A 'fascinating conundrum of a movie': Gothic, Horror and *Crimson Peak* (2015)

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Introduction

One trend emerging from the reviews of *Crimson Peak* upon its release in 2015 is the definitional challenge the film evidently poses for genre categorisation.[1] *Crimson Peak* is variously labelled by critics as Gothic romance, horror, a Victorian Gothic and a melodrama (Newman 2015; Travers 2015; Debruge 2015; Kohn 2015; Covert 2015; Ebiri 2015; Jolin 2015; Nicholson 2015). Elsewhere it is called a ghost story, a Gothic horror, the malformed love child between the two, a riff, a pastiche, a homage and a mash-up (Schaefer 2012; Shaw-Williams 2013; Covert 2015; Debruge 2015; Kohn 2015; Nicholson 2015). Bilge Ebiri muses upon this complex generic referencing by noting:

> But that's both the problem and the wonder of *Crimson Peak*: it features lots of ghosts, but isn't really a ghost story. It speaks a lot about romance, but isn't really a romance. It gives us the structure of a mystery, yet has very little mystery in it. […] It doesn't always seem to know what it wants to be [...] *Crimson Peak* is a fascinating conundrum of a movie. (Ebiri 2015)

This article will reflect upon one aspect which can help to begin to unravel this 'conundrum': the specific relationship between two of the genres mentioned above, namely Gothic and horror. Horror, as indicated from these reviews, is often used in describing *Crimson Peak*, a labelling which is, as Alison Willmore notes, not unwarranted given the film's theatrical trailer (Willmore 2015).[2] However, it is precisely this categorisation which provoked director Guillermo del Toro's ire: reviewers may have found *Crimson Peak* a complicated mix of several influences but del Toro is insistent that his film's genre is clearly that of 'a modern Gothic romance' which, importantly, means it is *not* a horror film.[3] This assertion is supported, in part, by del Toro contextualising his film within the longer literary and cinematic tradition of the Female Gothic, as shall be seen. *Crimson Peak*'s evocation of the Female Gothic is, this paper will argue, particularly complex: in contrast to the clear distinction del Toro suggests exists between horror and the Gothic in relation to this film, I argue that *Crimson Peak* ambiguously combines both, complicating its own employment of

Female Gothic tropes through the inclusion of ghosts and, most significantly, in coding these supernatural occurrences as moments of horror. This blending is evident on narrative and stylistic levels and has several consequences: in particular, the use of tactics more usually associated with horror re-defines the alignment between heroine and spectator central to a Female Gothic story; disgust and fear are aligned with other female characters; and the story's depiction of the villainous male is ambiguously concluded. Through the close analysis of the film's story, tone and visual address, this paper will illuminate some part of the 'conundrum' which is *Crimson Peak* – a mystery rooted in the film's relationship to the Gothic.

'Ghosts are real': Gothic romance meets horror

In a foreword the director provided for reviewers before a critics' screening of his new film, del Toro outlines the cinematic heritage *Crimson Peak* explicitly draws upon. He writes:

> This movie is my attempt to harken back to a classic, old-fashioned, grand Hollywood product in the Gothic romance genre. For a while, in the Golden Era of cinema, movies like *Dragonwyck*, *Rebecca*, *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* were produced but then decayed into oblivion in the '50s, '60s and '70s. In fact, it's been about 30 years since someone has made a Gothic romance on this scale, and I am proud to welcome it back. (Del Toro 2015)

The history del Toro is referencing here are the films Mary Ann Doane calls the 'paranoid women's films' produced in Hollywood in the 1940s (Doane 1987). This cycle of Gothic films includes *Rebecca* (1940), *Jane Eyre* (1943), *Gaslight* (1944), *Dragonwyck* (1946), *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947) and *Sleep My Love* (1948). These films evoke the traditions of the Female Gothic with narratives which focus on the exploits of a (usually) young heroine whose curiosity surrounding a specific mystery – normally associated with her love interest or newly married husband – lead to an investigation of the domestic space which is revealed to be a danger to her safety and/or sanity. These films draw on the conventions established in the work of Ann Radcliffe; indeed, the latter provides a key inspiration for Ellen Moers's coining of the term the 'Female Gothic' (Moers 1985). Helen Hanson explicitly draws the link between this tradition and the 1940s Hollywood films by labelling the latter as 'the Female Gothic film' (Hanson 2007). The emphasis upon a 'prohibition and its transgression'

within the narrative also forms the 'most elemental' concern at the heart of the Bluebeard fairy tale too (Hermansson 2009: 3). Maria Tatar further cements the link between Bluebeard and the 1940s Female Gothic films by categorising these Hollywood productions as 'the Bluebeard cycle' (Tatar 2004).

The narrative of *Crimson Peak* explicitly replicates the conventions and tropes of these Female Gothic and Bluebeardian traditions. The film tells the story of Edith Cushing, an aspiring writer who becomes infatuated with Thomas Sharpe, a member of the English aristocracy visiting the US with his sister Lucille in an attempt to raise funds for his business venture. After the mysterious death of her father, Edith marries Thomas and returns with him to England to live at his ancestral home Allerdale Hall. Edith begins to feel increasingly uncomfortable in the dilapidated house, which is saturated with the iconic red clay which Thomas is attempting to mine and which gives the place its alternative name 'Crimson Peak'. As Edith becomes convinced the mansion is haunted with terrifying spectres, she investigates further and eventually discovers that Thomas was previously married to other women who, like her, were young, wealthy and without a family. These brides were killed by the siblings in a scheme enacted to improve their own family fortune, support Thomas's entrepreneurial ambitions and permit them to continue their incestuous relationship. Thomas admits his love for Edith but, after attempting to save the latter from Lucille, is killed by his sister and former accomplice. Lucille continues her attack on the latest bride but Edith, with some help from Thomas's ghost, kills Lucille and finally escapes from Crimson Peak.

