Digital Cultures of Horror in Mónica Ojeda's Fiction

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Abstract:
The Internet is a world where all kinds of people with different interests, motivations, and worldviews browse and interact with each other. These interactions have given rise to diverse digital cultures, some of which can be called Digital Cultures of Horror. As an inhabitant of the contemporary world, Mónica Ojeda is aware of these cultures' dark themes and environments and how they shape the lives of their members, so she has used them to create her fiction and depicts the dreadful side of human beings. Mónica Ojeda describes the horrors of the Internet and digital cultures in her novels Nefando (Nefandous), where she touches on the subject of the Dark Web and its perverse and violent content through a creepy video game, andMandíbula (Jawbone), where she unveils how the digital folklore stories of horror called creepypastas induce fear and affect the lives of a group of teenagers. With this in mind, this paper argues that Mónica Ojeda's fiction represents the crossroads between horror and technology that reveal the digital cultures of horror that exist on the Internet.

Keywords: Mónica Ojeda, Digital cultures, Digital horror, Internet, Dark Web Introduction

The Internet is a world where all kinds of people with different interests, motivations, and worldviews browse and interact with each other. These interplays have given rise to diverse digital cultures, some of which can be called Digital Cultures of Horror. As a citizen of the contemporary world, Mónica Ojeda is aware of these cultures' dark themes and environments and how they shape the lives of their members, so she has used them to create her fiction and depicts the dreadful side of human beings. Thus she describes the horrors of the Internet and digital cultures in her novels Nefando[1] (Nefandous), where she touches on the subject of the Dark Web and its perverse and violent content through a macabre video game, and Mandíbula[2] (Jawbone), where she unveils how the digital folklore stories of horror called creepypastas induce fear and affect the lives of a group of teenagers.

Mónica Ojeda (Guayaquil, Ecuador, 1988) is currently one of the most prominent young writers in Latin American literature and has been recognized among the 25 best young authors in the Spanish language according to the literary magazine Grantain 2021 (Claudia, par. 1). As heir of new literary trends, her narrative stands out for the open exploration of violence, fear, pain, perversity, and conflictive relationships in everyday life, especially in family settings, since, in her fiction, the most terrifying arises from what is close, known, and less expected. Hence she incorporates into her fiction taboo themes such as incest, child pornography, violence, and female monstrosity as sources of contemporary horror to reveal the darker and repulsive side of human beings, crafting "a literature that renews traditions about fear, violence, and pain" (Carretero, 2020, p. 28).

Since her work began to catch the attention of literary critics, the study of Mónica Ojeda's fiction has focused on the analysis of sexuality and its relationship with violence and trauma; and the relationship between horror, beauty, language, and the monstrous feminine. Most of these investigations briefly mention the Internet digital cultures present in Ojeda's work, but they do not elaborate on their role in her literary creation. By narrating the horrors of the Web and its digital cultures, Mónica Ojeda shows that the Internet is a perfect vehicle for the spread of contemporary horror and that

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[1] This paper will use the e-version of the novel published by Editorial Candaya in 2016.

[2] The e-version published by Epulibre in 2018 and available at ebookelo.com will be used in this work.

netizens, through their interaction with the Internet, are the origin of everything egregious that circulates on it. In the case of the novel Nefando, it is through a browser game and the community of gamers and their forums on the Dark Web, where terrible acts such as child-raping, and cruelty against animals abound; while inMandíbula it is through the "creepypastas" created and fed by the collective fears and anxieties of young girls.

With this background in mind, this article aims to show how Mónica Ojeda's fiction represents the crossroads between horror and digital cultures that exist on the Internet and their impact on literature. To this end, in the first part, the article will make a brief description of the forms that horror takes within the Internet from a cultural perspective and its role in the formation of digital cultures of horror, and then will briefly analyze their effect on popular culture and collective behavior as depicted in two novels from the Ecuadorian writer.

The Horror of the Internet

As a narrative genre, horror evokes fear, dread, and repulsion, and it is a way of exploring and expressing the anxieties, fears, and disturbing desires of human beings, that is, "the subterranean areas behind everyday experience" (Beville, 2009, p. 15). Horror fiction also exposes the psychological traits of people and the deviation from what is considered 'normal' within a given society. Hence, Fred Botting (2008b) claims that horror exists in destructive and violent attitudes or "excesses that, unsanctioned, have no admissible outlet other than in fantasy or fiction" (p. 83).

