

# CRYPTIC CANVASSES: EMILY CARROLL'S SPATIALIZATION OF HORROR IN WEBCOMICS

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## Abstract

Over the years, comics has been undergoing major transitions given the affordances of evolving technologies and the growing consumer market of born-digital art productions. This paper argues that digitization augments the meaning-making operations and narrative machines of what creators, readers, and scholars categorize as *webcomics*. The primary task of this commentary is to consider webcomics' potential to enhance narratives traditionally enjoyed in print or film, particularly of the genre of horror. Unlike other genres such as science fiction or romance, horror is palpable to consumers as an affect. Horror webcomics utilize digitally-enhanced spatial layouts in order to visually articulate this.

In demonstrating how digital operations enhance the delivery of horror narratives, this paper focuses on the works of independent comic artist and illustrator Emily Carroll. Her works, especially *His Face All Red*, evidence how webcomics can be effective platforms for spatializing horror narratives. By employing the infinite canvas and other digital affordances as storytelling techniques, Carroll heightens readers' unwillingness to have a face-to-face confrontation with the *abject*—the unnamed non-object—or in these stories' case, the supernatural monster. This crossover between the grisly genre and the graphic medium makes readers aware that, by virtue of our confrontation with the abject, we ourselves become specters haunting the text.

If a fear cannot be articulated, it can't be conquered.  
Stephen King, *'Salem's Lot*

Due to overwhelming changes in technology and its affordances to the art sector, the form of comics, scholars concur, is undergoing major transitions. Digital display has increasingly become one of the primary modes of comics consumption as smartphones and tablet computers provide platforms that support a wide range of visual, narrative, and interactive strategies. As digital comics scholar Daniel Goodbrey comment, many people now use these digital devices as their primary “reading” media.<sup>1</sup> By the early 2000s a dominant model for *webcomics* had begun to emerge in the shape of regularly updated, creator-owned serials. Broadly defined, webcomics are graphic narratives available online at various websites, blogs, and wikis. Works belonging to this category are made *first* for the web with no originary print version and are made by an independent creator without corporate sponsorship, who may be corroborating with others.<sup>2</sup> The early webcomic is typically presented as horizontal strips of three to four panels, quite similar to daily newspaper comic strips in terms of format.<sup>3</sup> It can take many forms, encompass many subgenres and themes, and be of varying quality. The earliest webcomic was published during the earliest stage of the World Wide Web itself.<sup>4</sup> The transition from print to web and from the clunky Web 1.0 to the user-friendly and interoperable Web 2.0 allowed comics creators to explore new art styles and genres aimed at specific audiences.<sup>5</sup>

Given that a single platform allows for the consumption of films, animation, and videogames, webcomics have become more accessible to consumers. While free of charge, creators of the more popular series are able to generate income via advertising and even merchandising. However, traditional print comic publishers have

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1 Goodbrey, “The Impact of Digital Mediation,” 64.

2 Jacobs, “Webcomics, Multimodality, and Information Literacy.”

3 Johnston, “Bad Machinery and the Economics of Free Comics,” 5.

4 Garrity, “The History of Webcomics.”

5 Walters, “What’s up with Webcomics?” For a more in-depth history of webcomics as a whole, refer to Campbell’s *A History of Webcomics* (2006). Campbell documents the development of the form from its origins and early years in the mid-1990s to the diverse and well-established industry evolving since the mid-2000s.

been wary of taking a leap to the “free content” business model adopted by digitally native creators.<sup>6</sup>

The fuzzy border between print comics and webcomics as formats has been the subject of several studies. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, for instance, argue that the operations of many webcomics are not significantly different from that of their print forebears.<sup>7</sup> To them, the content of an “older” media could simply be poured into a “newer” one. However, I argue that digital affordances augment the meaning-making operations of comics, particularly in the aspect of narrativization. These operations—which involve the combination of words, images, spatial layout, gutters, sound effects, panel composition, body language, facial expression, emanata, and other comics elements—are already complex, but as Barbara Warnick explains,

Web-based affordances offer a number of advantages for public discourse that are unavailable in mass media. Among these are affordability, access, opportunities for horizontal communication and interactivity, online forums for discussion and mobilization, networking capacity, and platforms for multimedia.<sup>8</sup>