The film's emphasis on the suspicious husband, an eerie domestic space, hidden secrets (some of which are locked away by a key), forbidden places and, most importantly of all, the heroine's investigation, signal how the film knowingly incorporates the central tropes of the 1940s Hollywood Gothics; a lineage which also incorporates the traditions of the Female Gothic more broadly and the Bluebeard fairy tale.[4] This explains why the film is described by critics as a 'pastiche' and 'homage', while del Toro is said to be 'a filmmaker who knows his stuff' (Jolin 2015); the film's narrative themes and tropes are indicative of the director's self-confessed Gothic literacy. There is, however, a key difference between *Crimson Peak* and the literary and filmic tradition within which del Toro locates his film: this difference concerns the presence of the supernatural and, more specifically, the film's evocation of horror. David Punter and Glennis Byron explain how, within the Female Gothic, the 'presence of the

supernatural is often suggested, but all mysterious events tend ultimately to be rationalised and explained' (2004: 279). They continue that the Female Gothic thus:

> tends to emphasize suspense rather than outright horror, and this is often generated by limiting the reader's understanding of events to the protagonist's point of view. (279)

Crimson Peak disrupts these conventions from the opening shots. A voice-over narration by Edith – which speaks over the image of her bloodied and bruised from her fight with Lucille near the story's end – informs us that: 'Ghosts are real. This much I know.' Her narration continues to describe the death of her mother as the image dissolves to a funeral procession, the camera cutting to reveal a 10 year old Edith mournfully looking on. Adult Edith's voice laments how there were 'no parting kisses' or 'goodbyes' with her mother before noting: 'that is, until the night she came back.' This revelation motivates an iris fade to black and then a cut to a long shot of child Edith lying in bed in a shadow laden room. A thunderstorm outside and a ticking clock are dominant on the soundtrack. The camera re-positions to a side view of Edith lying in bed, a corridor visible beyond the open door deep within the frame, with the clock just visible at the back. The sudden stop of the clock's rhythmic beat prompts a frightened Edith to turn around and look down this hall, with a racking focus mimicking this action by bringing the back wall – and the shadow of two approaching hands upon it – into view. A black spectre floats towards Edith and, after the girl has turned away in fear, the camera returns to its positioning of the side view just as a stinger in the music corresponds to the moment a long fingered, skeletal hand clasps Edith's shoulder. The same framing is used as the ghost's decomposed face, barely discernible below a heavy black veil, whispers that Edith should 'beware of Crimson Peak'.

The supernatural is not 'suggested' here, only to be dispelled later, but rather its occurrence is confirmed within the diegesis, as reinforced by Edith's assertion that 'ghosts are real'. As I have analysed elsewhere[5], the 1940s Hollywood Gothic films generally correlate to the narrative patterning described by Punter and Byron above: that all 'mysterious events' – including the apparent occurrence of ghosts – 'tend ultimately to be rationalised and explained' (279). This trend is Radcliffe's 'explained supernatural' or what Bruce Karwin characterises as the 'bait-and-switch' technique (2012: 112). This difference already challenges del Toro's earlier statement that the film unambiguously 'harkens' back to a genre from the 'Golden Era' of Hollywood. Indeed, *Crimson Peak*'s emphasis on the supernatural

demonstrates how the del Doro production is not, as the director attests, the first film in '30 years' to 'welcome' back the Gothic Romance genre and is actually more akin to more recent iterations in the Female Gothic film occurring from the 1990s onwards. Helen Hanson observes how films such *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), *The Others* (2001) and *Enough* (2002) are examples of the 'neo-gothic': films which 'revive, revisit and rework elements of the female gothic film of the 1940s' (Hanson 2007: 171). I have described how one of these 'neo-gothics' – *What Lies Beneath* (2000) – is significant for its portrayal of a ghost, marking a significant development in the Female Gothic film which can be seen repeated in more recent examples; *Crimson Peak* is therefore also part of this contemporary turn.[6]

It could be argued that the ghosts in *Crimson Peak* can still be explained via a rational explanation: that their appearance is either the paranoid projection of Edith's traumatised mind, or the creative invention of her scholarly ambitions. Early in the film Edith meets with Ogilvie, a potential publisher, who suggests her 'ghost story' would be improved with the inclusion of a romance. The exchange is, of course, a self-reflexive comment and prophetic statement on *Crimson Peak*'s plot development, which makes Edith's response – that the 'ghost is just a metaphor' – all the more poignant: in an act of self-theorisation, the film overtly includes its own 'supernatural explained' clause.[7] However, it is not just the inclusion of the supernatural – real or not – which complicates *Crimson Peak*'s Female Gothic credentials: it is also the fact that such scenes are presented as specifically moments of *horror*. The film's opening sequence again demonstrates this. The return of Edith's mother is a fearful event as immediately indicated by the young Edith's performance: the long shot introducing the young girl marks her as vulnerable within the space where she nervously clutches her hands. The tension in the scene builds via the film's soundtrack which, at first, appears unambiguously anchored in the diegetic space. The ticking clock functions as a countdown to the undead mother's arrival as it is the sudden absence of its sound which motivates the racking focus of the long shot emphasising shot depth and the ghost's slow arrival in the background. At this point a creaking sound – which seems diegetic as the terrified young Edith stifles a scream in response – blends with eerie music and noises that build on the soundtrack. Much like the complicated ontology of a ghost – as both present and absent, from the past but now in the present – these sounds also blur definitional boundaries, this time between the diegetic and non-diegetic. The throbbing bass and high-pitched notes – which also sound like unearthly voices or screams – appear to emanate from the undead

mother whilst also functioning as the film's external, self-conscious and non-diegetic score intent on provoking a reaction parallel to Edith's: a response of fear.