In his paper Culture,Evil, and Horror (2007), Paul Santilli holds that, at the cultural level, "horror is the undefined other of a culture" (p. 173). In other words, for Santilli, horror goes against the culturally accepted because it evokes elements of reality "that have not been assimilated into a culture" (p. 174) since they are considered forbidden. Consequently, from a cultural point of view, anything that causes horror is viewed as abnormal, inconceivable, and proscribed because it exposes our fear of human evilness, brutality, and cruelty. Taking Mónica Ojeda's fiction as an example, incest, rape of children, and zoophilia found within the Dark Web are true aberrations and shocking because they are not culturally acceptable. Hence, horror acts as a tool for the critical examination of societies and their members.

In another vein, nowadays, due to its omnipresence in daily life, the Internet has become an extension of our reality, and it is hard to separate or differentiate from it. The Internet is now the main stage for the expression of contemporary folklore and cultures, so that myths, hoaxes, legends, and folktales pervade social media, blogs, YouTube, Wikimedia, forums, video games, and so on, and come into contact with traditional narratives such as literary texts, feeding and re-feeding each other. In that way, the Internet is the main space for digital fiction like creepypastas, where they are modified and spread continuously to become alive and take over the tangible world through their audience. Furthermore, the Internet and its digital cultures have had a powerful impact on popular culture and collective behavior, so they are blamed for inciting violence, homicide, suicide, and other aberrant conducts, as in the case of video games, creepypastas, memes, etc. Ojeda's novel Mandíbuladepicts this situation with the invention of the 'White God'[1] and his sadomasochistic cult, inspired by creepypastas, which take over the lives of five girls; and Nefando, where the lives of the protagonists revolve around the dreadful homonymous game.

The erasure of the borders between reality and fiction and the known and the unknown are the main hallmarks of digital horror that circulate on the Internet. For instance, one of the main features of creepypastas characters is the difficulty to define and classify them since their features are human and non-human at the same time. In this sense, in Slender Man, H.P. Lovecraft, and the Dynamics of Horror Cultures (2018), Evans points out that "Internet monsters exist in cyberspace and therefore in a realm that is related to everyday reality… and challenges our notion of what is real" (p. 134). Thus, web spaces have become sites for the repository and distribution of creepypastas and other horror narratives, which are transformed over and over by members of the creepypastas communities who play with reality and fiction, giving rise to a culture of horror that takes over their existences.

Another of the niches of digital horror where a culture of horror has developed, also described by Mónica Ojeda in her fiction, is online video games. Video games, as a type of storytelling, through characters' voices and

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[1] The White God and the White Age are part of a myth, inspired by the narratives present on the Internet, created by Annelise (one of the main characters of the novel) as a means to face and escape the conflicts and traumatic experiences that she and her friends experienced during their childhood and puberty through the horror generated by worshiping this entity, since horror surpasses and overshadows all lived experience.

actions, invite players to participate, thus awakening their concealed emotions and desires, as seen in Ojeda's novel. Thanks to this interaction, gameplaying creates a parallel world that influences reality in the same way creepypastas do.

The Cultures of Horror in the Internet

In Horror Memesand Digital Culture (2020), Tosha R. Taylor states that "lacking geographic or temporal boundaries and allowing almost total anonymity, the Internet itself is a gothic space" (p. 985). By enabling free communication and massive content dissemination in a fast and easily accessible way, it is a perfect place for the convergence of horror and fears, as observed with the Dark Web and its content of murder, incest, pedophilia, zoophilia, child pornography, necrophilia, and more. Since within the Dark Web there is no effective way to control access to illegal and prohibited content, it is the perfect niche for all kinds of criminals, perverts, sociopaths, and other individuals with deviant behavior to browse freely, thus boosting digital cultures of horror.

Given the participatory nature of digital cultures, their narratives are interactive, incorporating elements of literature, movies, comics, TV, folktales, and other cultural products, and also share the motifs and conventions of the horror genre. In general, digital cultures of horror have an intricated interplay and interdependence with the folkloresque. Similarly, like in folk narratives, Internet users can keep their anonymity and openly share and discuss topics without worrying about revealing their identities to create horror narratives. This helps to establish an indefinable border between fiction and reality, a crucial characteristic of digital horror.

Digital Horror as a Theme in Mónica Ojeda's Fiction

As a millennial writer, Mónica Ojeda knows the good and evil sides of the Internet. So, through one of Nefando character's voices, she claims that

> El internet que conocemos está lleno de lugares, lenguajes, territorios, y es, en sí mismo, un mundo alterno Todos los problemas sociales de nuestro mundo existen en la red:

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el robo, la pederastia, la pornografía, el crimen organizado, el narco-
tráfico, el sicariato...

