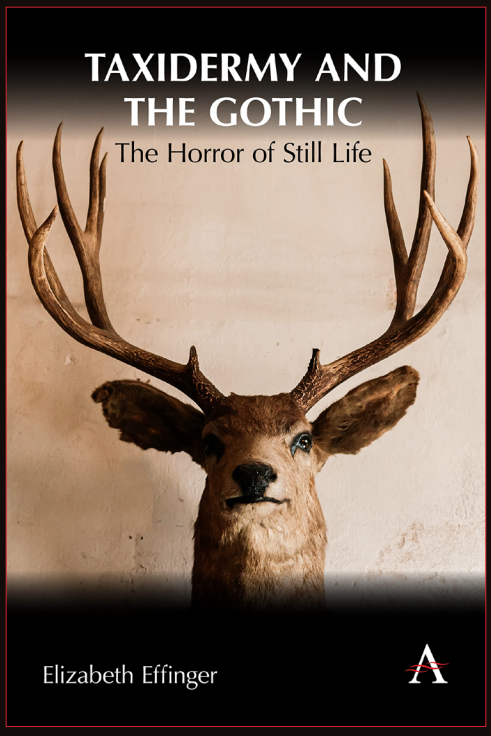
Fuzzy Boundaries

Poulomi Choudhury



Review of:
Elizabeth Effinger, *Taxidermy and the Gothic: The Horror of Still Life*. Anthem Studies in Gothic Literature. London: Anthem Press, 2024. xliv + 172 pp. £80.00 (hb), £25.00 (ebook)

Poulomi Choudhury is a Research Ireland-funded PhD scholar in the School of English at University College Dublin, Ireland.

Email: choudhup@tcd.ie

Elizabeth Effinger's *Taxidermy and the Gothic: The Horror of Still Life* is a provocative intervention into Gothic and Horror studies, material culture, and animal studies. Her thesis centres on taxidermy's uncanny ability to encapsulate what she terms the "stuckness" of life's horrors: the phenomenological terrors of everyday existence, perverse desires and systemic violence. Tracing this collusion between Gothic horror and the "taxidermic imaginary" (2) across the long nineteenth century to the contemporary period, Effinger posits that taxidermy functions as a "dark mirror" that reflects the "human animal's dark sides" (xxviii).

Effinger argues that the Gothic's myriad incarnations — horror, Gothic horror, ecogothic — make it an unstable and protean concept, fraught with definitional dilemmas that have long agitated scholars. Yet rather than offering a neatly circumscribed new definition, Effinger embraces this tension as central to her argument. Making the case for the Gothic as an impure, messy, and compound concept, Effinger recasts the Gothic in light of taxidermy as an "affectively charged composite term" (xvi). Like taxidermy, in other words, the Gothic has fuzzy boundaries. But Effinger's definitions of taxidermy are somewhat more clean-cut. By delimiting her focus to three-dimensional, stuffed, and displayed mounts, she explicitly excludes other kinds of taxidermic practices such as wet preservations, skeletal remains, and animal-derived décor. This conceptual framing, she suggests, helps foreground the particularly unsettling physicality of mounts as a dominant form of taxidermy — their capacity to evoke disgust, desire, and dread.

Shifting between close and distant readings, *Taxidermy and the Gothic* brings taxidermy's menacing presence to the forefront of Gothic horror studies. Structured thematically, the book's four chapters each address a different aspect of taxidermy culture: making, looking, touching and, ultimately, transforming or becoming taxidermy. In the opening chapter, Effinger positions Walter Potter's two-headed stuffed kitten — a macabre Victorian creation that stands apart from his whimsical anthropomorphic dioramas — as a Gothic muse for exploring taxidermy's "darker side" (1). Through

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close readings of texts such as Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story* (1862), Effinger demonstrates how taxidermy's affective power, particularly its capacity to unsettle boundaries between the animate and inanimate, come to evoke visceral horror and hence continue the Gothic's enduring preoccupations. Tracing the "taxidermic imaginary" of the long nineteenth century, Effinger complicates prevailing narratives that present the period as wholly comfortable with taxidermy (2). Through meticulous archival research, she instead highlights the era's deeper cultural ambivalences and discomforts surrounding preserved animal bodies.