In his doctoral thesis, Ernesto Priego notes that these affordances have spurred much discussion on webcomics in and out of academia, placing the form in the mainstream as a relevant topic.<sup>9</sup> The contributors of a special issue of *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* even assert that webcomics scholarship must strike forward to new directions:

Our work is now to explore what the form can tell us about the project of narrative representation itself. What do we gain from works that are, in their very structure and grammar, cross-discursive: composed in words and images, written *and* drawn?<sup>10</sup>

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6 Goodbrey, “The Impact of Digital Mediation,” 65.

7 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 45.

8 Warnick, *Rhetoric Online*, 6.

9 Priego, “The Comic Book in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” 10

10 Chute and DeKoven, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” 768.

As such, the primary task of this commentary is to consider the form's potential to enhance narratives traditionally enjoyed in print or film. In order to make this small contribution to scholarship, the study shall be delimited to a critique of one genre, *horror*.

In demonstrating how digital operations enhance the delivery of horror narratives, I shall focus on the independent comic artist and illustrator Emily Carroll, who has garnered quite an audience in the recent years. As evidenced by a number of Emily Carroll's works, most especially her *His Face All Red*, webcomics can be effective platforms for spatializing horror narratives. By employing the infinite canvas and other digital affordances as storytelling techniques, Carroll heightens readers' "unwillingness to have a face-to-face confrontation with the abject",<sup>11</sup> or specifically in these stories' case, the supernatural monster. I also suggest that these webcomics can be a powerful forum where the potentials of the screen-based medium in narrativizing affect can be discussed and analyzed.

To expound on these propositions, I shall approach webcomics as spatially symbolic acts, where narrative unfolding is taken as an expansion of textually constructed space, exploring different territories and discovering different effects.<sup>12</sup> Spatiality is a fitting framework for this critique because comics is an art form that exists fixed and unchanging in space, whether a page or a different carrier medium.<sup>13</sup> Time itself is represented as space on the page, and the expansion of space is the form's fundamental syntactical operation.<sup>14</sup> The 'spatial' usually refers to an environmental and architectural dimension, but in the case of comics it can be construed as the layout of panels on the page and the way such panels are configured in relation to each other through frames and gutters.<sup>15</sup> Space does not only refer to the physical aspect of panels, frames, balloons and their various relationships, or

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11 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 209.

12 Tally, "On Literary Cartography."

13 Ecke, "Spatializing the Movie Screen," 9.

14 Chute and DeKoven, "Introduction: Graphic Narrative," 769.

15 Jacobs, "Webcomics, Multimodality, and Information Literacy." Note that "gutters" in comics refer to the space between panels and their frames.

what Groensteen calls *arthrology*.<sup>16</sup> On the representational dimension of arthrology, Pascal Lefèvre construes space as two categories: (1) the *diegetic* space, or the visible fictive space in which characters live and interact, and (2) the extradiegetic space, the non-visualized space seemingly hidden inside the panels.<sup>17</sup> Diegetic space is what we see, extradiegetic space is what we assume to *exist*, a completely representational space that pins down all panels-as-space onto one comprehensible storyworld.

Suffice it to say that Groensteen and Lefèvre's theorization of space in comics are tied to the visuality of the medium; they describe how narrative is represented graphically. Latching on to works of *horror* calls our attention to another aspect of comics spatiality best demonstrated by the medium's screen-based variant: affective response. Much like comedy and suspense, horror is a genre that is named after the characteristic response it engenders in audiences.<sup>18</sup> The most well-developed definition of horror is one proposed by Noël Carroll. According to him, a work of horror must include, or at least suggest the presence of, a *monster*, a fearsome creature whose existence is not entirely comprehensible.<sup>19</sup> Of course, there are more monsters than the supernatural type, such as Norman Bates in *Psycho* or the shark in *Jaws*. As readers and audiences, we expect that horror horrifies, or at least it tries to, and our affective response is either fear, disgust, or anxiety.

