GOTHIC FILM
An Edinburgh Companion

Edited by
Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy
Gothic Film
Edinburgh Companions to the Gothic

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William Hughes, Bath Spa University

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In *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (2000), his expansive introduction to the Gothic as a perpetually shifting aesthetic and socio-historical phenomenon, Richard Davenport-Hines notes that it is often difficult to ascertain precisely what people mean when they describe a text as informed by ‘Gothic’ sensibilities. Much of this confusion stems from the myriad ways that popular and academic discourses have deployed the term throughout the centuries following the destruction and pillaging of Rome by a combination of Scandinavian and Eastern European warriors (aka the Goths). From its earliest associations with destruction, violence, darkness and despair (connotations that persist to this day), ‘Gothic’ has been a very flexible term imbued with multiple connotations. While for many the term Gothic implies melancholic decay and decadence, for others it connotes a subcultural sartorial style grounded in dark colours (black, red), theatrical accents (French cuffs, lace trimming) and pallid complexions enhanced by dark eyeliner and lipstick.

More to the purposes of this volume, the term ‘Gothic’ is also frequently used to describe a particularly stylised approach to depicting location, desire and action in literature and film. For many contemporary film viewers, the term evokes images of derelict castles atop craggy hills or sprawling, labyrinthine ancestral mansions in various stages of ruin or disrepair. This association can, of course, be traced back to the influence of prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novels like Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897); each of these works features action set in similarly imposing locales. Indeed, the connection between the Gothic and architectural design is profound. In the sixteenth century, ‘Gothic’ was a pejorative descriptor for an architectural style that, emerging in Northern Europe between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries (or from
the late Middle Ages to the early modern period), posed a radical – and, for some Renaissance critics, ‘barbaric’ – response to classical Greco-Roman design. Gothic architecture integrates Romanesque elements into its propensity towards verticality, while its inclusion of copious and, in the case of gargoyles, grotesque ornamentations departs more radically from classical conceits. The most conspicuous ‘Gothic’ edifices, namely churches and cathedrals, integrated architectural elements like ribbed vaults, multiple arches, and flying buttresses to support impressive and ornately designed walls replete with stained glass windows and topped by towering spires. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as a renewed interest in Gothic aesthetics gripped the popular imagination, it is from these towering structures that novelists drew inspiration for the decaying citadels that housed their ruthless patriarchs, incestuous families and victimised governesses.

Nature in Gothic novels and film is likewise extreme. Mountains are treacherously jagged at their cloud-bedecked peaks. Arboreal realms are dark, riotous and rarely hospitable. Characters that venture into such discordant vistas enter environments where the natural and the supernatural seemingly commingle, and where human intervention in the form of Enlightenment methodologies like science or reason is no guarantee of survival. In this sense, wild Gothic nature threatens notions of cultural and corporeal integrity, displacing humanity from its perceived perch at the top of the food chain and exposing us for the frail, clever and frequently hubristic animals we are. As Victor Frankenstein, the eponymous hero of Mary Shelley’s iconic novel, pursues his pitiful creation across the merciless frozen wastes, there is a fatalistic tenor to the chase. In the face of nature’s sublime and indifferent power, Victor Frankenstein’s maniacal pursuit could have only ended tragically.

Verbal exchanges and paradigm-shifting revelations in Gothic narratives likewise tend towards extremity. In this way the Gothic is never far from melodrama and dialogues are frequently pitched for maximum emotional intensity. Conflicts assume near mythic proportions and social ‘order’ is regularly threatened, if not deliberately overturned. In this sense the Gothic is transformational and revolutionary, and Gothic narratives frequently capitalise upon their audience’s simultaneous fear of, and attraction to, social change and rebellion. This association, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as ‘an aesthetic of pleasurable fear’ (11), is especially compelling when one considers the durability of one of Gothic art’s most popular figures: the monster. As Judith Halberstam reminds us in Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters (1995), monsters are heterogeneous figures capable of not only representing ‘any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative’ (21),
but also, because of their radical irreducibility, of allowing for new ways of imagining ‘social resistance’ (23).