These sounds temporarily dull before the ghost's hand unexpected clasps Edith's shoulder from the darkness, and an explosion of (what is more overtly marked as) non-diegetic sound occurs in the first example of the film's utilisation of jump scares. This is an example of what Murray Leeder calls the horror film's use of 'assaultive sound' or 'startle effects', which find precedence in films such as 1942's *Cat People*. The latter's famous example of a bus suddenly arriving in the frame when the viewer is expecting an imminent attack, is 'often described as the first "jump scene"' where it is the 'interplay of silence and sudden volume' which 'makes the scene so effective' (Leeder 2018: 179). Andrew Tudor highlights the 'ambivalently pleasurable tension' in such moments where the '*socially* constructed' experience of the genre aims to 'produce physically manifest responses. Hiding one's eyes, jumping at moments of shock' (Tudor 2002: 49-50, original emphasis). *Crimson Peak* clearly evokes this generic convention in this early scene and it is this emphasis upon horror which again marks a departure from the 1940s Hollywood Female Gothic films. *Rebecca* (1940) illuminates this difference as Hitchcock's formative film of the cycle not only denies the literal depiction of ghosts, but its tone is specifically one of dread and unease, rather than outright shock and jump scares.

For example, when the new Mrs de Winter decides to explore the West Wing, the camera pans and tilts, tracing her movements up the stairs and towards the bedroom but it does not cut into the action immediately: rather the heroine's movement into the depth of the long shot emphasises the enormity of the house which dwarfs the new bride's appearance. The next cut appears to be a point-of-view of Rebecca's bedroom door, and then the reverse shot tracks backwards as the new Mrs de Winter approaches. The camera is therefore both representative of the heroine's movements through this space, aligning the viewer with her trepidation and fear, but it is also complicit in evoking that anxiety, as framing and camera movement enhances the suggestion of an unseen presence. This is particularly underlined by the next shot which appears to repeat the point of view patterning established previously but, as John Fletcher quite rightly highlights, this is shown to be false: the heroine's hand enters the frame from screen left and, if this were a true point of view shot, it should emerge from the right (Fletcher 1995: 349). This unnerving irregularity mimics the uncertainty expressed by the heroine whose negotiation of the narrative's central mystery – Maxim's feelings about

Rebecca – is reinforced by a film style which vacillates between expressing the new Mrs de Winter's unease and suggesting an unseen force may be at work. The haunting nature of this scene echoes an earlier moment when Mrs Danvers describes 'Mrs de Winter's room'. The maid and heroine then move out of the long shot with the West Wing door in the background but the camera does not follow them. Rather, the room's doorway is brought into focus and the camera tracks forwards slightly, lingering on the entrance, with Rebecca's faithful dog Jasper seen resting in front. The suggestion that Rebecca still remains beyond that door is reinforced by a dissolve to the recurring motif of her initials.

The supernatural is thus only *suggested* in *Rebecca*, rather than overtly depicted by literal ghosts. These eerie occurrences are inextricably linked to the heroine's own inferiority complex but the tone of these scenes is equally crafted and enhanced by these moments of spectral embodiment which is connected to, but sometimes distinct from, the new Mrs de Winter's movement through the space. *Crimson Peak* changes this dynamic. As with the scene depicting Edith's undead mother, the supernatural is given a physical manifestation and this, in turn, realigns the parameters through which the viewer is aligned to the heroine. Later in the film Edith is re-visited by her dead mother moments before Thomas arrives to convince her to join him at a party. After he asks her 'Why would you want to stay here, all alone?' Edith nervously smiles and glances to screen left, motivating a cut to a high-angled shot from the top of the stairs. Her look and this edit is of course ironic: Edith is *not* alone and, as in *Rebecca*, this shot embodies the spectral threat, making the heroine appear vulnerable within the domestic space. However, unlike the new Mrs de Winter, Edith stares directly into the camera, a reflection of the fact that this look is knowing: ghosts, as she has already emphatically stated, *are* real and haunt the heroine.

Moreover, Edith's second interaction with her dead mother is again articulated as horror. The latter scene echoes the parameters through which child Edith is terrified: adult Edith resides on her bed during a thunderstorm in a darkened room. A series of jump scares then occurs: the rattling of the door handle culminates in the door suddenly opening, revealing the same corridor from the earlier scene, complete with clock. The difficulty in distinguishing between diegetic creaks and the high-pitched sound of the non-diegetic score occurs again. In a close-up shot of the door, Edith's hand reaches for the handle which unexpectedly moves, the shock of which is underlined by an edit to a gasping Edith who pulls away. As Edith prepares to slam the door her look to screen left produces a cut to show the spectral mother already

present and floating in the hallway; the medium shot slowly tracks forward and lingers on the ethereal figure before a sudden cut to a tighter framing emphasises the jump scare of the undead mother's arms reaching forward, together with a screech. Edith slams the door and a close-up of her face, breathing heavily, asking in a desperate whisper 'what do you want?', is again a moment of quiet violently disrupted by sudden action and noise: the corpse's hands emerge through the door, grabbing at the heroine as the ghost repeats her motherly warning from beyond the grave.

The experience of this scene as horror is emphasised by its similarity to the earlier event: the spectator is therefore primed to expect suspense and then an overt scare. However the film seemingly increases the ante by releasing the tension not within a single climax but several: at least four jump scares occur. *Crimson Peak* therefore disrupts the fundamental conventions and spectatorial address maintained by the majority of the 1940s Female Gothic films. Returning to Punter and Byron's earlier definitions, *Crimson Peak* achieves this by converting the 'suggested' presence of the supernatural into an established presence which is not simply 'explained' away. Additionally, whilst the viewer of the film is generally aligned with 'the protagonist's point of view' – a factor underlined by Edith's role as narrator – the characteristic suspense of Female Gothic stories is quite explicitly expanded into moments of 'outright horror'. The next section will continue to explore the latter, investigating further consequences that the use of horror has for the viewer's alignment with the heroine's point of view. Another answer to the 'conundrum' of *Crimson Peak* resides in how the film creates horror specifically through its depiction of the monstrous.

