**‘Weird Pictures, Monster Mansions and Time Pockets: Gothic Obscurities and Temporal Displacement in *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children*’**

The blurb on the back cover of Ransom Riggs’ 2011 novel *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* promises: ‘A Mysterious Island. An Abandoned Orphanage. A strange collection of very peculiar photographs’. To the connoisseur of gothic and horror narratives these motifs may well be strikingly familiar, seen again and again in numerous novels and films from both of these popular genres. Yet what we have in *Miss Peregrine* is an engaging mixture of bildungsroman, portal-fantasy and gothic aesthetics. The story revolves around the character of sixteen-year-old Jacob Portman who, by deciphering the clues given to him in the final words of his dying grandfather, discovers a collection of mysterious letters and pictures from his grandfather’s secretive past. These in turn lead him to a Welsh island, the ruined remains of an old orphanage and the secret portal to a temporal pocket in which lives, preserved in time, a community of supernaturally-gifted children (the peculiars of the title) under the charge of the enigmatic Miss Peregrine. However, this idyllic utopia is soon threatened by dark forces, seeking to discover the hidden school and destroy its special residents. Jacob finds himself embroiled in an ancient conflict that leaves him with an important decision to make.

What makes *Miss Peregrine* such an interesting novel is the fusion of portal fantasy and gothic motifs, explored within the engaging context of skewed temporality. The portal as a motif is a common trait within the fantasy genre, especially within those novels aimed at younger readers. As Farah Mendlesohn suggests in her work *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, the concept of portals and the passage of a protagonist through them to an ‘unknown place’ is older than the modern fantasy genre, yet it is with the growth of fantastic fiction during the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century that we begin to see the portal fantasy become popular. Novels such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* books and C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are all recognisable and familiar texts within this specific sub-genre. Yet what is it they all share in common?

Mendlesohn describes the portal fantasy quite simplistically in her introduction as ‘a fantastic world entered through a portal’ (xix) but later probes a little further with more conceptual detail:

A character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal to an unknown place. Although portal fantasies do not *have* to be quest fantasies the overwhelming majority are, and the rhetorical position taken by author/narrator is consistent.

The position of the reader... is one of companion-audience, tied to the protagonist, and dependent upon the protagonist for explanation and decoding (1)

In portal-fantasies we, the reader, engage from a specific entry point which marks the transition from realist space to something more fantastical in nature; or, as John Clute states: ‘[portals] litter the world of the fantastic, marking the transition between this world and another; from our time to another time; from youth to adulthood’ (776). Indeed, it is this very definition that indicates why the portal is such a common motif within children’s fantasy, as its playful temporality reflects the nature of growing up, of progressing from childhood to adulthood. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, the Pevensie children, after vanquishing the White Witch live a long and prosperous life as rulers of Narnia. Only when they discover the long-forgotten lamp-post do they return through the portal, less than an hour gone since their original departure, despite decades of time passed in Narnia. Portals act as ‘temporal discombobulations’ in such novels - sorry, I had to include that amazing conference title somewhere - time moving differently on either side of the portal due to temporal asynchronicity between opposing sides. By moving through a portal time skews in some way for the protagonist due to the introduction of a secondary world, and the symbolism that can be evoked in terms of bildungsroman-esque ‘coming-of-age’ storytelling is very effective. The Pevensie’s are dramatically changed by the temporal effects of the Narnia-portal. In our ‘real-world’ their vast experiences change them into adults trapped within the physical bodies of children.

This shifting temporal effect that portals encourage links with Martin Heidegger’s theory of time put forward in *Being and Time* as a counterpoint to Aristotle’s linear concept. Heidegger’s work on the concept of Being ultimately challenged traditional philosophy concerning temporality, touching upon, and asking questions, about the connections between the idea of ‘Being’ and the passage and experience of time itself. Heidegger’s questioning here is that time is much more than a series of progressive moments; that the philosophical concept of ‘being’ is intrinsically intertwined with a more complex concept of temporality, that ‘being *is* time’ and our very existence is a fluid movement between life and death that is affected by all the temporal points that have existed. The portal in fantasy novels skews temporality, playing with Heidegger’s suggestion of a more complex idea of time, and how this may affect the psychology of the portal-traveller.