This commingling of threat and promise within the body of the monster is, of course, merely one facet of a constellation of aesthetic and narrative elements that many have come to associate with the Gothic. Nevertheless, given their status as hybrid entities, they are perhaps the ideal analogues for the Gothic’s rich aesthetic and narratological approach to storytelling. At the very least, the hybridity that many Gothic monsters possess mirrors the complex of potential meanings and connotations that lead critics like Davenport-Hines to remark upon the Gothic’s evasiveness as a literary and cinematic ‘genre’ (7). Similar to film noir, the ‘Gothic’ in Gothic film does not merely designate a kind of cinematic entertainment, like ‘Western’, ‘Horror’ or ‘Science Fiction’. The Gothic, in other words, is not a genre per se, although an argument can be made for ‘Gothic’ as a very loose subgenre of horror. Rather, ‘Gothic’ is a style. It is a way of arranging literary and cinematic elements to create a particular affect. Whether an author or film-maker sets their tale’s action in candle-lit mansions or populates their dark worlds with brooding or ‘fallen’ anti-heroic characters, Gothic motifs in cinema conjure a variety of variably foreboding tonalities. As such, it is understandably temping to reduce the Gothic to a classificatory function and, consequently, posit it as something resembling a genre. Such a perspective, however, should never neglect the extent to which the Gothic as aesthetic approach or style regularly traverses multiple established film genres.

Gothic Film explores the Gothic’s resilience as a stylistic and aesthetic strategy that has permeated cinema from pioneering forays like Georges Méliès’s The Haunted Castle (1896) and Edison Studio’s Frankenstein (1910) to more technically and socially complex iterations like Park Chan-wook’s Stoker (2013) and Jordan Peele’s Get Out (2017). The articles that comprise this volume, each written by a prominent scholar in the field of Gothic and Film Studies, examine the ways that film-makers throughout history and across cultures have mobilised (and continue to mobilise) Gothic conceits in seemingly disparate and discrete genres, like ‘Science Fiction’ and ‘Westerns’, and in conjunction with other prominent film styles like film noir and aesthetic frameworks like surrealism. In the process, Gothic Film not only contributes exciting new readings of canonical works of Gothic cinema, including key German Expressionist texts and 1930s Universal horror films, but also explores important intersections between the Gothic and established film traditions, from the Italian giallo to the horror cinemas of South East Asia.

We have structured this volume into three sections: ‘Gothic Film
History’, ‘Gothic Film Adaptations’ and ‘Gothic Film Traditions’. The
chapters in the first section take a broadly historiographical approach
from early cinema to the present day. The second section looks at exam-
pies of Gothic Film that feature aspects of adaptation, appropriation
or parody. The third section looks at Gothic film in national contexts
as well as identifying subgenres and hybridising techniques. Opening
‘Gothic Film History’, James L. Neibaur’s ‘Gothic Cinema during the
Silent Era’ is an exploration of the earliest articulations of the Gothic
on screen, investigating in depth the work of George Méliès as well as
the key achievements of German Expressionism and the Universal films
of Lon Chaney. But Neibaur extends his remit further with accounts of
the Charlie Chaplin comedy Cruel Love (1914) and Buster Keaton’s
The Haunted House (1921). Through this detailed account, Neibaur
argues that it is in silent cinema that we find Gothic visuals presented
with the greatest depth and care. It is thus by turning to early cinema
that we can better understand the longer development of Gothic cinema,
its assimilation of various genres and the inauguration of concepts and
motifs that eventually become standard expectations in the evolution of
‘Gothic cinema’.