'The ghost is just a metaphor': ***Crimson Peak*'s monsters**

Crimson Peak's supernatural plot redefines the tension between what is present and what is absent. The spectral embodiment of the camera in *Rebecca* is particularly illuminated during the scene in the boathouse where Maxim confesses that he actually hated Rebecca and she accidentally died during their confrontation. As he speaks, the camera tracks through the space, imitating the movements and gestures Rebecca would have made. Tatar notes that Hitchcock's camera creates a 'presence from Rebecca's absence […] creating a ghost-like presence on screen.' (Tatar 2004: 83). Ghost-like but *not* an actual ghost of course: the film simply re-presents the actions of an absent body in order to re-animate past events. *The Innocents* (1961) – a later iteration of the Female Gothic form which more overtly troubles

the distinction between the 'supernatural explained' and the reality of ghosts[8] – again places the emphasis upon creating a presence from absence, which establishes a mood of unease and dread rather than explicit horror. Miss Giddens sits quietly at night reading her bible and stoking the fire before hearing distant music play. A point of view shot of the piano, untouched, underlines the ambiguity of these sounds: what is the source of this noise? As the music gives way to whispering voices and creaks, the governess takes a candelabra to investigate further. The camera varies between tracking Miss Giddens's movements and remaining static whilst the heroine moves further into the depth of the shot, as when Miss Giddens's climbs the stairs. A creak which forces the protagonist to turn is emphasised by an edit to a medium shot of Miss Giddens from the front, re-positioning the camera for her continued investigation of the sounds.

As a whole, the scene makes use of few edits – for the most part utilising mobile framing – although cuts do occur at key moments of suspense: as the unusual sounds heighten, the camera moves in towards a medium close-up of Miss Giddens which is then juxtaposed to a cut from an extreme high-angle, looking down. The film makes use of a kind of jump scare – a sudden edit to a mask on the wall coupled with a scream on the soundtrack – although, significantly, this moment is only one of a series of occurrences, both visual and aural, which build unease but do not become overt horror. Indeed, the scene's conclusion provides a series of further enigmas as to the significance of this terror: the children's strange behaviour and Miles's odd explanation; the dead bird under his pillow; and the inappropriate way the boy kisses his governess goodnight. The 'presence' of these clues are still at a remove from Miss Giddens's suspenseful investigation, which in turn seeks to find evidence of a present absent. This absence – the explicit depiction of a malicious ghost – is (for now at least) denied an on-screen presence. Rather, the scene functions to further render ambiguous the existence of the supernatural, and to cast doubt upon the heroine's perception of events, and even her sanity.

Crimson Peak is clearly indebted to the style and imagery of *The Innocents*.[9] The scene described above shares an affinity with much of del Toro's film. For example, during both returns of Edith's mother there is a comparable emphasis upon a ticking clock, the white nightdress, the depth of space and changes in framing. Where *The Innocents* uses complex sound to dramatize a crisis of subjectivity (are these noises 'real' or simply in Miss Giddens's mind?), del Toro's film blurs the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. *Crimson Peak*'s referential nature is unequivocally marked when Edith is seen investigating a

sound in Allerdale Hall, in her white dress, with a candelabra. The camera similarly tracks Edith's movements around the darkened corridors and spaces, her investigation inspired by unusual noises (and her dog's frantic barking). As in *The Innocents*, little editing is used: from the moment Edith leaves her bedroom, the scene is one continuous shot until the heroine opens the closet door where she believes her pet to have become trapped. A medium close-up frames Edith grasping at the handle when her look to screen right motivates an edit to show the dog in the hallway. After a shot/reverse-shot between Edith and the dog, the camera re-positions to a medium shot which captures a red-faced ghost screaming from within the closet, whilst pulling the door closed.

The absence of presence integral to the 1940s Hollywood Gothics and films such as *The Innocents* is transformed in *Crimson Peak* into a literal presence of absence: ghosts physically appear. This has implications for the viewer's alignment with the central protagonist. As Punter and Byron describe, the Female Gothic's avoidance of outright horror is 'often generated by limiting the reader's understanding of events to the protagonist's point of view' (2004: 279). This tactic correlates to *Rebecca* and *The Innocents*, although the visual address of the scenes described in *Crimson Peak* thus far complicate this notion. The suspense which gives way to horror is primed by the film's narration: the scene with young Edith is introduced with the specific expectation that a ghost will appear; suspense which is evoked again when adult Edith replays the interaction. Carl Plantinga describes such narrative events as 'concern-based construals': a scene, such as those analysed from *Crimson Peak*, can achieve an affective impact, including an emotional reaction, because the 'intended response' is specifically guided by 'the filmic narration' (Plantinga 2009: 140-1). The narrative construction of such 'concern-based construals' in the scenes with the dead mother's return are coded as horror and yet still maintain Edith's perception of events in a manner akin to Female Gothic narratives: the revelation of the ghost's presence is experienced as a shock for protagonist and viewer alike. However, once Edith resides in Allerdale Hall, the Gothic trope of restricting 'understanding of events to the protagonist's point of view' is further eroded as the 'concern-based construals' become dependent upon knowledge which exceeds Edith's own – a tactic which is integral to creating suspense and overt horror.