While the expansive scope of this first chapter is a strength, it is not without its risks. Effinger consults such a dizzying array of primary materials—literary texts, taxidermy manuals, periodicals, material specimens, and visual art—that her engagements with individual works are necessarily limited. Nonetheless, she deftly navigates this corpus, demonstrating how taxidermy materializes Gothic anxieties. Her analysis of the shared rhetorical strategies between Gothic fiction and taxidermy manuals is particularly persuasive. She argues, for instance, that the Gothic novel's disruption of authorial identity is mirrored in nineteenth-century taxidermy manuals, such as those to which naturalist Sarah Bowdich contributed anonymously. Both reflect a fascination with counterfeit constructions, where "bodies, like names, are unstable markers of identity" that cannot be trusted (9).

The following two chapters establish the theoretical scaffolding that underpins Effinger's analysis. Weaving together Levinasian phenomenology and Derridean deconstruction (Chapter 2) and psychoanalytic theory (Chapter 3), Effinger interrogates what she calls taxidermy's ontological dissonance. She positions taxidermy as a materialization of Levinas's *il y a*—the suffocating anonymity of existence without exit—and suggests that the object's glassy eyes reflect Derrida's "bottomless gaze" of alterity. Dylan Trigg's "nocturnal ontology" further frames taxidermy as a frozen, shadowy presence that traps viewers in the "interminable horror of existence" (48). These

theoretical ideas inform Effinger's artfully composed readings of horror cinema that often reveal unexpected connections. Her reading of Ana Lily Amirpour's *The Outside* (2022), for example, excavates a historical parallel between the protagonist, Stacey's taxidermy hobby and her job as a bank teller. Nineteenth-century taxidermists, Effinger notes, used mutilated paper currency to construct animal mannequins, crystallizing taxidermy's counterfeit logic: "It now looks like an 'animal' that is no longer an animal made from 'money' that is no longer money" (67). Stacey's association with taxidermy's crisis of stagnation—the existential paralysis of being trapped, of living an empty life—is reinforced through her name's homologous link to "stasis" and her fear of being socially ostracized. If the encounter with taxidermy suggests the horror of existence, of "violence and violations without end" (48), it is Stacey's counterfeit, hollow interiority and desire for acceptance that drives her to extreme violence, ultimately killing and stuffing her husband.

Effinger's reading of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) places the film within Gothic horror's broader fascination with taxidermy. She draws out how the spatial grotesquery of the Swayer family's homestead animates the film's atmosphere of dread and bodily violation. The visual substitution of Leatherface for the taxidermied wall mounts becomes a key moment in which the film aligns taxidermy with danger and perverse creativity (55). Effinger's analysis works well on these terms and charts the horror of aestheticized violence through the macabre display of specimens on the red-accented wall. However, her reading might have been further enriched by attending to the material conditions of the film's production. Art director Robert Burns notes that shifts in the 1970s meat industry, particularly its overproduction, enabled him to source real animal corpses from farms which were unable to afford rendering costs.[1] This hidden presence of industrial animal death within the film would bolster Effinger's claim that "torture occurs beneath the taxidermy" (57), reinforcing her argument while drawing the suffering of nonhuman animals more explicitly into the frame.

1 See *Texas Chain Saw Massacre: The Shocking Truth*, directed by David Gregory (Blue Underground/Exploited Film, 2000).

In her third chapter, Effinger explores the "dark libidinal energies" (72)—disgust, fascination, and erotic charge—that cluster around preserved animal bodies. Through Freud's notion of "polymorphous perversity", she foregrounds the unruly desires taxidermy provokes; via Lacan's concept of the "Thing", she positions taxidermy as a libidinal object of the drive: captivating, abject, and resistant to symbolic resolution. This framework underpins Effinger's coinage of "taxiderm-erotics", a term she uses in order to track taxidermy's erotic and psychic excess in texts such as *Psycho* (1960), *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), and *Tell Me Your Secrets* (2021). Her close reading of *Psycho* is especially compelling. Building on her earlier claim that Norman Bates's taxidermy-lined parlour literalizes his "private traps" of stasis (53), Effinger turns to the uncanny space of Norman's childhood bedroom. There, she reads the juxtaposition of a child's stuffed toy and a taxidermied owl as staging a continuum between affective comfort and emotional paralysis. Drawing on Winnicott's theory of transitional objects—items that mediate early separation from the maternal figure—Effinger argues that *Psycho* collapses the distinction between the child's object of attachment and the adult's pathological fixation.

