sierz), the circumstance that these headphones at some points emitted jarring static noise (Rutkowski), and having to crane their necks to get a good look at the monitors showing other perspectives of the hides and the house (Rev Stan).

Secondly, many of the reviewers also link their feelings of physical discomfort to the feeling of being implicated as a *voyeur*, being placed in the position of those victimizing the poor rather than of the victims themselves. I have argued else-

where that evoking a sense of implication is an important feature of many plays on the housing crisis, from Alan Bennett's *Lady in the Van* to *Home* to Sh!t Theatre's *Letters to Windsor House* (see Birke, "Economies"), all of which also use forms of audience address to represent the housing crisis as a symptom of larger structures of inequality to which we all contribute. One could argue that its experiential orientation makes *Game* a particularly effective vehicle for this point, and indeed several reviewers have stressed that they felt the play invited them to assess the ethics of their own position ("forced an examination of one's values" [Boles, "*How to Hold your Breath*"]; "asking the audience to consider their own behaviour and that of their peers" [Fisher]). An element that had an emblematic function in this context was the prominent use of glass in the stage design, both in the shape of a soundproof barrier encapsulating the stage and as screens on which the audience could monitor activities in otherwise hidden parts of the house and in the other hides. Elizabeth Sakellaridou, who cites *Game* as an example of the increasingly central role of glass in contemporary theatre productions, points out how the one-sidedness in the transparency afforded by the glass (the characters can be seen and heard from the outside, but they themselves cannot see or hear anything beyond their 'aquarium') further promotes the "sense of aggressive invasion of the outside world into the private world of individuals" and "turned the concrete theater space into a fantasized social terrain where human needs, activities, and desires clashed violently in a nightmarish social situation" (Sakellaridou 10). The reactions quoted above attest to the strong physical and psychological impact of the production's staging of the nightmare of total surveillance and lack of agency.

However, as in the case of the Gothic novel (see Castle 673–677), spectators have also been uneasy about *Game*'s affective appeal. As one reviewer puts it, she wanted "more sense, less sensation" (Kellaway). One felt that the experience was "guilt-makingly compelling" (Cavendish), another that "the characters become subhuman watched like this, like animals in a zoo" (Rutkowski); yet another described the play as "plain nasty" and "for voyeurs, not theatregoers" (Tanitch). While many understood the play as a critique of contemporary media formats, especially the prurience of reality TV (e.g. Rutkowski, Lukowski, Rev Stan) and the violence of ego-shooter video games (e.g. Coveney, Sierz), there were also those who felt that *Game* itself caters to the same impulses on the part of the recipient. Billington, for example, complains that "the play offers more in the way of visceral thrills than genuine moral inquiry."

Criticism of the play as sensationalist can be backed up by an analysis of the media campaign with which it was advertised, in particular the trailer for the play, commissioned from the digital PR company Hot Cherry (which markets itself as helping customers to "engage consumers in the digital world and reach influ-

ential audiences on an unprecedented scale” [Hot Cherry]). The trailer shows a sequence of beautifully shot close-ups of interior design, in the style of an advertisement for an exclusive home. The serene scenes are gradually overlaid with visual and auditive distortions as well as images suggesting the perspective of a target shooter in a video game. The trailer thus not only conjures up a sense of violent intrusion into an idyll, but also the titillation of participating in a risky piece of entertainment (*Game Trailer*). An appeal to the theatre-goer as a thrill-seeker is also encapsulated in the slogan with which the trailer ends, reproduced on posters advertising the production at the Almeida and on the back cover of the published script: “Are You Game?”

These aspects of the play’s script, its production and its marketing resonate with Adam Alston’s more general critique of the aesthetic politics of immersive theatre, “an emerging [...] style broadly premised on the production of experiences” (Alston 128). Alston, who defines immersive theatre as characterized by the amplification of sensory acts involved in spectatorship (129), argues that it is susceptible to the same kind of commodification as the “experience industry” of e.g. theme parks and strip-clubs (131) and that it “appeals to hedonistic and narcissistic desire” (130). He also sees it as tending to elicit in its audiences the key values of neoliberalism, such as “the valorization of risk, agency and responsibility” (128). The selling point of immersive theatre, that is, the prospect of an experience outside of the familiar protocols of theatregoing, projects a spectator who is both able and eager to take risks and exercise agency (while the actual compass for doing so may in fact be very small).