The scene with the ghost in the cupboard is brief example of this; another occurs when Edith takes a bath soon after arriving in her new home. As Edith sits uncomfortably huddled in the

tub, the camera cuts to a long shot from beyond the bathroom door, trapping Edith in a frame within a frame, deep in the overwhelming space. The camera slowly tracks forwards before cutting to a medium shot of Edith, and her glance towards to the back of the room (where the camera had just been) motivates a shot-reverse/shot where she glimpses a shadowy figure retreat into the darkness. Edith gets out of the bath and, as her back is turned while she put on her robe, the camera shifts to the left as the ghost of one of the dead wives shuffles towards the heroine in the background. An edit cuts to the back of this space, along the Z axis, showing Margaret's approach, before each woman – one living and one dead – is isolated within different shots: Edith's back in one, and the gruesome reveal of Margaret in the other. As the latter screeches (in what one interprets to be an imminent attack) Edith turns. The camera does not, however, return to her point of view: rather the camera cuts back to its original long shot, revealing her to be alone but still emphasising her vulnerability in the space once again.

This angle, it is now known, is aligned with the threatening ghost but, unlike the presence given to Rebecca's absence, the camera does not so much embody the spirit but rather confirm its existence *without* Edith's shared experience of the moment. The hierarchy of knowledge between heroine and viewer has thus radically shifted, and this is integral to the scene's 'concern-based construal': the spectator is no longer limited to Edith's experience of ghosts but, rather, suspense is created, sustained and enhanced by seeing the danger and threat of the encounter beyond Edith's awareness. This is not to say that Female Gothic films wholly exclude such tactics in their own creation of suspense: indeed, Helen Hanson, drawing on Elizabeth Cowie's work, notes how suspense sequences 'temporarily put protagonists at a knowledge disadvantage, in order to thrill and engage the viewer' (59). However, Hanson notes how in the 1940s Female Gothic films these suspense sequences are deployed 'at a point in the narrative *after* which suspicion has been confirmed through investigation, discovery and, usually, the confrontation of the gothic husband/lover' (59, original emphasis). *Crimson Peak* again inverts the trope: its creation of suspense, via a 'knowledge disadvantage', occurs much earlier in the story – the bathroom scene takes place before Edith's investigation has even begun – and therefore cannot function to 'realise the suspicions of the female gothic heroine' (59). Instead, such suspense sequences see Edith become less the investigative Gothic heroine and more a potential victim to an unseen entity; a scenario more broadly aligned with horror conventions.

One could argue that these moments of suspenseful horror are ultimately a Hitchcockian-type MacGuffin: these ghosts do not intend to hurt Edith but rather warn her of the real danger she faces from the Sharpes. However, the film still aligns to the tropes of horror because of the ghosts' design: decomposing, abject, zombie-like bodies which are ultimately monstrous. The screeching Margaret in the scene above emblematises the point. The medium close-up emphasises her monstrosity: her face is missing eyes and a nose and her skull is broken open. She still possesses some stained teeth and lips but what is left of her decomposing skin is shrivelled and torn. Her red appearance (which is presumably caused by her body's concealment in the clay) gives her a glistening, visceral texture, whilst ethereal trails emanate from her body like ectoplasm. The latter emphasises her spectral ontology – as underlined by her impossible and instantaneous disappearance – and yet she is also strangely tangible and embodied, an impression reinforced by the soundtrack which conveys shuffling flesh and creaking bones. The ghosts' monstrous appearance and their inclusion in the narrative would clearly categorise *Crimson Peak* as a horror film, according to Noel Carroll's definition of art-horror. In a manner comparable to Plantinga's emphasis on narrative events and evocation of emotional affect, the horror genre is 'essentially linked with a particular affect – specifically, that from which it takes its name' (Carroll 1990: 15). Yet Carroll notes that, in horror, this affect is reliant upon several other parameters specific to the genre, beginning with the 'mirroring-effect' between viewer and the 'positive human characters' through whom the audience is aligned. The emotion reactions of such characters provide a 'set of instructions' for how the viewer is intended to respond (17-18). *Crimson Peak* evidently follows this trend: just as the young Edith quivers with fear in bed and the older Edith breathes anxiously behind the door in the scenes analysed earlier, so too is the viewer clearly intended to also feel fear.

Horror is evoked when this fear is combined with a feeling of disgust, and the latter signals the importance of monsters to Carroll's definition of the genre. A monster must be 'threatening *and* impure' (28, original emphasis) and this is defined when an object or figure 'is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless' (32). Monsters provoke such an evaluation on physical and cognitive levels in a manner comparable to the ghosts in *Crimson Peak*: the spectres in the film are already a challenge to logic and reason – by confirming the existence of the supernatural – but they are also physically repulsive. Like Margaret, the ghosts show the degradation and decay of human flesh which moves in unnatural ways, appearing to ooze and drip thereby rendering the

surrounding area where they appear as suddenly unclean and abject. The monsters of *Crimson Peak* are, as in Carroll's definition of horror, 'putrid or mouldering things [that] hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh [...] They are not only quite dangerous but they also make one's skin creep' (23).

In Carroll's analysis, the conventional Female Gothic would better align with what he classifies as 'art-dread', as a film which features an 'uncanny event' which thus:

> causes a sense of unease and awe, perhaps a momentary anxiety and foreboding. These events are constructed to move the audience rhetorically to the point that one entertains the idea that unavowed, unknown, and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe. Where art-horror involves disgust as a central feature, what might be called art-dread does not. (42)

Carroll thus draws an important distinction between the evocation of the uncanny – which Freud defines as the *unheimlich*; the familiar made strange or strangely familiar (Freud 2003 [1919]) – and overt depictions of shock, bodily disintegration and disgust which reside within the figure of the monster, and therefore evoke horror. *Crimson Peak* complicates the boundaries between these two generic classifications once again. In addition to the suspense and disgust evoked by the film's introduction of the ghosts, *Crimson Peak* also clearly draws upon the uncanniness of the domestic space as depicted in earlier Female Gothic films and, as mentioned earlier, dispels the danger the spectres apparently pose by reframing these monsters as victims during the course of Edith's investigation. One could argue, then, that where the film begins as an art-horror, it ends by becoming an art-dread. Carroll's analysis illuminates other such nuances: for instance, the character in *The Fly* (1986) is clearly disgusting, and yet the other character's sympathy encourages the spectator to look beyond this reaction. Additionally, there are those characters in other films commonly classed as 'horrors' who are not literally monsters but behave like them, which Carroll argues is more accurately described as a 'moral condemnation which is basically metaphorical' (40-41).