Anticipating criticism for drawing from psychoanalysis, which "some have dismissed as dead, [and] outmoded", Effinger defends her methodology as mirroring the Gothic and taxidermy's resistance to structural and conceptual purity (xxxv). While this ambition is valuable, it relegates nonhuman animals to talismans of human anxiety, depoliticizing the animals' materiality. This elision is conspicuous in her discussion of the British Academy of Taxidermy's Valentine's Day workshops, where couples created taxidermied mice in fetishized poses. Effinger notes one attendee's nervous quip that this hobby could spiral into a more grotesque obsession, one where their "house becomes filled with stuffed cadavers" (74). Effinger frames this as evidence of taxidermy's proximity to taboo: "bound (and gagged) with the promise (or threat) of seduction" (75). This focus on psychological unease sidesteps the material realities of taxidermy's production, namely the objectification, commodification, and killing of animals. As Nicole Shukin suggests, under biopolitical regimes, animal

life is simultaneously transformed into a semiotic spectacle *and* reduced to disposable matter.[2] By effacing the capitalist logic that extracts value from animal bodies, Effinger risks aestheticizing violence as a mere spectacle without addressing its structural conditions. In doing so, her analysis misses an opportunity to extend the Gothic's preoccupation with abjection and horror to the nonhuman world.

Throughout the monograph, Effinger underscores taxidermy's associations with terror and horror by highlighting the visceral, breathless response it elicits. This idea crystallizes in the final chapter, where she links taxidermy to the suffocating effects of systemic racism. Effinger connects the idea of breathlessness (xxxvii, xli, 69, 114, and *passim*) not only to the lifelessness of animal remains but also to the anxiety that these remains provoke in humans when confronted with them. This connection is extended to Shermaine Jones's conceptualization of "affective asphyxia", which refers to the expectation that Black people must suppress their emotions, rage, fear, and grief when dealing with racism and racial microaggressions (112). Drawing on Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's theorization of bestialization and thingification, where Black individuals are systematically dehumanized by being aligned with animals and reduced to an exploitable object, Effinger suggests that taxidermy performs a similar manoeuvre to the "black(ened) being's ontological plasticity" (108). Rather than analogizing racialized bodies with the animal-object, Effinger carefully navigates the ethical and political risks of collapsing these categories. She builds on Jackson's argument about the profound instability of black flesh to suggest that taxidermy, too, enacts a "nocturnal ontology" that forges an identification with Black life and its attendant horrors. To illustrate this, she traces historical entanglements between race and taxidermic practices, highlighting the erased labour of the Black taxidermist John Edmonstone, who trained Darwin, and the grotesque posthumous display of Sara Baartman. Effinger likens zoologist Georges Cuvier's obsessive pursuit of Baartman's body to the Gothic trope of the fleeing heroine and frames taxidermy as a practice that blurs the line between scientific curiosity and violent objectification.

2 See Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

Yet, if taxidermy is a site where mechanisms of racial violence can be read, Effinger suggests that its very instability also holds subversive potential. Her reading of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) exemplifies this tension. She compellingly links the taxidermied deer to the fungibility of Black bodies within a neoliberal order, which she identifies in the figure of Dean Armitage, the patriarch of the family and head of the secret Coagula Order. Armitage represents the fatherly face of neoliberalism, an economic and social system that commodifies Black bodies while annihilating their agency. At the same time, the deer mount, which Chris, the film's Black protagonist, uses to free himself, gains "renewed life as a weapon" (129), allowing him to reverse his own transmogrification into commodity by exacting his revenge and killing his captor. This final chapter is perhaps the most powerful in the book. Here, Effinger narrows her focus to only two texts. This allows her close readings to breathe and unfold with theoretical depth and historical nuance. It convincingly demonstrates the potential of reading taxidermy as a dynamic site for interrogating the multiple forms of violence imposed on racialized and nonhuman bodies.