This is seen in Riggs’ novel, where the portal exists within an ancient cairn that Jacob discovers on Cairnholm Island. The cairn is taller than he is, with an entrance to a tunnel leading to a subterranean chamber. The chamber only has one entrance and exit, yet by stepping into it one is unknowingly passing into a temporal portal. Passing through is a physical activity as the tunnel is damp and narrow, forcing Jacob to ‘move forward in a kind a hunchbacked crab-walk’ (120). These cramped conditions conjure up images of the rabbit-hole in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and the fur-coat-filled confines of the wardrobe in C. S. Lewis’ novel, portals that seem as if the real-world is enclosing around the portal-traveller. The real-world physically contracts so that the secondary world can expand outwards, the portal acting as the waist in a topographical hourglass.

In *Miss Peregrine* the portal also acts as a mirror. Both versions of the world mirror each other in terms of topographical detail: the fact that Miss Peregrine’s unique home exists in a rural community is significant here as it allows Riggs to move past any architectural expansion that would have occurred in a more urban location over the course of seventy years. The village of Cairnholm has changed little in this time, and it therefore means that Jacob does not realise his movement through time straight away; in fact he notices that people are staring at his strange attire, yet fails to notice the same about the villagers (124).

Time moves at the same rate on either side of Riggs’ portal. A minute is a minute, an hour an hour. Yet Riggs introduces an interesting twist by having one side of his portal stuck in a temporal loop, the same day reset over-and-over again. September 3rd, 1940. This detail is significant in establishing Riggs’ portal from being different from those of Carroll and Lewis, Instead of being a doorway to *another* world, Riggs’ portal acts in the same fashion as the science fiction novum of the time machine, shifting the traveller temporally instead of topographically. Whereas portals often affect the traveller’s perception of time due to topographical shift between two worlds out of sync in terms of linear temporal progression, Riggs’ portal actually shifts the traveller *through* time, not geographical space. This tiny difference aligns *Miss Peregrine* with the science fiction genre - a loose connection, but a viable one nevertheless. This portal is a temporal, instead of topographical, shift; both sides of the portal are actually the same, just at different specific moments. It is more aligned to Clute’s suggestion of portals that shift ‘from our time to another time’.

The temporal loop has been created by Miss Peregrine herself, in order to hide her peculiar children from the evil forces looking for them in the real-world. For seventy years the children have been safe within the temporal pocket, but a price has been paid. Even though the day is reset, meaning that the children do not grow older, they have the memories of all the previous days that have come before. This is quite a sinister, psychologically-obscure side-effect of the portal; the bodies of young children with the collective memories of elderly people, stuck in an eternal cycle they cannot escape. The portal therefore shifts these children into a form of hauntological body, neither here nor there; living or dead; unable to progress on with their lives. Its underlying supernatural capacity becomes associated with entrapment and the ‘undead’. The portal’s temporal trickery infuses the peculiars with a Gothic aesthetic of uncanniness; a feeling of being simultaneously ‘natural’ and ‘*un*natural’ to paraphrase Freud’s work on the subject. It is only at the end of the novel, when the power of the portal is dropped so the peculiars can go out in search of their own kind, that this aesthetic changes. This is why there is a subtle hint of hopefulness in Riggs’ ending. Time is restored to normality and the peculiars are granted movement forward to a new day. As Jacob reflects: ‘The doors had been blown off our cages’ (348). In this ending, Heidegger’s theory is confirmed: Being *is* Time. The peculiars at this moment become similar to the Pevensie children returning from Narnia. Both have been given a lifetime of experience in a temporal slip. They must move forward with their existence, changed forever.

Is this novel a portal fantasy? Well, the plot and the actions of the characters do suggest so, yet the nature of the temporal pocket within this portal does throw in one complication. If we refer back to Mendelsohn’s definition, then the other side of the hourglass is not a *unknown place*, but a temporal skew of Jacob’s own recognisable world. However, it is hard to ignore the presence of the portal in Riggs’ novel as it is so central to the plot, and it is the bleeding of one side into the other that drives everything forward and introduces a sense of the fantastic into the novel.

So, how does the Gothic aesthetic interact with the concept of portal fantasy in *Miss Peregrine*? As well as being closely associated with the uncanny, Gothic also explores concepts of beauty and sublimity. As a category the sublime contains a sense of vastness and greatness, of forces incomprehensible. It includes the supernatural and the spiritual, our delight in the presence of natural forces so powerful and grand that we are left bewildered. This delight in the terrible is what makes the sublime appealing as an aesthetic for all aspects of Gothic art, architecture and literature.