Crimson Peak incorporates these exceptions too. Near the story's end an injured Edith finds the ghost of a dishevelled Enola floating in the centre of the house, clutching the deceased deformed child who is later revealed to be a product of Lucille's and Thomas's incestuous liaisons. Edith is no longer afraid: rather, she sympathises with the spirit's anguished afterlife

and kindly asks her what she wants. Enola points towards another space in the house and Edith dutifully follows. This appears like another moment of horror, as Edith walks down shadowy corridors with eerie sounds accompanying her movements as she reaches for the handle of a closed door – an action which is reminiscent of the role given to doors and the secrets behind them in the earlier described scenes of horror. Edith's resultant horrified expression on her entry into the room is not provoked by a ghost – as was previously the case with the arrival of her undead mother – but this time by her discovery of Lucille's and Thomas's relationship. This moment – which acts as the catalyst for the uncovering the film's final secrets, including the siblings' murdering of their own mother – shifts the categorisation of 'monster' into what Carroll identifies as the realm of metaphor. Indeed, *Crimson Peak* underlines the change in emphasis through dialogue: when Lucille orders Thomas to kill Alan (who had arrived to rescue Edith), Edith screams at the siblings 'You're monsters, both of you!'. It is an identity Lucille acknowledges, later noting that all the 'horror' she and Thomas had enacted on others was for 'a monstrous love', arguing that romance 'makes monsters of us all'.

The film therefore reinforces Edith's earlier self-reflexive comment about her own fiction in which the 'ghost is just a metaphor': here the ghosts function to illuminate the true monstrosity and disgusting nature of (the very much living and human) Lucille and Thomas. Edith earlier describes the ghost in her work is a 'metaphor for the past', a sentiment she reaffirms again during the film's concluding shots when her voice-over narration returns. Edith describes how ghosts become 'tied to a place' whilst others 'hold onto an emotion', including love, and it is those who 'never go away'. This melancholic ending, which concludes with a spectral Lucille playing the piano in an otherwise empty Allerdale Hall, signals the film's final shift away from literal, monstrous disgust and threat – the key components in Carroll's art-horror – and an alignment towards 'art-dread', whereby the relationship towards the supernatural is no longer one of fear but now sympathy and pity, with metaphoric reflections upon morality and human nature. However, I argue that such a development within the narrative and its shift in the intended response does not remove the film's horror-based nature earlier in the film: these scenes of horror still correlate to specific genre conventions which directly contrast some fundamental tropes of the Female Gothic. Additionally, the film's switch in tone from horror to dread does not permit the film to easily re-define itself in Female Gothic terms either: the confirmation of the existence of ghosts is still a complicating factor. Nor is it insignificant that the sympathetic ghosts – particularly

those of the murdered wives – are designed to appear disgusting: even when Edith finally sympathises with their tragic history, one cannot ignore the 'impurity' of their bodies, which emphasises decaying flesh revealing bone beneath the skin. If these ghosts are, then, a 'metaphor' the next conundrum of the film becomes: a metaphor for what?

In my chapter on *What Lies Beneath*, I concluded by suggesting that the existence of the supernatural in the film, and particularly the appearance of the ghost Madison, serves to validate and emblematise the threat at the heart of all Female Gothic stories, and particularly those inspired by the Bluebeard fairy tale: the danger of domestic abuse and male violence within the home (Kamm forthcoming 2019). *Crimson Peak* could be said to do the same: the supernatural permits Margaret, Pamela and Enola to return from the beyond the grave, ensuring Edith finds the correct clues and unlocks the secrets of their murders. These women refuse to be forgotten and their terrifying appearance functions to underline the horror inflicted upon them by the monstrous Sharpes. Their victimhood is thus externalised and emphasised. The link to the Female Gothic's Bluebeardian tradition is important here. Elsewhere, *Crimson Peak* signals the film's connection to the fairy tale by calling the dead wives the 'three brides of Bluebeard' (Salisbury 2015: 146) and a comparison to this origin text illuminates the subversive potential of del Toro's re-telling, particularly in respect to the original story's gruesome reveal. Casie E. Hermansson notes how the climatic discovery of the Bluebeardian murder chamber differs in various versions of the text: early English translations from the French de-emphasise the grisly nature of the scene, which can also highlight the theme of 'the act of seeing' which is fundamental to the story (2009: 46-48). *Crimson Peak* also employs ideas around seeing – particularly within the tension between absence and presence evoked by the supernatural – but, in doing so, it does not shy away from showing the results of Bluebeardian violence. The women's decaying flesh and missing organs force the viewer to look upon the horrors of domestic violence, to see the dangers which lurk behind closed doors. *Crimson Peak* puts the horror, gore and – as particularly enabled by the bodies' red appearance and the 'bleeding' look of the clay – blood back into the bloody chamber, indicating a way in which the film may voice a 'critique' of patriarchal inequalities, which is a potential function of the Female Gothic film (Waldman 1984: 34-35).