One of the central provocations of *Taxidermy and the Gothic* is Effinger's claim that Gothic scholarship has consistently overlooked the deep entanglement between taxidermy and horror. While taxidermy frequently appears in Gothic texts, she argues, it is rarely the object of sustained critical attention, particularly with regard to its grotesque materiality. At the same time, she observes that scholars working within animal studies have become increasingly attentive to taxidermy. Yet, they neglect to think about it explicitly in Gothic terms. This is the critical gap she seeks to redress.

However, the way Effinger positions her work in relation to both Gothic and animal studies raises certain tensions. One of the more polemical aspects of her argument is her challenge to what she calls "critical taxidermy studies" (CTS), which she provocatively dubs the "stuffed progeny of critical animal studies" (143). CTS, she claims, encompasses a wide range of scholarship, from Steve Baker's botched taxidermy to Giovanni Aloi's speculative taxidermy

and Susan McHugh and Sarah Bezan's literary and visual analyses. These scholars, Effinger acknowledges, have been "invaluable in thinking through our more-than-human worlds" (xiv). But she also argues that their work remains tethered to the ethical imperative of critical animal studies (CAS), which seeks to reimagine human–animal relations through frameworks of mourning, melancholia, interspecies kinship, and care.

Effinger contends that CTS, despite taking taxidermy seriously, tends to sanitize it and transform it into what she calls a "bloodless" and "furry figure of critique and speculation" (xxi). In her reading, even when these works acknowledge taxidermy's "negative aesthetics" (xviii), they ultimately disavow its abject horror. For instance, she suggests that McHugh and Bezan shift their attention away from the "seediness" of the taxidermist, preferring to find "seeds of resistance" in the figure who avenges the animal's death (xx). Similarly, though Aloi aligns *Speculative Taxidermy* with Morton's dark ecology — a theory that embraces uncertainty, ugliness, and horror — Effinger argues that his case studies lack the visceral horror she sees as taxidermy's ontological core. Her critique seems to hinge on a distinction between the redemptive ethics of CAS, which seek to recuperate violence through reparative frameworks, and her own ethics of confrontation, which insists on lingering in taxidermy's discomforts, perhaps, without resolution. Rather than offering an ethical encounter with the animal, Effinger positions taxidermy as a Gothic object that compels us to confront violence, ambiguity, and stasis in all their discomforting affective force. This approach allows her to foreground taxidermy's grotesque materiality, but, to me, it also raises important questions about the limits of identification and the risks of detaching taxidermy from the real animal bodies it represents.

Indeed, one of the issues with Effinger's broad categorization of CTS is that it risks flattening the diversity of existing scholarship. Many of the works she groups together do register histories of violence and exploitation, albeit through different modes. For example, McHugh draws out affective affinities between humans and animals, while

Angela Singer's botched taxidermy, discussed in an interview with Aloi, exposes how "the exploitation and destruction of animals and our environment, is in the end all our fault".[3] By collapsing CAS and human–animal studies under a single polemical framework, Effinger oversimplifies the nuances of a field that has already developed substantive engagement with taxidermy's abjection and harm, even if through reparative or ethical lenses.