In his *Philosophical Enquiry* Edmund Burke attempts to define the Sublime, linking it with the concept of terror. For Burke, whatever is capable of producing the awe and emotional response that coincides with fear is capable of producing a feeling of the sublime. He further posits the sublime is created through moments of obscurity, or incomprehension. Moments in which the world is presented at its most powerful and strange, in a manner that we cannot understand, as summarised here by David Saliba. Although Burke does not describe obscurities as comprehensibly as other definitions within *A Philosophical Enquiry,* his work in this area does provide a useful framework for establishing Gothic aesthetic within art and literature. In essence he produces a list of seven obscurities which represent defining qualities of the sublime within a wide spectrum of Gothic texts. These obscurities are: meteorological, topographical, architectural, material, textual, spiritual and psychological. Common motifs are associated with each. We can therefore use Burke’s seven obscurities to briefly explore the ways in which Riggs may be trying to emulate Gothic aesthetics within *Miss Peregrine.*

In the novel, meteorological obscurities are very plain to see. Weather plays a key part on both sides of the portal. As the peculiars are trapped within a temporal pocket, the weather is always the same, emphasising their cycle of entrapment. In fact, when he is exploring the same house in the present world, the meteorological conditions are always described in a typical Gothic style as dark, foggy and stormy, the ruinous remains of Miss Peregrine’s home constantly shrouded in mist and surrounded by overgrown bogs, reminiscent of familiar landscapes from archetypal Gothic texts. When Jacob first crosses the portal, and is blinded by the midday sun, he comments upon the meteorological shift, saying ‘*God, the weather changes fast around here!*’ without comprehending his transition in temporal space (123).

Which brings us to topographical obscurities, most clearly explored in the novel’s principal setting, the island of Cairnholm. The majority of the novel takes place here amongst the rugged landscape that instantly sparks Jacob’s imagination and fascination, his initial description of the island suitably Gothic in nature:

It was my grandfather’s island. Looming and bleak, folded in mist, guarded by a million screeching birds, it looked like some ancient fortress constructed by giants. As I gazed up at its sheer cliffs, tops disappearing in a reef of ghostly clouds,the idea that this was a magical place didn’t seem so ridiculous. (66)

This is a wild land, comprising of bogs and heather and mist. Riggs’ depictions of landscape, although through the eyes of a young narrator, are descriptive and evocative, of almost mythical proportions. It is no wonder that this topography is imbued with magic and mysticism; it is indeed a sublime landscape. The island, and indeed Miss Peregrine’s house, are both also examples of enclosed communities, cut-off from the normalities of the modern world. Miss Peregrine’s home may be trapped inside a temporal bubble, yet in many ways, the inhabitants of Cairnholm Island are too, away from the influence of a rapidly developing postmodern and capitalist world.

One of the most important Gothic obscurities in *Miss Peregrine* is the architectural structure of the house itself. It is a significant presence on both sides of the portal: within the temporal pocket it represents sanctuary for the peculiars under Miss Peregrine’s charge, a beautiful mansion home. However, on the other side, in the normal world, it is a ruinous sprawl, the devastation caused by the WWII bombing raid that occurs at the end of every day within the temporal pocket. On both sides of the portal the house takes on anthropomorphic qualities, seemingly coming alive. There is a noticeable connection to the eponymous house in Edgar Allen Poe’s famous story *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Riggs describes his ruined mansion with a sense of sinister corporeality, as if it has skin, bones and claws of its own. The house takes on a life of its own here, is more than a simple architectural ruin. The similarities to Poe’s description of the house of Usher are clear to see, once again the architecture of the house brought to life in a terrifying manner. It is therefore clearly suggestible that Riggs’ is paying homage to Poe’s Gothic archetype.