In ““So why shouldn’t I write of monsters?”: Defining Monstrosity in
Universal’s Horror Films’, Andy W. Smith explores the Universal Studios
series of horror films from the 1930s and 1940s. Carefully exploring the
source texts of Dracula and Frankenstein, Smith explores the construc-
tion and significance of the Universal film adaptations, finding in these
monsters the very apex of Horror’s Golden Age, iconic figures who
abide and haunt Gothic cinema just as their textual ancestors haunt
Gothic literature. In ‘Film Noir and the Gothic’, Jay McRoy analyses
film noir in the context of Gothic cinema. A hybrid style – informed by
German Expressionism, crime fiction and existentialism – film noir’s
cynicism and paranoia regarding changes in a variety of social and
political contexts is emphatically a ‘cultural barometer’. Through an
exploration of film noir’s aesthetic hybridity and its shifting cultural
terrain, McRoy examines ‘traditional’ and contemporary iterations of
Gothic film noir, namely Alfred Hitchcock’s Shadow of a Doubt (1943)
and Park Chan-wook’s Stoker (2013).

In ‘Transitional Gothic: Hammer’s Gothic Revival and New Horror’,
Adam Charles Hart looks at the significance of Hammer Films, demon-
strating how Curse of Frankenstein (1957) instigated a hugely influen-
tial Gothic revival in global cinema that remains core to horror cinema
until the New Horror revolution in the late 1960s with films such as
Rosemary’s Baby (1968) and Night of the Living Dead (1968). For
Hart, Curse of Frankenstein is a transitional film, bridging older tradi-
tions of the Gothic while being transformational, not least in its redefi-

nition of monstrosity as internal and psychological, especially in the

classification of a sadistic Victor Frankenstein. We close the ‘Gothic

Film History’ section with ‘Gothic Cinema from the 1970s to Now’ in

which Xavier Aldana Reyes traces the post-Hammer mainstreaming of

horror in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, surveying

subgenres such as exorcism films, slasher films, found footage horror,

body horror and torture porn. Through these popular sub-genres of

Gothic horror, Aldana Reyes demonstrates how excess and transgres-

sion has become normalised in the mainstream horror film.

In the second section of the volume, our authors explore ‘Gothic

Film Adaptations’. In ‘Danny’s Endless Tricycle Ride: The Gothic and

Adaptation’, Richard J. Hand examines a traditional process of per-

ennial significance throughout the history of Gothic cinema: adapta-

tion. From family-friendly horror movies to Lenny Abrahamson’s 2018

screen version of Sarah Waters’s neo-Gothic novel The Little Stranger

(2009), adaptation has infused the full spectrum of Gothic cinema. In

the case of Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 film version of Stephen King’s The

Shining (1977), we find a film that has its own exceptional legacy as an

adapted text. In ‘Jekyll and Hyde and Scopophilia’, Martin Danahay

uses the paradigmatic feminist lens of Laura Mulvey’s scopophilia to

explore the major screen adaptations of Stevenson’s novel in the first

half of the twentieth century and their performative progenitor: the

Richard Mansfield stage version in the 1880s. Danahay reveals how

these film versions implicitly raise subversive questions about mascu-

linity and sexual violence and yet are ultimately conservative works,

framed by patriarchy and heterosexuality. Ever since the Gothic literary

form emerged there have been parodies of it. In ‘Gothic Parodies on

Film and Personal Transformation’, Laurence Raw looks at Gothic film

parodies by Mel Brooks, Gene Wilder and others through to the tele-

vision series Penny Dreadful (2014–16). As well as exploring these screen

versions’ use of Gothic codes, conventions, intertextuality and nostal-

gia, Raw also explores the subgenre’s themes regarding the therapeutic

process of transformation.