Effinger also situates her study in relation to recent efforts to introduce nonhuman animals into Gothic criticism. She engages with Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson's edited collection *Gothic Animals* (2020), identifying the "creature terror"—the uncanny fear generated by encountering the nonhuman other (xxxvii)—as productive for her own project. This focus, however, is symptomatic of a recurring tendency in Gothic studies: it privileges the so-called animal *within*, treating nonhuman animals primarily as conduits for human fears and anxieties. Effinger's alignment with *Gothic Animals* overlooks this tension. In fact, Timothy Baker's contribution to the same volume explicitly resists such symbolic reductions. He argues that animals in Gothic literature can disrupt entrenched anthropocentric and masculinist ideologies, insisting that they be read not merely as reflections of human interiority but as agents that unsettle human exceptionalism itself.[4] For Effinger, however, it is the affective jolt of recognizing parallelism—what Jane Desmond, in McHugh and Bezan's *Configurations* issue, calls a "transspecies speculation"[5] of becoming the animal—that lies at the heart of Gothic horror. While Desmond characterizes this encounter as "charming", Effinger reframes it through horror. In Gothic contexts, she argues, taxidermy stages the fear of "being disemboweled, of being evacuated, of being stuffed and mounted, rendered frozen, immobile, and placed on

3 See Susan McHugh, "Taxidermy's Literary Biographies", in *Animal Biography: Re-Framing Animal Lives*, ed. André Krebber and Mieke Roscher (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 141–60; and Giovanni Aloi, "Angela Singer: Animals Rights and Wrongs", *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* no. 7 (2008): 17.

4 See Timothy C. Baker, "Companion Animals in Contemporary Scottish Women's Gothic", in *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*, ed. Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 291–306.

5 Jane Desmond, "Vivacious Remains: An Afterword on Taxidermy's Forms, Fictions, Facticity, and Futures", *Configurations* 27, no. 2 (2019): 266. https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2019.0015.

display, to be alive in death, to be unblinkingly stuck, to be radically transformed, to feel a scream stuck in one's throat, to be in stasis forever" (xl). What unsettles us, she suggests, is the sensation that we, too, could become mounts.

Yet this emphasis on the phenomenological dread of becoming a taxidermied animal risks occluding a more urgent question: why is the animal dead to begin with? What conditions of violence, control, or extraction have led to this preserved body? While *Taxidermy and the Gothic* offers to contribute to "more-than-human directions in Gothic horror" (xxxviii), its reluctance to fully confront the material violence inflicted on nonhuman animals feels like a missed opportunity. As Cristy Tidwell reminds us, the true horror of taxidermy lies not in metaphorical identification but in the very fact of an animal's violated body: "I do not need to imagine myself into the animal's place; it's bad enough that the animal is in this position."[6] Similarly, John Simons asserts that "When I see a work of 'botched taxidermy' […] I do not see an epistemological problem. I see a dead animal" (183).[7] To this, I would add that when I encounter a taxidermied animal in a Gothic horror text, I see a dead animal. And I want to ask — why is the animal dead? What structures led to them becoming a mount? And if the scene fills me with dread, what does that say about why I am afraid of being treated like the animal?

Despite these limitations in explicitly engaging with the material conditions that lead to taxidermy, *Taxidermy and the Gothic* is a bold and significant intervention. It reframes taxidermy as a "catachrestic figure" — an anamorphic presence shifting between background and foreground to provoke confrontations with existential dread, sexual repression, and, most convincingly, systemic racism. Effinger's transdisciplinary methodology, which stitches literary analysis, archival studies, film criticism, and theoretical inquiry, reveals taxidermy as a material embodiment of Gothic horror's preoccupation with

6 See Christy Tidwell, "Taxidermy as EcoGothic Horror: Five Questions for Christy Tidwell", *Edge Effects*, 31 October 2024, https://edgeeffects.net/taxidermy/.

7 See John Simons's Review of *The Postmodern Animal* by Steve Baker in *Anthrozoös* 15, no. 2 (June 2002): 182–84, https://doi.org/10.2752/089279302786992603.

violation and stasis. Like Polly Morgan's *Harbour* (2012), which grafts octopus tentacles onto a fox's corpse, Effinger's work embraces the Gothic's messiness, challenging scholars to confront the "violent cycles of life" (138). If Effinger's analysis leaves some readers yearning for a more expansive engagement with questions of animal ethics, it is a testament to the relevance of the affective power of horror as a critical lens to do so. As Gothic and horror studies evolve to confront Anthropocene anxieties, *Taxidermy and the Gothic* will endure as an indispensable provocation.