[The Internet is full of places, languages, and territories, and is, in
itself, an alternate world All the social problems of our world exist
online: robbery, pedophilia, pornography, organized crime, drug
trafficking, hitmen...][1] (p. 58)

She knows of the existence of this dreary world, and her life, like most
of people, is influenced directly and indirectly by the Internet and its digital
cultures. The influence of digital folklore, the depravity of the Dark Web,
and the cruelty of social networks are protagonists in her fiction, and she
uses the Internet digital cultures of horror to build her fiction and expose the
ugly side of people and the paradox that is that the disturbing and horrifying
attract us and, in many cases, please us, thus writing a narrative of violence
and fear in Mandíbula (2018) and of shocking perversion in Nefando (2016).

Digital Folklore and the Horror of the Creepypasta in Mandíbula

Folklore is vital for nurturing and maintaining the horror tradition as it
is one of its sources of inspiration. Nowadays, the Internet is the best vehicle
for disseminating folkloric stories, urban legends, hoaxes, and horror. Social
networks, forums, blogs, and instant messaging apps, among others, have
helped to create new and, most of the times, absurd fears, promoting the
alienation of our world, as observed inMandíbulain the case of "grupos en
Facebook en donde chicos y chicas se asumían a sí mismos como licántropos
e intercambiaban historias sobre sus transformaciones, fotos, videos, etc."
(groups on Facebook where boys and girls assumed themselves as lycanthro-
pes and exchanged stories, photos, videos, etc., about their transformations,
p. 82) or the case of Annelise, who wanted to write creepypastas about the
White God and the White Age that were present "en videojuegos, páginas
web, cómics y películas caseras" (in video games, websites, comics and home
movies, p. 120) and "crear un mito parecido al de Slenderman" (create a myth
similar to that of Slender man, p. 90). This use of the Internet for the
creation of monsters and horror legends is the outcome of the necessity of

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[1] This and the other translations from Spanish to English of the excerpts cited in this paper
are mine.

expressing and assimilating the current anxieties, fears, and problems of humankind.

In this context appear the creepypastas, which "are stories, pictures, videos or audio material that have a paranormal or supernatural theme and convey narratives in the shortest format possible" (Boyer, 2013, p. 243) and are created and reproduced by members of the creepypastas communities. They belong to the Netlore or folklore generated and replicated through digital media and Web platforms. By relating to contemporary folklore, creepypastas become folkloric narratives whose themes are transferred to digital narratives, which, in turn, become part of other cultural expressions, such as literary works – as it happens in Ojeda's novel – and like folkloric stories, the "process of mythos development around their creation demons-trate communal testing of ideas, variation among tales, the direct and recur-sive engagement of… creators and audiences, and the desire to base the mysterious character in common fears, experiences, and traditions… " (Chess & Newsom, p. 77).

Because of the lack of a clear delimitation between reality and fiction, the main narrative particularity of creepypastas is the feeling that the events narrated might be real, which causes a sensation of fear in the audience, as observed inMandíbula, where the girls come to believe that the creepypasta about mothers who eat their daughters may be true, so "Todas pensaban que la madre de Annelise se parecía a las madres de sus historias de terror, pero no se lo decían" (They all thought Annelise's mother resembled the mothers in her horror stories, but they didn't tell her, p. 114). In other words, the creepypastas seem real, and often the narrated events are considered irrefu-table truths, despite their improbability and evident fake nature.

Another essential feature of creepypastas is anonymity, which contri-butes to the mystery and sinister atmosphere of the stories, and serves as an aesthetic element to produce fright in readers. Furthermore, in creepypastas communities, the ability for users to edit and share texts transforms cree-pypastas into collective creations in permanent construction and evolution, like in the case of Slenderman[1] mentioned in the novel: "Es una criatura inventada por cientos y miles de personas que lo mantienen vivo generando

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[1] It is one of the most popular creepypastas existing on the Internet created in 2009 by Eric Knudsen and users from the web site 'Something Awful' through Photoshop of paranormal images. (Chess and Newson 16).

creepypastas, que son horror stories que se esparcen y crecen en la web" (It is a creature invented by hundreds of people who keep it alive by generating creepypastas, which are horror stories that propagate and grow within the Web, p. 90).