Historically, the grisly genre of horror and the graphic medium have often conspired to articulate anxiety and fear through visual and textual means. During the American comics boom of the 1950s, horror comics and its dubious distribution became notorious, spurring Senate investigations across the U.S. that soon censored the comics industry.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, both mainstream and independent companies have continued to publish comics of such genre, usually incorporating adult or psychological themes.<sup>21</sup> In the Philippines, *Hiwaga* komiks began circulating around the

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16 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 22.

17 Lefèvre, "The Construction of Space in Comics," 157-8.

18 Smuts, "Cognitive and Philosophical Approaches to Horror," 6.

19 Carroll, cited in Smuts, "Cognitive and Philosophical Approaches to Horror," 5-6.

20 See Nyburg, *Seal of Approval*.

21 Round, "Gothic and the Graphic Novel," 335.

same time as the American horror comics boom. Today, *Trese*, which ensnares the crime genre with horror elements, is widely read by audiences from varying age groups. Comics as a hybridized form of image and text seem to be disposed for the articulation of an *unknown* monster—and thus, a non-object or *abject* as critic Julia Kristeva calls it—because the elusive, fleeting, and baffling object can be grasped more tangibly “through the intermediary of a representation, hence a seeing, that it holds together”.<sup>22</sup> Affect, being a pre-signifying articulation, is an *equation* rather than a symbolic equivalent for objects.<sup>23</sup> While linguistic construction can position objects as subjects—“position” because, in such case, the notoriously unnamed is named, it is visual *presentation*, particularly the *absence of which*, that can offer the haunting of horror.

To scrutinize the space of the abject in Carroll’s webcomics, this study shall move within Lefèvre’s diegetic-extradiegetic spatialization in examining the use of panels, frames, balloons, and other elements (especially the digital) that elicits response, which may be fear, disgust, or anxiety among others. The horror genre’s monster *occurs* in the act of reading itself (scrolling down in webcomics). This paper aims to delineate the different digital spaces in Carroll’s *His Face All Red* and how they contribute to the articulation of the abject, and thus, the narrativization of horror.

A popular name in the Canadian webcomics scene is Emily Carroll. An independent comics artist and illustrator, her works have been published online in her website, <http://emcarroll.com>. She gained worldwide recognition with her work *His Face All Red*, earning her the moniker “Fairy-Tale Teller in a Digital Age”.<sup>24</sup> Reminiscent of the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the online webcomic sensation *His Face All Red* was published in print for the first time as part of her *Through the Woods* anthology. Her works are based on fairy tales or her dreams, and many of them exhibit the features and elicit the affect responses ascribed to horror.

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22 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 46.

23 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 51.

24 Hubbard, “An Interview with Emily Carroll.”

Needless to say, Carroll is not the first artist to gain recognition for horror webcomics. Her contemporaries include Kris Straub; his *Broodhollow* takes off from the conventions of popular horror writing website Creepypasta. Si Spurrier, Javier Barreno, and Fernando Melek came up with *Crossed: Wish You Were Here*, a webcomic spinoff of Garth Ennis and Jacen Burrows' print comic book. Younger audiences would be familiar with the *Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* comic, a Korean horror webcomic that spread across social media platforms because of its ingenuous method of scaring audiences. A girl walking home alone one night is apprehended by the ghost of a shoddy woman ambling aimlessly on the street. This manhwa-style<sup>25</sup> webcomic jump-scars its readers by automatically scrolling down through the panels (thus creating a 2D flip book animation effect) once tension is built. In one out of two of these instances, when the girl felt frightened of the woman's gait, the webpage suddenly plummets down, flashing a sequence of images of a woman contorting her neck to the screen.

While her comics do not feature the jump-scare technique employed by the *Bongcheon-Don Ghost* comic, Carroll scares audiences through other, less elaborate methods. *Out of Skin* and *When the Darkness Presses*, for instance, include animated GIFs<sup>26</sup> as panels. Later in *Out of Skin*, the narrator starts to think that she is hallucinating. The panel reveals this beyond the diegetic dimension of the panel's space as we readers witness the chair's transformation as an experience of hallucination, and not the woman (who is not even looking). Instead of depicting an elaborate scene in *When the Darkness Presses*, Carroll chooses to convey didactically the protagonist's fear through words. The words "The door is shuddering | I am shuddering | My sweat is cold and sharp" are scrawled on the door depicted on this GIF panel. Nevertheless, owing to the GIF's animation function, the speech-balloon-as-panel imitates the narrator's shuddering, depicting an affect of dread. Thanks to the animated GIF, comic panels can become static

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<sup>25</sup> Manhwa is the general Korean term for comics and print cartoons.