I say *potential* because, as Diane Waldman also highlights, it is often the case that the 1940s films only come 'close' to highlighting such a criticism, but such radicalism is curtailed in the tension surrounding the validation or invalidation of the heroine's perception (Waldman

1984). Similarly, *Crimson Peak* undermines Edith – as its central Gothic heroine – and her experience of events when the objects of her fear, the ghosts, prove to be harmless. *Crimson Peak* further problematizes its feminist potential in respect to its 'Bluebeard wives' and the commingling of Gothic and horror traditions which is used in their depiction. Whilst the ghosts' appearance may afford them a narrative significance and dominance over the image (and soundtrack), their agency is somewhat limited by the fact they are dead. Joanne Clarke Dilman, who identifies a 'dead-but-not-gone-convention' in other films and television shows, observes that the apparent 'feminist logic' of such stories is undermined by the woman's deceased status which only serves to further 'assuage societal guilt over women's death' (2014: 11). Alice Bolin makes a similar observation with what she terms the 'Dead Girl Show', where the death of (usually young) women serves a central motivation for an investigation where, even when this is conducted by another female character, the mystery often focuses on the male, thereby demonstrating the removal of the dead woman's agency on two levels: her restriction by being dead and the devaluing of her significance within the narrative. Bolin notes:

> There can be no redemption for the Dead Girl, but it is available to the person who is solving her murder [...] the victim's body is a neutral arena on which to work out male problems. (2018: 18)

This observation correlates to the conventions of the Female Gothic: for example, one could say that the eponymous Rebecca functions only to unlock the mystery of Maxim for the new Mrs de Winter, an interpretation confirmed when Maxim's recounting of his first wife's death – in the moment when the camera creates a 'presence from Rebecca's absence' (Tatar 2004: 83) – is met by a rejoiced reaction from the unnamed heroine who exclaims 'But you never loved her!'. Similarly, the dead wives in *Crimson Peak* are employed initially to characterise the house as haunted, before becoming an integral mechanism through which Edith unlocks the mystery of the Sharpes, including Lucille's apparent coldness and Thomas's evident affection. Arguably, the film could achieve this without the physical presence of the ghosts: Edith finds crucial clues in Enola's chest, photographs and the wax cylinder recordings the latter of which more effectively re-animates, and literally gives a voice to, one of the siblings' victims. The decision to depict the dead wives within the physical space thus necessitates a re-evaluation of their affect and function, and the early appearances are particularly problematic: Margaret's introduction in the bathroom, as analysed above, is restricted as a

moment of pure horror: the 'concern-based construal' emphasises Margaret as a threat and this, along with her repulsive appearance, clearly intends to evoke a reaction of horror. Furthermore, this scene does not have any bearing on Edith's investigation: unlike Enola who (literally) points Edith in the right direction, Margaret's presence is unknown to Edith during this early encounter. Similarly, Edith's undead mother may initially provide the impetus for the mystery surrounding what is 'Crimson Peak' but her second appearance is simply repetitive; the return functions to further spectacularise the horror potential of her presence.

Moreover, if the film is successful in shifting our intended emotional response towards the ghosts of the wives from one of horror to one of sympathy, then it is still deeply troubling that their appearance should evoke notions of disgust at all. When Edith finds the wax cylinders, her attention is drawn towards the corridor behind her, in another mimicking of the staging in depth utilised in the other horror scenes. An arm suddenly appears from the floor, as a spectre begins to crawl towards a terrified Edith. A reverse shot emphasises the ghost's protruding spine, its claw-like arms dragging its immovable legs along the floor. Another edit to a backwards tracking shot of the spectre, now framed in a medium close-up, reveals how this ghost still has its eyes but its face is deformed and it mumbles and shrieks as though it were struggling to speak. This is, by all the definitions above, a moment of horror; but this is also the narrative's introduction of Pamela, Thomas's second wife who was wheelchair-bound. Her urgent approach towards Edith is an encouragement for the heroine to listen to the wax cylinders, which contain the recordings of Pamela's living voice. When Edith later plays these recordings it reveals a happier Pamela tragically asking Thomas to say into the horn that 'he loves her'. The sympathy the viewer should feel towards Pamela is problematized by her current monstrous appearance and the fear and disgust she is intended to evoke.

Crimson Peak's shift from horror to 'art-dread' does not, therefore, mitigate the ghosts' abject appearance. Indeed, in another observation which links *Crimson Peak* back to horror conventions, these undead women correlate to Barbara Creed's definitions of the 'monstrous-feminine.' Creed notes that women in the horror film are depicted as monstrous in a manner which is implicitly linked to the woman as representative of sexual difference, particularly in respect to 'her mothering and reproductive functions' (Creed 1993: 7). Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, this monstrosity is anchored in the notion of the abject where 'the ultimate in abjection is the corpse' (9). The horror film activates the processes of abjection by dramatizing images of the abject (mutilated corpses, blood and 'putrefying flesh'); by

creating a monstrous entity which threatens to cross the 'border'; and by further aligning this with women through 'the construction of the maternal figure as abject' (10-11). *Crimson Peak*'s depiction of the zombie-like undead wives clearly evokes these ideas of the abject, including that of the maternal: two of the film's ghosts are, after all, undead mothers, and Enola is revealed holding the Sharpe's deformed love child. Even the 'metaphoric' monstrosity of Lucille is emphasised via the maternal, as Edith is appalled to learn the truth concerning the dead child's parentage.