Throughout Mandíbula, psychological fear, to which creepypastas contribute, is supported by violence as an argumentative thread. For instance, the two main characters, "Fernanda y Annelise leían creepypastas para inspirarse a la hora de crear sus propios relatos de terror" (Fernanda and Annelise read creepypasta for inspiration in creating their own horror stories, p. 74). By doing so they are influenced by creepypastas, which seize their reality to produce a mythology of terror in the form of the White God and his cult of violence and corporal pain, as seen with Annelise, who "parece poseída por las cosas que se inventa" (seems possessed by the things she invents, p. 86). Thus, the fear and horror generated by Internet narratives and their influence on the five girls serve as the basis for the creation of the White Age and the White God myth as a means to explore the dreary recesses of their minds and souls and reflect things that happen in their lives.

The horrors of creepypasta also encourage the recklessness and rebellious attitude of the girls and serve as the background for the narration of stormy mother-daughter relationships. This situation evinces the power of this type of cultural product, especially on teenagers, who are the most susceptible to being influenced by them, like in the case of Slender Man, one of the best-known and studied creepypastas, which has been blamed for causing anxiety, depression, psychosis, and homicides among young people (Taylor, p. 998). Likewise, in the novel, "En las historias de Annelise, el Dios Blanco se les presentaba solo a chicas de su edad y la visión era tan perturbadora que las transformaba para siempre" (In Annelise's stories, the White God appeared only to girls their age, and the vision was so disturbing that it transformed them forever, p. 77), and

> En los relatos sobre la edad blanca, las jóvenes protagonistas tenían teofanías espantosas en donde el Dios Blanco se les aparecía igual que Yahvé a Moisés, y ese era el comienzo de un progresivo cambio que las arrastraba a hacer cosas horribles como comerse a sus madres, matar a sus hermanos o acercarse a cultos secretos poco antes de desaparecer. [In the stories about the White Age, the young protagonists had gruesome theophanies where the White God appeared to

them just like Yahweh to Moses, and that was the beginning of a progressive change that pushed them to do horrible things like eating their mothers, killing their brothers, or joining secret cults shortly before disappearing.] (p. 99)

As in the case of Slender Manand other monsters and creepypasta characters that "always have human features but never will be fully human" (Powell 19), the White God of the novel is a "Dios-madre-de-útero-deambulante" (God-Mother of wandering womb, p. 72), a god without face or shape that "podría adquirir la apariencia de todo lo que existe en el universo" (might acquire the appearance of everything that exists in the universe) and whose "símbolo es una mandíbula que mastica todos los miedos" (symbol is a jawbone that chews all the fears, p. 99).

Therefore Mandíbulais a novel that probes the creepypastas and their communities and how they cause fear and terror and affect the lives of the characters.

The Browser Game Culture of Horror in Nefando

Horror motifs abound in video games, and the exploration of horror is recurrent in them. Nefandois one of Mónica Ojeda's novels which discloses the sinister world of browser games and the Dark Web, as well as aspects of the digital culture of gamers. In the novel, Nefando is a browser game that revolves around violence, pedophilia, zoophilia, and child pornography, "una representación de la mierda que nos rodea todos los días, un simple poner en escena lo que está ahí donde es imposible clavar los ojos: en nuestras propias nucas" (a representation of the shit that surrounds us every day, a staging of what is there where it is impossible to fix the eyes: our own necks, ch. 12). In this game, as in real video games, these banned and revolting themes are exposed in order to vent the fears and hidden desires of people because "en el cibermundo todos nos atrevemos, al menos una vez, a ser criminales o moralmente incorrectos..." (in the cyber world, we all dare, at least once, to be criminal or morally improper..., ch. 8).

Within the space provided by browser games, the players, without external censorship, feel confident and safe to do or express themselves without fear of punishment. This freedom also allows their self-exploration, thus revealing their obscure selves, as Ojeda demonstrates in Nefando, where

scenes of violence, animal cruelty, zoophilia, and sexual abuse of children are enjoyed by the players of the game, as described in the following excerpt on one scene where the female character of the game is sadistically beaten: "No sé cuánto tiempo lo hice, pero la sangre llovió y eso estuvo bien. Me gustó mucho" (I don't know how long I did it, but the blood rained, and that was fine. I loved it so much, ch. 22). As can be seen, the video game becomes a place where a person expresses and unleash his lowest instincts without any kind of shame or remorse. In this regard, Mónica Ojeda argues that

> Lo más oscuro, lo abyecto y lo obsceno, son zonas de lo humano difíciles de explorar, no sólo por lo que entrañan, sino porque normalmente preferimos mirar hacia otra parte. Se trata de zonas en donde mirar resulta doloroso Por eso, la escritura de 'Nefando', en cada uno de sus registros, es una forma necesaria y verdadera de encontrar un lenguaje que desafíe el silencio que queda frente a lo abominable. [The darkest, the abject, and the obscene are areas of the human that are difficult to explore, not only because of what they imply but because we usually prefer to look elsewhere. These are areas that are painful to look at Hence, the writing of Nefando, in each one of its registers, is a way of finding a language that challenges the silence that remains in the face of the abominable]. (Reche, 2016, par. 3-4).