<sup>26</sup> GIF means Graphics Interchange Format. It can also refer to bitmap images in such a format.

for a moment, “but always with the dynamic potential to change”<sup>27</sup> Dreams and visions such as these, Julia Round explains, draw our attention to the role of seeing, as sight is etymologically tied to notions of apparitions and specters, the tropes of horror.<sup>28</sup>

The graphic novella *Margot’s Room* exhausts the affordances of the webcomics medium to portray chaotic “disorder, obsession, psychological disarray”. *Margot’s Room* is, on the surface, a quiet yet macabre horror story about a girl falling in love with a man who later turns out to be a monster, but digging deeper into Margot’s grave will unearth a tale of obsession over death and the difficulty of coping with the loss of a child. Interestingly, the webcomic begins with the single panel of the titular bloodstained room (Figure 1). Starting above and ending below is a poem that reads: “first he gave me flowers | & second I made her a doll / but third he’d be gone for hours | & fourth we hit a wall. | LASTLY THERE WAS BLOOD, (rich & raw in the light of the moon) | I can’t forget | I will always regret | what happened in | Margot’s Room”. More closely, each item Carroll mentions in the poem (flowers, doll, wall, blood), or alludes to (the open window for “him” being “gone for hours”) is linked to a chapter in the comic. We input commands to the computer (clicking links) in order to expand the space of Margot’s room, thus unfolding the cybernetic narrative. *Margot’s Room* beckons the reader to haunt the fringes of the webcomic. Hypertextuality makes the relationship between each panel less linear because the link to the next set of panels is only one of many that are scattered across the layout of a webpage in which a webcomic is embedded (Jacobs 2014).

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27 Jacobs, “Webcomics, Multimodality, and Information Literacy.”

28 Round, “Gothic and the Graphic Novel,” 336.





Fig. 1. The first panel of the webcomic contains links to the rest of the chapters.

Generally, readers construct the diegetic space by elements that appear inside panels' frames and by those that remain unseen.<sup>29</sup> By exploiting the hyperlink feature of the World Wide Web, *Margot's Room* asks that we play a larger role in narrativization. This hyperlink spatiality highlights the horror narrative's *cryptomimesis*, a sense of haunting in a given work that resists linearization, particularly in ambiguous horror stories. *Margot's Room*, as a space, imitates the operations of the crypt, "whereby the nature of the other is [...] both inside/outside (since it hides as it protects; and the inner safe is both within the crypt and positioned outside it)".<sup>30</sup> The monster that wreaked havoc in Margot's room is inside the room-as-crypt itself, waiting to be discovered by the readers' naïve clicking of links and expansion of space. The technique that psychogeographically layouts the comics' narratology allows the medium to present to us "the hyperreal, or the real in excess", in which we are part.<sup>31</sup> As evidenced by Carroll's *Margot's Room*, "webcomics could offer a more interactive experience".<sup>32</sup>

29 Lefèvre, "The Construction of Space in Comics," 157.

30 Castricano, *Cryptomimesis*, 94-5.

31 Round, "Gothic and the Graphic Novel," 345.

32 McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 210.

As of the moment, there are 13 webcomics on Carroll's website, but this paper takes special interest in *His Face All Red* as it retains a strong link to a sense of place, particularly one dappled with graves, dark forests, and ghostly images—the unmistakably Gothic horror.<sup>33</sup> As we shall see, these images conspire together to dramatize disorder, obsession, psychological disarray, and physical distortion for the purposes of both entertainment and speculation.<sup>34</sup> Unlike the three texts enumerated above, *His Face All Red* disregards the affordances of GIFs and hyperlinks. Out of Carroll's oeuvre, it may have the most straightforward spatial layout, and this makes it an effective forum to discuss how webcomics, at the most basic level, can reinforce the powers of horror through space. In fact, the only cybernetic user inputs required by this webcomic is scrolling downward and clicking a "Next" button that would lead to the next section of the story.