In ‘The Gothic Sensorium: Affect in Švankmajer’s Poe Films’,

Anna Powell uses Gilles Deleuze’s work on film as a theoretical frame

to analyse the Czech surrealist animator’s The Fall of the House of

Usher (1980) and The Pendulum, the Pit and Hope (1983). As Powell

argues, Švankmajer’s films reflect experiments in Tactilism (touch-based

art) and were created within a culture of dissidence. In this regard,

Švankmajer’s imagination works not just to visualise the sense of touch

but to bring out Gothic tropes and contradictions and the mobilisation
of anti-totalitarian desire. We conclude ‘Gothic Film Adaptations’ with Andrew Hock Soon Ng’s ‘Dracula in Asian Cinema: Transnational Appropriation of a Cultural Symbol’. In this chapter, Ng examines the vampire in Asian cinema, but rather than looking at the many indigenous vampires of Asian cultures, he focuses on the appropriation of a Western icon inaugurated by Bram Stoker’s creation of Dracula. Rather than being merely for commercial reasons, Dracula can be seen to fulfil a powerful symbolic and allegorical role in Asian horror films.

We open the third and final section of this volume – ‘Gothic Film Traditions’ – with Mikel J. Koven’s ‘The Italian Gothic Film’. Koven presents an exploration of the Italian Gothic horror movies produced in the early 1960s by Mario Bava and other directors, placing his analysis of this distinctive and influential genre into a nuanced context of the larger, cross-disciplinary, debates about the Gothic. In ‘Gothic Science Fiction’, Geraint D’Arcy gives an account of the complex relationship between the Gothic and Science Fiction in cinema (a somewhat ironic tension given the rich heritage of hybridising the Gothic and Science Fiction in literary fiction). Subsequently, D’Arcy examines and defines the presence of visual Gothic conceits in Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979) and the appearance of Gothic themes in the visuals and narratives of Duncan Jones’s Moon (2009) and Alex Garland’s Ex Machina (2015).

In ‘American Gothic Westerns: Tales of Racial Slavery and Genocide’, Josef Benson argues that the American Western genre is particularly well suited for American Gothic narratives since the genre itself emanated from the legacy of racial slavery and the genocide of indigenous peoples. Benson finds this correlation reflected in the genre’s tropes of aestheticised violence and dehumanisation and explores the progression of these elements in Western films such as Sam Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch (1969), Clint Eastwood’s High Plains Drifter (1973), Jim Jarmusch’s Dead Man (1995), Django Unchained (Tarantino, 2012) and others. Further exploring the context of American Gothic is Elaine Roth’s ‘This Is America: Race, Gender and the Gothic in Get Out (2017)’. Roth explores Jordan Peele’s phenomenally successful Get Out, the most popularly acclaimed horror film since The Exorcist (1973). The author-director Peele describes the film as a ‘social thriller’ in the tradition of Night of the Living Dead (1968) and Roth reveals how richly Get Out evokes the themes and conventions of the Gothic tradition while being a thrilling revitalisation of the genre on screen.

We conclude ‘Gothic Film Traditions’ – and the volume as a whole – with Thomas Joseph Watson’s ‘“Part of my soul did die when making this film”: Gothic Corporeality, Extreme Cinema and Hardcore Horror in the Twenty-First Century’. In this chapter, Watson looks at films that
have tested the boundaries between ‘extreme pornography’ and ‘torture porn’ with particular attention given to Adam Rehmeier’s *The Bunny Game* (2011). For Watson, this notorious film’s aspects of realism and authenticity associated with extreme violence hinge on more than what is represented on the screen. Although still banned by the British Board of Film Classification, *The Bunny Game* should perhaps be regarded as a film that ‘re-politicises’ porn, horror and the nature of the Gothic.

We hope that *Gothic Film: An Edinburgh Companion* makes a timely and appropriate intervention in the fields of Gothic Studies and Film Studies. The essays in this volume reveal how the Gothic’s relationship with the screen has produced works that can be conservative or radical, nostalgic or revolutionary, family-friendly or outlawed. It can span multiple genres, textual forms and national cultures, examining contemporary preoccupations as much as historical motifs. As the reader will see, Gothic Film has a rich heritage and a dynamic future.

References