The idea that the ghosts are metaphors for 'the real horror' which is 'the humans' (del Toro in Salisbury 2015: 136) does not remove the significance of the above horror conventions, nor does it see the film straightforwardly adhere to Female Gothic traditions either. The horror and disgust of the ghosts diverts attention away from the true villains, the Sharpes, which means, over the course of the narrative, *Crimson Peak* mitigates the suspicion surrounding Thomas as the Gothic husband in a manner quite different from the 1940s Hollywood Gothic films. This is also a significant departure from the Bluebeardian paradigm as the ghosts not only misdirect the viewer's (and Edith's) attention away from the suspicious male, but their presence and (later) characterisation as victims do little to help condemn Thomas's previous actions. In fact, the film seeks to redeem Thomas via his genuine affection for Edith and then by transforming him into one of the (friendly) spirits. This threatens to erase the potential for a radical progressive and political reading of the dead wives' on-screen presence; their corpses become literal and figural vessels which are re-animated for the primary function of Edith unlocking the secrets of the house: secrets which are inextricably linked to her negotiation of married life to Thomas. The film's concluding shot on a spectral Lucille is additionally complicating: like ghost Thomas, dead Lucille also lacks signifiers of the abject and disgust to the extent which define the dead wives, and Edith's philosophical musings upon the afterlife in the voice-over suggest Lucille's undead isolation to be ultimately tragic. This ambiguous ending raises another 'conundrum' for narrative interpretation and generic classification.

Conclusion

Edith's opening statement that 'ghosts are real' already marks *Crimson Peak* as different from those films del Toro claims as his key inspiration. It is not, however, the inclusion of the supernatural alone which is significant here; critics' difficulty in identifying the genre of

Crimson Peak is highlighted by the film's clear evocation of horror tropes too. It could be that these ghosts – and the horror they create – are, as Edith suggests, 'just a metaphor' although the meaning of this metaphor is ultimately ambiguous. The film's combination of horror and Gothic could provide a way for the film to draw attention to the dangers of the domestic space; or the horror could complicate definitional boundaries which leads to a complex relationship between the heroine's experience of events, the spectator's alignment with her, and the significance of the former 'Bluebeard wives'. Or perhaps del Toro need not draw the line between the Gothic and horror so rigidly: after all, many of the 1940s Female Gothics were once conceptualised as a type of 'horror' at the time of their release (Jancovich, 2013). Additionally, in a paradoxical turn, *Crimson Peak*'s disruption of the Female Gothic conventions via the use of horror (as defined throughout this paper) may actually return *Crimson Peak* to one of the crucial traits of the 1940s films: as Waldman notes, 'the central feature of the Gothics is ambiguity' (Waldman, 1984: 31). How one decodes this 'ambiguity' is a trait present in the 'neo-gothics' and, I argue, more recent incarnations of the Female Gothic film of which *Crimson Peak* is an important example. As Hanson notes, reincarnations of the Female Gothic film demonstrate how the Gothic comes 'back to haunt the contemporary moment' (2007, 198): *Crimson Peak*'s commingling of Gothic and horror provides a particularly complex contemporary haunting which is, indeed, a 'fascinating conundrum'.

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[1] The majority of reviews or articles on *Crimson Peak* consulted were published immediately after the film's release although two of the examples included here – Shaw-Williams (2013) and Schaefer (2012) – were published prior to this, illuminating how the debate surrounding the genre of the film was emerging even during its production.

[2] The film's trailer emphasises the film's key 'horror' moments, including the undead mother and the appearance of the former wives.

[3] Matthew Denny's article on *Crimson Peak* within this special issue specifically explores this discrepancy. See: 'Don't Call it a Horror Film: *Crimson Peak* (Guillermo del Toro, 2015) and the uses of the Gothic'.

[4] For a detailed discussion on how *Crimson Peak* evokes Bluebeard as a 'ur-text' see Tamar Jeffers McDonald's chapter 'Blueprints from Bluebeard: Charting the Gothic in contemporary film' in Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Frances A. Kamm (eds.) *Gothic Heroines on Screen: Representation, Interpretation and Feminist Enquiry*. London and New York: Routledge. Forthcoming 2019.

[5] See Frances A. Kamm, '"There's a Ghost in My House": The Female Gothic and the Supernatural in *What Lies Beneath* (2000)' (forthcoming, 2019). In this chapter I note how *Dragonwyck* (1946) and *The Uninvited* (1944) are exceptions to this rule as they explicitly feature ghosts. However, these spectres are depicted in a way which segregates the supernatural occurrences away from the Gothic heroine's personal experiences – the defining element of a Female Gothic story.

[6] Examples I mention in the above chapter include *The Orphanage* (2007) and *Under the Shadow* (2016).

[7] Carol Clover observes how horror is 'intentionally or unintentionally, the most self-reflexive of cinematic genres'. See: Clover, Carol, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

[8] John C. Tibbetts explores the 'ambiguity regarding the nature and reality of the haunters and the haunted' in the film in 'The old dark house: the architecture of ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw* and T*he Innocents*', in: Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley, eds., *British Horror Cinema,* London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp.99-116.

[9] This is made overt in the video essay *Passages of Gothic* made as part of the Melodrama Research Group and Gothic Feminism project at the University of Kent by Sarah Polley, Frances A. Kamm, Alaina Piro Schempp, *et al*. It first screened for the public as a three-screen installation for the University's International Festival of Projections in March 2016. The film juxtaposes scenes from a variety of films within the Female Gothic tradition – including *The Innocents* and *Crimson Peak* – thereby highlighting the strong similarities between them. The video may be viewed here: https://vimeo.com/170080190.

Filmography

Crimson Peak, Guillermo del Toro (Director), Universal Pictures, 2015.

Dragonwyck, Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Director), Twentieth Century Fox, 1946.

Gaslight, George Cukor (Director), MGM, 1944.

Jane Eyre, Robert Stevenson (Director), Twentieth Century Fox, 1943.

Rebecca, Alfred Hitchcock (Director), United Artists, 1940.

Secret Beyond the Door, Fritz Lang (Director), Universal Picture, 1947.

Sleep My Love, Douglas Sirk (Director), United Artists, 1948.

The Innocents, Jack Clayton (Director), Twentieth Century Fox, 1961.

What Lies Beneath, Robert Zemeckis (Director), Twentieth Century Fox, 2000.

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