Fig. 2. The bloody title card, followed by the first panel of the comic that shows the narrator in a brown coat, and his envied brother wearing blue.

The comic's narrator has all always been the shadow of his well-liked older brother. One day, the siblings volunteer to venture into the woods to hunt a mysterious creature that has been terrorizing the village and wiping out its livestock. The older brother slays the beast while the narrator hides. As the older brother laughs at the fact that it had been only a wolf, the narrator kills him, leaving his face all red. The narrator returns to the village and takes credit for his brother's heroism. Three days later, the older brother—

33 Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 7; Round, "Gothic and the Graphic Novel," 336.

34 Cavallaro, *Gothic Vision*, vii.

clean as a whistle—comes back to the village, corroborating the narrator’s alibi and acting as if nothing happened. Suspecting that the man is a double, the narrator heads back to the forest to check the grave he dug. He sees his brother’s body, which, in the last panel of the webcomic, faces him halfway. This spectral tendency is unabashedly horror as it grants corporeality to the abject, what Kristeva considers the lynchpin of the horror narrative. It is that which is opposed to the self, dissembling the personal by confronting the self with the other.<sup>35</sup> The brother’s animated corpse, as an abject, resists linguistic articulation: is it truly the brother’s corpse? Is the brother alive all along? Who, then, is the man in the village? The readers’ questions are left unanswered by the abjective panel.

Early on we sense the narrator’s estrangement towards his brother—“This is not my brother,” he says in the first webpage’s third panel. Even their skin palettes are different. As in any well-executed comic, visual content and paneling would contribute to this motif as exemplified in the screen-grabbed panels in Figure 3. The extradiegetic space of the woods is split into two panels to depict two distanced diegetic spaces. The offshoot is a space that visually communicates the feeling of estrangement through the split panels and the dark white space<sup>36</sup> that surrounds them. Taking the shape of horror genre tropes (a beast, a potential doppelganger, a potential ghost or the undead), the same estrangement is then later concretized in the narrative as a spectral monster that conjures anxiety both for the narrator and the readers. As seen in this one example, digitized comics space can excite the generic conventions and the affect of horror.

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35 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4, 12.

36 White space in comics typically refers to the blank space on which panels are located. The (white) extradiegetic space between panels is used in various ways: “in the past artists used a regular and constant distance between the panels, but an artist can vary these distances to various effects” (Lefèvre, “The Construction of Space in Comics,” 160). Don’t let the nomenclature fool you; they can come in various colors. In horror comics however, they tend to be deep black.



Fig. 3. A panel depicting the two brothers venturing into the woods is split and then slightly shrunk, letting the dark white space surround and come between the two heads.

Many have praised Carroll's deliberate pacing style that inconspicuously binds readers to their seats, arresting all possible jump-scare scenarios. Protracted time here is represented as complex spatial layouts. The killing of the beast, for instance, is executed within three panels: imitating the narrator's fear of the altercation, the panels show only trees, detached from the rest of the action. In the second panel, the diegetic space of the woods shifts to a monochromatic red palette, then returns to the original in the third, suggesting a successful gunshot. Occurring but as a punctum, violence is visually silenced so as to not agitate the agued pace of the narrative. The same technique is used in the next webpage when the narrator kills his brother. Note that these sets of panels depicting violence suggest a spatial adversity against life. Both sets construct a diegetic space that excludes the executed. The second set includes only the carcass of the dead wolf. The living body is cut from visibility, more so positioning life as the spectral subject of the narrative. In the context of horror, these cursory changes between panels are linked to the notion of haunting, "situations where we cannot be certain whether we are perceiving actual things or hallucinating". As if haunted by some spectral force, we are unable to establish whether the vision we see in the narrative is our own, "or if somebody else is dreaming it on our behalf".<sup>37</sup> Again, the screen-based spatial layout emphasizes object elements such as the

<sup>37</sup> Cavallaro, *Gothic Vision*, 74.