The contrast between the house on the opposing sides of the portal also highlights the material obscurities present in the novel. In the real-world, these are represented in the house through descriptions of detritus and ruin, which create a carpet of decay through which Jacob must move:

Each room was a disaster more incredible than the last. Newspapers gathered in drifts. Scattered toys, evidence of children long gone, lay skinned in dust. Creeping mold had turned window-adjacent walls black and furry. Fireplaces were throttled with vines that had descended from the roof and begun to spread across the floors like alien tentacles. (80)

By contrast, the house within the temporal pocket is pristine and ordered, with a ‘staircase, now gleaming with varnish... wallpaper, and wainscoting and cheerful shades of paint’ (140). The portal produces a shift in the material obscurity of the house and it is this shift that Jacob utilises, most effectively, to identify this as an opposing version of his world. Material obscurities are also explored in *Miss Peregrine* through the use of veils and disguises. Miss Peregrine herself is constantly dressed in black from head-to-toe, her photograph depicting her also with a veil. Her demeanour is ghost-like, a mournful figure, yet simultaneously homely and authoritarian, as all good headmistresses should be! The antagonist of the novel (whom I will not reveal) also uses disguise as a means of manipulating events. This character is not what they appear to be, and this holds great significance for Jacob as his personal quest begins to reach its conclusion. Riggs is very clever with his use of material obscurities in *Miss Peregrine*, once again mirroring other classic Gothic narratives that constantly shift and play with our mis-understanding of the characters involved through the use of clothing and disguise.

By far the most interesting use of Gothic obscurities in *Miss Peregrine* is the inclusion of these photographs and letters which Jacob discovers, initially those of his dead Grandfather but later from other sources. These create a sense of textual obscurity and interactivity for the reader; the photographs not only providing more visual information to support Riggs’ description, but also drawing the reader directly into the narrative itself, making them complicit with Jacob’s discoveries and actions. Also, it means that the construction of the book itself takes on an interesting dynamic; the first person journal narrative, and the photographs and letters, combine to form a ‘found narrative’. The personal narrative of Jacob needs the support of the photographs and vice versa. There is no ‘truth’ without all of the components of this found narrative coming together. The use of found narratives is a common feature of Gothic texts, most famously in the letters, diaries and other written communications used as a structural device in both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*.

Spiritual obscurities are represented through the peculiars themselves and, perhaps more importantly, their supernatural powers. Invisibility, the ability to float, strength, fire, and shapeshifting are all powers that the peculiars possess. A particular favourite is the sinister power that Enoch wields, which enables him to bring inanimate objects to life, to become a puppet master. In a poignant moment at the end of the novel, he animates a clay figure which he lays to rest upon the body of Victor. (347) These seemingly magical powers tap into the Gothic aesthetic of the uncanny very effectively due to their presence within children; the innocent infected by the supernatural. At least that’s how the peculiars are viewed within the real-world. In the safety of the temporal pocket they are free to explore these powers as a gift, not a curse.

Finally there are psychological obscurities, and like all good fantasy and Gothic texts there are several examples of dreams, visions, hallucinations, ghostly presences and questioning of sanity within *Miss Peregrine.* Most effective within this category however are the elements of terror which Riggs deploys. After seeing a demonic creature kill his Grandfather, Jacob is put into psychiatric care at the hands of Dr Golan to help him deal with the trauma. (33-51) Of course, we soon learn that there is nothing hallucinogenic about what he has seen. As with other classic texts, Riggs is using Gothic motifs to explore the dynamic between madness and sanity. The tentacular monsters hunting down the peculiars are directly lifted from the stories of Lovecraftian-Weird fiction, Jacob only able to articulate their uncanny features through actually drawing them. The resulting picture is a horrifying fusion of monster and human, exploring concepts of body horror and terror.

By deploying Burke’s seven obscurities as a framework, Riggs is able to develop a strong Gothic style within the novel, creating a rich sense of the fantastic within his world creation. The elements of portal fantasy present within the text also help with this methodology, although the deliberate temporal, rather than topographical, displacement within Riggs’ portal does make it slightly different from more classic examples. The repeated temporality is what defines the very existence of the peculiars, affirming Heidegger’s belief that ‘Being *is* Time’. Therefore, the combination of temporality, portal-fantasy and Gothic obscurities is central, with all three elements working in unison to produce the sense of the fantastic within the text. The film adaptation of *Miss Peregrine* is released soon from Twentieth Century Fox. Tim Burton is directing. Given his propensity for Gothic stylistics, and the fabulous world-building seen in *Edward Scissorhands* and *Beetlejuice*, there seems no one more fitting to approach an adaptation of this novel. I’ll see you on the other side. Miss Peregrine is waiting for you...