In this virtual world, the interplay between the players and the game and the players with each other takes place in the forums of the gamer community. This is described in the novel in a whole chapter, in which the video game urges the players to immerse and interact with each other and share their experiences about the game.

Like in other video games, the violent narrative of Nefandoinfluences the behavior of the players, so that one of them recounts, also referring to the woman protagonist of the game, that while playing, "el cocodrilo se subió a la cama y empezó a comerse a la dormida. Me di cuenta de que podía golpearlo para que se detuviera, pero no lo hice" (the crocodile got on the bed and began to eat her while sleeping. I realized that I could hit the crocodile to make him stop, but I didn't, ch. 22). So, it is evident that the player is encouraged to continue with the narrative plot of the game until the end, no matter how perturbing it may be, as another of the characters says while playing the game and watching a video of a man cutting off his penis, and

albeit the repulsion he experiences, he forces himself to watch it because he feels that is his role and duty (ch. 22).

Ojeda portrays Nefandoas a game that, without being playable or fun, "atrapaba a sus jugadores pero no porque los divirtiera, sino porque tenía el poder de despertar una curiosidad… morbosa, que se iba agigantando…" (caught the players not because it amused them, but because it had the power to arouse a curiosity… morbid, which was getting bigger…, ch. 14), because, as stated by one of the characters, "todos nos sentimos atraídos hacia lo que nos provoca repulsión y queremos espantarnos aunque no nos guste admitir que el espanto es placentero" (we are all drawn to what disgusts us, and we want to be frightened even though we do not like to admit that fright is pleasant, ch. 12).

Therefore, the novel demonstrates that digital spaces are the perfect platforms to express the violence and most awful things people can do, as well as the thoughts and feelings regarding these acts, and also that, in the game, the fear derived from the loathsome violence that abounds within the Dark Web is shocking because it exposes our true selves. Accordingly, the discussion of the players regarding the game, their feelings, assumptions, depravities, and fears shows that the fascination for the disturbing and forbidden is part of human beings' nature. The pain of others and the pleasure of watching it in the video game awakens and reveals players' hidden desires, allowing them to see the most detestable of themselves and the horror caused by it that only can be seen through the video game.

From all the previously discussed, it is clear that *Nefando* connects the Dark Web's culture of horror with the real world to reveal the unspeakable and most horrifying of humankind.

Conclusion

After the short analysis made in this article, it can be concluded that Mónica Ojeda's novels Mandíbula and Nefando demonstrate how horror and technology intermingle in the world of the Internet, converting it into a platform for digital cultures of horror. They reveal how the Internet and its digital cultures shape and influence the collective psyche and popular culture. This is so because the Internet provides a fast and easy way to spread all kinds of content, which makes it the ideal place for the development and

growth of digital cultures of horror. Hence, Mónica Ojeda uses these digital cultures to write her fiction and expose the reality we live in today.

The study shows that the narratives of digital horror cultures are dynamic and participatory, so they incorporate elements of other cultural products and folklore. In the case of creepypastas, Ojeda displays how horror legends circulating on the Internet came out of the need to express and assimilate the fears of contemporary life, which shows that we live in a culture of horror. Likewise, she displays the constant interaction between this type of narrative and other cultural expressions, like literary works, thus making it part of today's popular culture. As for video games, Ojeda unveils the horror motifs present in them and some aspects of the digital culture of gamers, like that since browser games lack censorship, the players are likely to show their dark side and lowest instincts, and also that, in this virtual world the interaction between players and game occurs through the forums of the gamers' communities. Furthermore, the violent narrative of the game influences the behavior of the players, therefore showing all the wickedness that human beings carry inside them. In short, Ojeda's fiction connects the horror of the Internet with the physical world to shed light on how these digital cultures shape us.

These findings bring the Internet and its narratives and cultures to the fore, demonstrating its great power over popular culture and literary creation and the development of contemporary literature. In this way, this work aims to contribute to current knowledge on the interdependence and mutual influence between literature and narratives and cultures existing on the Internet.

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