(un)dead. As in any horror narrative, understating the material dimension becomes a means of heightening its significance by a notable absence; “terror of the indefinite and horror of the corporeal are inextricably interwoven”<sup>38</sup> in the nexus of the absent corpse, a motif that haunts the rest of *His Face All Red*.

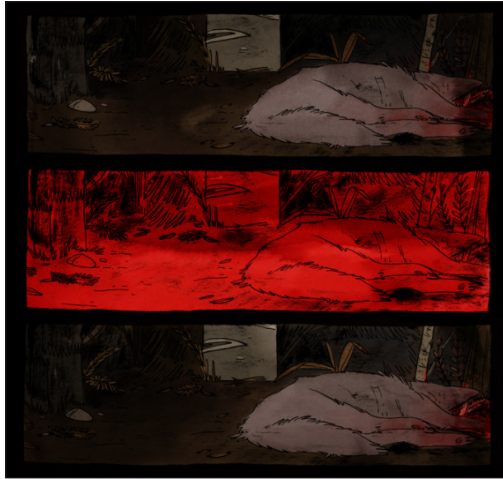


Fig. 4. Three panels depict the murder of the narrator's older brother.

What may be the most exploited yet least noticeable digital technique in her webcomics is an *infinite canvas* that favors a spatial organization conducive for pacing a horror narrative. Jakob Dittmar reminds us that digitally transmitted comics supposedly not for print “can use additional layers of narrations apart from sequential juxtaposed images and text”.<sup>39</sup> On paper, especially in books, artists are constrained to a vertical rectangular space in which to tell a story and transitions can only occur between the flipping of pages. The space given for a newspaper-published comic is even more limited—in general, it consists of a horizontal row of a few panels.<sup>40</sup> Scott McCloud believes that webcomics can offer potential solutions for nearly any narrative challenge unlike anything ever attempted in print. These solutions rise from the

38 Cavallaro, *Gothic Vision*, 67.

39 Dittmar, “Digital Comics,” 88.

40 Walters, “What’s up with Webcomics?”

potentially limitless space afforded by the webpage of Web 2.0. McCloud develops the idea of the infinite canvas to embrace all such possibilities:

Navigating through a series of panels embedded in each previous panel may create a sense of diving deeper into a story. A series of panels turned at right angles may keep the reader off-guard, never knowing what to expect around the next corner. Giving a pictorial shape to whole stories may provide a unifying identity. Most important, the ability of creators to subdivide their work as before is undiminished but now the “page”—what Will Eisner calls the “meta-panel”—can take whatever size and shape a given scene warrants [...] no matter how strange [...] or how simple those sizes and shapes may be.<sup>41</sup>

Webcomic creators could make pages as large as needed to contain panels of any conceivable number and size—that is, conceivable by the computer. This space rendered by digital technology would bestow creators more freedom in storytelling. The screen acts as the unmoving stage onto which panels both appear and disappear: “The reader clicks on the stage and a new panel (or group of panels) appears. [...] These new panels join the previous ones, often replacing or obscuring some (or all) of them.”<sup>42</sup> The comic metastasizes into a visual hallucination that, while still navigable, dramatizes a ghost-like ephemerality.

Emily Carroll demonstrates how the infinite canvas can be used to tell effective horror narratives. In *Margot’s Room*, for instance, all links lead to infinite canvasses. The final chapter exploits this digital affordance by flowing sideways, downward, then horizontally to depict the chaos of a wife massacring her husband.

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41 McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 226-228.

42 Barber, “The Phenomenon of Multiple Dialectics in Comics Layout,” 63.

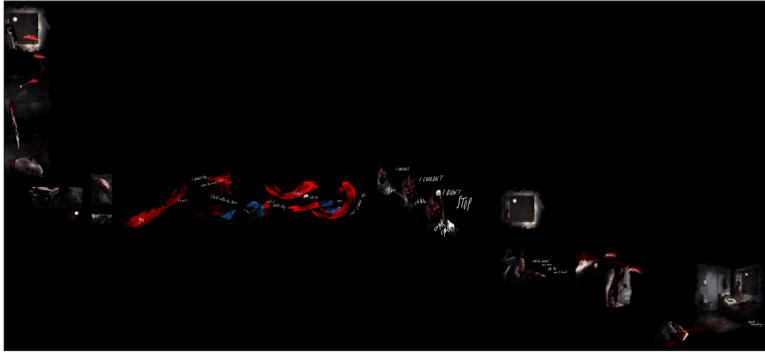


Fig. 5. A zoomed-out view of the final chapter of *Margot's Room*, whose panels unfold sideways.