Game is unusual in that it employs the form of immersive theatre in order to frame a comment on the social and economic consequences of such a re-casting of individual agency and responsibility, depicting a dystopian image of a society in which the expectation that the welfare state should repair the housing crisis has been replaced by a capitulation to the money-making interests of corporations. This entails the social diagnosis that there is an ongoing process of reducing shared responsibility in favour of increasing that of the individual. As the divided opinion of the reviewers attest, some spectators have been more, some less willing to embrace a similar shift of responsibility onto the audience. In order to experience the play as an effective means of social criticism, spectators have to accept the idea that they should first feel intrigued, then indicted by the uncomfortable thrill of voyeurism.

“All That Is Solid Melts into Air”: *Radiant Vermin* and the Dark Side of Our Property Fantasies

The question of the precise nature of the audience's implication in the processes presented on stage is also central to Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*, which is founded on a similar premise as *Game*. This play also focuses on a young couple without funds, Ollie and Jill Swift, who are offered the opportunity to acquire the nice house they cannot afford. The Mephistophelian Miss Dee, employed by the “Department of Social Regeneration through the Creation of Dream Homes,” proposes a contract according to which the Swifts get a spacious house for free, on the condition that they fix it up themselves and thereby kick-start the gentrification of a whole neighbourhood. What Ollie and Jill find out after they move in is that there is a quick method to refurbish the house: when they accidentally kill a homeless man who has broken in, the corpse, after an interval of 66.6 seconds, transforms into the designer kitchen of their dreams. The moral qualms the couple have about the killing quickly turns into a pragmatic attitude towards the “renovators,” who are tricked into entering the house to be turned into a bathroom, garage and car or a nursery for the baby Jill is expecting.

If *Game* is a Gothic thriller, *Radiant Vermin* is Gothic comedy. Reviewers' characterizations of it as a “supernatural horror play” (Leiter), a “nightmare tale” (Billington), a “fantasy nightmare scenario” (Sierz) on the one hand and as a “satirical over-the-top sci-fi allegory” (Komisar), “absurdist satire” (Bove), and “black comic sketch” (Barbour) on the other respond to the mix of shocking outbursts of violence, evocation of the supernatural, social analysis, satirical characterization, and slapstick humour. The play's supernatural features – an aspect that is reminiscent of the Gothic novel – to some extent actually mitigate its shock value. The satanic provenance of the Faustian deal offered to the Swifts, as well as the grotesque transformations it involves, contribute to giving the play an allegorical quality. As one reviewer notes, “[w]e laugh because we recognize that [the] killings aren't really killings but a metaphor for complicity in gentrification” (Lukowski). The play was seen as “avoid[ing] literalism” (Leiter) and “creating detachment between action and portrayal” (Horn). At the same time, however, the metaphorical resonance of the murders presented in the play creates a whole new level of unease: it is left to the audience to ponder the play as exposing systemic violence and brutal social mechanisms.

Once again, stage setting plays a key role in the way in which the play negotiates affect and reflection. In contrast to the elaborate spatial design of *Game*, in which the apparatus regulates the relation between audience and stage, *Radiant Vermin* calls for a minimalist set. The original production in Soho Theatre, which

then travelled to the *Brits Off-Broadway* festival in New York, featured a “pristine white stage” (Billington) with “no fancy [...] lighting” (Woolgrove) and “next to no props” (Horn). More than half of the reviewers register the special impact of this bare space and variously see it as adding “a note of clinical detachment, as if Jill and Ollie were pathological specimens” (Brantley), and exposing the characters “to the merciless gaze of the spectators” (Sierz).