Her usage in *His Face All Red*, however, relies on quashing the infiniteness of the infinite canvas. In the comics reading process—construed as a dialogic model of creativity by some critics, the presence-yet-absence of readers complete the text by creating a coherent storyline from the scattered spatial organization of panels on a page.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the most important obstacle comic artists must surmount in organizing space is the tendency of the reader's eye to wander.<sup>44</sup> Jochen Ecke snaps that

creators have overwritten the dominant spatial aspects of the page with narrative cues in a long and difficult process of the temporalization of the image, to the point where the continuity and linearity of narration has become so absolute a value that comic book creators even appear to be afraid of foregrounded spatiality, which is seen as the equivalent of chaos.<sup>45</sup>

Carroll is guilty of Ecke's accusations, but in so doing she foregrounds both spatiality and horror narrativity. Despite the elastic scale of the webpage, she layouts *His Face All Red* in a relatively straightforward manner with all panels aligned at the center, letting the dark white space loom and dominate the readers' web browser, setting up a chilling reading environment (especially when the webcomic is read in a poorly lit room). In

43 Round, "Gothic and the Graphic Novel," 337.

44 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 40.

45 Ecke, "Spatializing the Movie Screen," 19.

most horror comics, “spatial and psychological confusion are intimately intertwined, both resulting in a disquieting sense of directionlessness”.<sup>46</sup> *His Face All Red* however, restricts the “limitless” number of user interactions with the infinite canvas to a tedious downward scroll and the occasional clicking of “Next”, which leads us to more pages and more scrolling. In the infinite canvas, the screen acts as a window to an arrangement of panels that is partly unseen.<sup>47</sup> The somber straightforwardness and minimalism of the comic’s spatial organization tell us that we cannot escape the resolution of the text, the potentially twisted revelation to the mystery of the living brother intimated by the narrator earlier. Readers, like the narrator whose subterfuge is foiled, have no other choice than to face the abject.

The restraint dramatized by this rigid spatial layout is reinforced by the computer screen, what may seem to be a visual obstacle but is an advantage to Carroll’s horror narrativization. On the computer screen, comics are viewed through a window oriented horizontally instead of vertically, putting up an illusion that the story is undisrupted<sup>48</sup> when, in fact, the browser window paces the tempo of the panel flow. For example, this webcomic’s eighth page composes of only two long panels that depict the narrator’s descent to the grave. The illustration of multiple narrators (as seen from afar) anticipates the browser’s window size ratio that would show the elongated panels partially at a time. It is a way to mark the progression of time during the climb down, building anxiety as both the reader and the narrator descend.<sup>49</sup> The reader’s control over the pacing of narrative occurrence is characteristic of the graphic medium, but this may have been overlooked in print.<sup>50</sup> It does become more significant in the context of digital mediation due to the cybernetic aspect of webcomics; the narrative would not unfold without user-input. While the technique is not as elaborate as that used by the *Bongcheon-Dong Ghost* comic, *His Face All Red* machinates animation, albeit at a slow, suspenseful rhythm. The

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46 Cavallaro, *Gothic Vision*, 89.

47 Goodbrey, “The Impact of Digital Mediation,” 21-22.

48 Walters, “What’s up with Webcomics?”

49 Kogel, “Rethinking Webcomics,” 65.

50 Goodbrey, “The Impact of Digital Mediation,” 52.



panel flow and the browser window match the storytelling and pace of the horror narrative, thus enhancing the already thrilling moments in the comic.<sup>51</sup>

Carroll's infinite canvas is finally constrained by the "Next" button. The problem of the two older brothers—one emerging from the woods, the other cloying inside, remains unresolved. Two webpages follow the panels depicting the narrator's descent: the first showing the brother's corpse facing the other way, the next showing his face all red. The "Next" button separating these panels-as-webpage stimulates tension. *His Face All Red* demands readers to face up to incompleteness as a condition that cannot be redeemed: a spurious "Next" button lies below the gutter of the final panel, luring us to a hope for resolution. However, the link only leads to an all-black webpage scribbled with the words "by Emily Carroll." The devious "Next" button is one of the digital techniques utilized by Carroll to build up suspense in her horror narrative. Every scroll or "Next" brings us closer to the monster we are made to fear. As in any powerful horror narrative, it is not the mere presence of a monster or the brandishing of disturbing themes that afford it such a label.<sup>52</sup> It is, rather, how the narrative is driven by the necessity of going through and facing the frightening aporia of abjection. It is permanent and comes from within.<sup>53</sup>

If a page of print comics "is offered at first to a synthetic global vision, [demanding] to be traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered",<sup>54</sup> the page of a horror webcomic—as far as Carroll's *His Face All Red* reveals—can restrain the reader's vision by way of a hunkered and rigid panel layout, the anticipation of a browser window, and suspenseful links—spatial contrivances that imitate the experience of horror. We cannot look at the object-in-picture from another point of view than the one the picture offers, sharing the maker's mode of seeing,<sup>55</sup> which in this case traipses in the deep black (the dark white space, that is). In the

51 Kogel, "Rethinking Webcomics," 65-6.

52 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 140.

53 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 113.

54 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 19.

55 Peters, *Pictorial Signs and the Language of Film*, 14.

process of visually articulating the conspiracy of presence (the brother's corpse) and absence (the reason behind such presence) as an abjection, *His Face All Red* calls attention that the readers of a horror webcomic are no longer the privileged loci of narrative reconstruction. John Nichols notes that print formats are possessed by "flippy-throughness", a fixity to "the physical location of all the information" in the spatial network of the comic.<sup>56</sup> The act of flipping through is the constant memento that reading is a physical act. Digital comics, due to their lack of fixed physical structure—the "physical handling of the book",<sup>57</sup> erodes this and makes out of the readers a spectral presence, doomed to reexperience the same tensions. Comics, after all, are an art of tensions—between image and text, singularities and sequences, and the latter against the whole spatial layout itself.<sup>58</sup>

The spatial considerations that dramatize the feeling of anxiety-inducing restraint hinder attempts at decipherment attained more facilely with print. Carroll's digital techniques quell "the human eye's anarchic tendency to roam and to sometimes disregard conventional sequence entirely".<sup>59</sup> Carroll's other webcomics such as *Out of Skin*, *When the Darkness Presses*, and *Margot's Room* employ other cybernetic gimmicks to toy with readers' perception, but *His Face All Red* proves to us that the simplest affordances of Web 2.0, employed craftily, can eke out the affective response to horror such as anxiety and restraint. Emily Carroll's works represent a spatiality that lends itself to the reader's haunting, an act of simultaneous spatialization and narrativization that parallels of the tropes of horror. The stress shifts from the images to the functions that tie them together<sup>60</sup>—functions such as buttons, links, scrollable screens, and the chilling white space—and then ultimately to the space of the comic itself. Horror emerges out of topology.

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56 Nichols, qtd. in Goodbrey, "The Impact of Digital Mediation," 72.

57 Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 66.

58 See Hatfield, "An Art of Tensions."

59 Ecke, "Spatializing the Movie Screen," 8.

60 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 53.

As seen in this illumination of how webcomics can be effective platforms for narrativizing horror, enhancing (and in Emily Carroll's case, imitating) experiences usually enjoyed in print and in film, it is no question why the medium is a unique part of the wider tradition of graphic literature. As noted by Bolter and Grusin, "each medium promises to reform its predecessor by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium."<sup>61</sup> Horror webcomics calls our attention not only to itself being a digitally-augmented format, but also to the possibility that, in the trappings of hypermediacy, the spectator has become a specter haunting the fringes of the electronic text, doomed to go through abjection. Ultimately, works such as Carroll's invite us to trek stranger forests where the most interesting of comics could be discovered.

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61 Bolter and Grusin, "Remediation," 19.

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