One may at first sight find it odd that a play about people obsessed with re-modelling their home features not a single piece of furniture or any other household object. But on reflection this makes perfect sense: not only does the bare stage offer a practical solution to the problem of representing the supernatural transformations, but it also emphasizes that the value of the material property accumulated by the protagonists is illusory. As one reviewer puts it: “All that is solid melts into air” (Corbett). This reference to the English translation of the Communist Manifesto seems fitting for a play that can be seen as a biting critique of capitalism and consumerism. At the same time, it also alludes to the uncanny character of the ‘dream home,’ which is constantly remade through the expanding ambitions and desires of its inhabitants. Jill’s sudden impression that human hair is growing out of the sofa (Ridley 78) is one of the more explicit pointers to a quality that is reminiscent of Freud’s invocation of *das Unheimliche* (‘un-homely’ as well as ‘un-secret’). The familiar object turns into something strange, and at the same time reveals the couple’s fear that their guilty secret will be found out by their neighbours. The instability of objects furthermore ties in with the *leitmotif* of sudden transformation, which is taken up in the couple’s last name, in the play’s oxymoronic title, and the name of the agency for which Miss Dee works. The latter – “social regeneration through the creation of dream houses” – contains in a nutshell a critique of an ideology of limitless economic growth and upward mobility whose upbeat rhetoric (like the cheery demeanour of the Swifts) seeks to deny or even erase the reality of its social costs.

The only actual prop called for in the stage directions is the contract brought in by Miss Dee and signed by the Swifts. Contracts, incidentally, also play a central role in the literary-historical period of the Gothic, where they represent the temporal corollary of the dread of spatial entrapment which Baldick describes as the “fearful sense of inheritance in time” (xix). Emma Clery provides a cultural-historical analysis of how in Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* a sense of being bound into temporal relations reflects contemporary anxieties about laws of property inheritance, which were felt to be destructive of individual happiness (xxxix–xxxii). Ridley’s play offers an update of the worries attached to property – as does Bartlett’s. Both in *Game* and in *Radiant Vermin*, the contracts the protagonists sign bind them to a dehumanizing logic of economic exchange. Whereas Ashley and Carly are clearly represented as the victims of this system, however, Jill and Ollie

are both victims and perpetrators. Meanwhile, the temporal reach of the ‘fearful inheritance’ that is emphasized in the dystopian Gothic plays is not into the past, but into the future – both *Game* and *Radiant Vermin* emphasize how the patterns established by the protagonists are passed on to their children.

Where *Game* implicates the audience by making them into voyeurs, *Radiant Vermin* does so by positioning them as interlocutors for the protagonists. The whole play is set up as an appeal, where the couple seek to convince the spectators that despite some of the “not exactly nice” things they’ve done, they are essentially “good people” (Ridley 5). As many of the reviewers testify, this plea is surprisingly effective: they found the characters sympathetic despite their flaws. “It’s impossible for us to resist such a jolly and entertaining couple. They implore us, almost seduce us to watch and understand,” writes Bove. Ross finds them “masters of keeping our sympathy and allegiance,” Minihan describes them as “plain likeable.” Boles argues that the play “enwraps the audience in its philosophy of home ownership” (“Theatricalizing” 62), a philosophy that “revolves around the embracing of violence to acquire a home” (64). What I would like to emphasize, however, is that this is precisely *not* because the characters or the play actually convince us of the validity of the rationalizations that are needed to justify this philosophy. Rather it is because we recognize the evasive thinking and flawed morality underlying our own reality. A majority of the reviewers highlight that in asking us to judge the characters, the play asks us to judge our own treatment of the homeless, our attitude towards the poor, our materialism: “When Jill and Ollie ask us to ponder if we’d do what they did, it’s not that Ridley expects us to say yes. Rather, he seems to hope that we’ll look beyond the play’s ludicrous surface and consider, say, our roles in gentrification, or how we treat the poor and ‘undesirable’ of society” (Horn). The play’s many playful Christian allusions, such as the devil figure, the sacrifice on the part of the homeless, the timing of the transformations, contribute to satirizing the quasi-religious status of home-ownership (and, more generally, consumer culture) as a value system devoid of compassion.

In my own reading, the point of the play is not just that in the neoliberal societies we live in materialism trumps empathy, but that it offers a more precise diagnosis of exploitation as the very condition on which prosperity is built. This idea is taken to a grotesque extreme in the transformation of body into commodity, a process that temporarily induces horror even in the protagonists, for example when Jill sees the olives she serves at a party as eyeballs (Ridley 77) or (as already quoted) the sofa as covered in human hair (78). But the real horror for the audience lies in the realization of how apt the allegory may be in describing our actual living conditions. *Radiant Vermin* goes further than criticizing the rhetoric of the ‘undeserving poor’ that has once again taken prominence in political and

media discourse (see e.g. the analysis offered by Biressi and Nunn). The play actually undermines the very idea of a correlation between merit and wealth. In a scene that references the ‘slave labour’ on which the tea trade is built (Ridley 98), it also hints at the global dimension of inequality. Ultimately, then, the play poses the question: what if we do not ‘deserve’ any of the comforts we aspire to?

The answer is left open at the end, which shows Ollie and Jill gearing up for a whole series of new dream houses, imagining a future in which their two sons will be able to help them with the thousands of “renovators” this will require (114). The plot development suggests two possible ways in which this plan could play out. One option is a downfall, caused by the Swifts’ own greed. This is plainly what Ollie and Jill themselves are afraid of – the whole play is driven by their anxiety, which culminates in a frantic climax in a party scene, where they are simultaneously trying to impress their neighbours and to hide their guilty secret. It is also what the fairytale allusions seem to point to: the Swifts are strongly reminiscent of the never-satisfied fisherman and his wife in the Grimms’ story, who are granted one wish after the next, until in the end they go too far and are left with nothing. The other option is to imagine a cynical happy end rather than poetic justice for the characters. With Miss Dee’s reappearance at the end of the play and her offer of an even bigger house which will require double the “sacrifices” (113), what could be in the cards is the mounting accumulation of wealth, bought at the cost of moral bankruptcy not just for the protagonists, but also for the following generation.

Conclusion

I have described the playhouse Gothic as a type of play that uses strategies of the Gothic to rework the relation between dramatic and theatrical space. On the level of the dramatic action, the dream of home as providing comfort and security is exposed as an anxiety-inducing nightmare. The negotiation of theatrical space, in turn, is designed to elicit affect on the part of the audience – while at the same time extending an invitation to reflect on the fact that each and every one of them participates in negotiating, and possibly exacerbating, social hierarchies that also translate into spatial relations. To some extent the playhouse Gothic can be seen as inheriting the emotional intensity of the big theatrical trend of the 1990s, in-*yer-face*, which Aleks Sierz after all has described as “experiential” (19). However, the playhouse Gothic is neither as aggressively raw as the typical in-*yer-face* play, nor does it, as Sierz writes of those 1990s plays, “impose [...] its point of view on the audience” (19). In fact, in enlisting the Gothic effect in order to explore contemporary anxieties about the precarities of housing and property, the plays re-

quire their spectators to position themselves in relation to the constellations on stage.

In *Game*, the interlocking of theatrical and dramatic space creates a tension between the thrills and the discomforts of exploitation and sensationalism. The play activates various physical and cognitive channels that open up a number of contradictory positions for the spectators (or participants?). It thus elicits the sense that in the contemporary economic situation we are all in danger of becoming both victims and perpetrators. By itself adopting the logic of economic exchange it wants to criticize, *Game* risks some loss in moral authority – but then, part of its appeal lies in the playful way in which it approaches the issue of economic inequality.

In *Radiant Vermin*, spectators are asked to position themselves in their emotional relation to the protagonists (do they accept the address as confidantes?) as well as in their moral evaluation of the Swifts' actions (do they accept the role as jury?). Ridley's play gives its audience more opportunities to distance themselves than does Bartlett's: through the abstract stage design, the actors' slapstick performances, the fairy-tale logic that highlights the allegorical quality of the story. But at the same time, the play exerts a strong affective power that rests on the spectator's introduction into a Gothic sensibility: he or she is blatantly confronted with a very literal take on the horrifying mechanisms of victimization that are glossed over by everyday rhetoric on economics and politics. As Sierz puts it in his review: "neither cardboard city, nor the local mall, will ever be the same again." Nor, one could add, will one's own home. Or the theatre as a space that is, after all, also permeated by socio-economic realities.

With its focus on the home as a concrete socio-economic space as well as an emotionally loaded fantasy, the playhouse Gothic works both as an anatomy of the housing crisis as a specific problem and as a more general social commentary. Its evocative, sometimes crude scenarios transform the private, intimate sphere of home into a horror show. They thus offer aesthetically mediated confrontations with the notion that our everyday experiences are suffused with the condition one of the most prominent proponents of affect theory, Lauren Berlant, has labelled "cruel optimism" and described as typical of contemporary Western societies: a relation "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 1). The kind of world Bartlett's and Ridley's plays evoke can indeed be characterized, in Berlant's words, as one where "people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies – say of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work – when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abound" (1).

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