

**Conference Report: ‘Gothic Feminism presents Women-in-Peril or Final Girls:
Representing Women in Gothic and Horror Cinema’, 25th-26th May 2017**

Catherine Lester

‘Gothic Feminism presents Women-in-Peril or Final Girls: Representing Women in Gothic and Horror Cinema’ took place at the University of Kent from 24th-26th May 2017. However, to tell the full story of this conference, it would be remiss not to begin with the inaugural Gothic Feminism conference, also hosted at Kent in May 2016. This first, and highly successful, collective of scholars of women and the gothic was apparently inspired by a dismissive comment made by an unnamed male academic who claimed that it is impossible for the gothic to be feminist due to the way the genre so commonly concerns the terrorising and/or entrapment of women. And so, Gothic Feminism 2016 set out to demonstrate that the representation of women in gothic cinema is more complex and nuanced than this judgement gives the genre credit for. In this respect, the conference was a resounding success but by no means an exhaustive interrogation and celebration of women in/and the gothic. It was therefore no surprise when a second conference was announced to take place the following summer which would broaden out the call to focus on women in gothic *and* horror cinema.

This seemed to be both an inevitability as well as a relief, at least for this reviewer. I am sure I am not alone among scholars of horror and the gothic who have pondered over the difference between the two, and I attended Gothic Feminism 2016 at a point in my doctoral research on horror films for children when I was grappling with this very problem. The line between ‘horror’ and ‘gothic’ can be blurry; at times the terms are used interchangeably, while some argue that there are distinct differences between the two, with varying degrees of success (e.g. Kavka 2002). As Frances Kamm acknowledged in the opening remarks of Gothic Feminism 2017, ‘When you’re talking about gothic film, you’re not talking for very long before you’re talking about horror.’ Indeed, some of the texts discussed at Gothic Feminism 2016 fit a very traditional (if somewhat restrictive) conception of the gothic as concerning a young female protagonist plagued by domestic paranoia, trapped within a decaying mansion by a suspicious husband or other imposing male, such as Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, *The Haunting* and *Crimson Peak*. Yet far more of the texts examined are not so easily categorised, with some crossing over into horror (*The Babadook* [2014], *Eden Lake* [2008]) and others belonging to even more disparate genres like science-fiction (*Ex Machina* [2014], *Aliens* [1986]) and even the Western

(*A Town Called Bastard* [1971]). The 2017 conference's deliberate inclusion of horror therefore allowed for further exploration into the boundaries of the gothic and its hybridities with other genres, with a specific focus on how these overlaps and differences can be worked through by examining the representation of women, as well as the interventions of female directors, producers and writers, into the female gothic.

This inclusiveness resulted in perspectives on the gothic heroine in a diverse range of gothic-adjacent genres and media, including melodrama, noir, children's cinema, comedy and video games. With texts examined including *Carry on Screaming* (1966), *The Witch* (2015), *The Handmaiden* (2016), *Martyrs* (2008) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996-2003), they ranged from the popular to the obscure, the unexpected to the obvious, and represented a refreshingly international scope. The idea of a three-day conference on a very specific theme, with no parallel panels, might seem full-on, but the benefits became clear in the balance of both scope and unity, with all delegates able to partake in one ongoing, lively and intellectually invigorating discussion. Within this discussion, some common themes became evident. One of these related directly to the problem of differentiating between horror and the gothic, as highlighted by Matt Denny and Oana-Maria Maziluon in their papers on the marketing strategies and generic categorisation of *Crimson Peak* and *Miss Christina* (2013), respectively. These two papers revealed the tensions between the genre a film is marked as compared to what the filmmakers and cast seem to *think* it is. In the case of both of these films, their subtler gothic romance elements were obscured in their marketing in favour of emphasising more typically 'horrific' jump scares and bloody sequences. This highlighted the common perception of the gothic – and especially gothic romance – as a feminised genre that these films' marketing deliberately avoided, and adversely affected the way they were received by audiences who expected something altogether more 'horrific', or rather, less feminine. In this sense, the blurred line between horror and the gothic proved to be detrimental to these films' reception and success.

Conversely, other papers highlighted the more productive ways that horror and the gothic can work together, specifically in their dual application to texts in order to explicate the representation of female protagonists' entrapment within normative structures. The seminal works of Mary Ann Doane (1987) on the paranoid Gothic woman's film and Carol J. Clover (1992) on the slasher film's 'Final Girl' archetype were key touchstones in examinations of texts as diverse as children's horror film *Coraline* (2009), the time-loop/haunted house teen horror film *Haunter* (2013), and the video game *Gone Home* (2013). Working through the ways

in which these approaches and genres overlap and illuminate our understandings of these texts' representations of female characters went some way to assuaging my own anxiety about separating and defining horror and the gothic. In this sense, an analogy made by Xavier Aldana Reyes in his keynote lecture proves fruitful: horror is a less a genre than a 'language' through which to imagine things differently and reify status quo when it comes to diversity and representation. Taking up this idea of horror as a 'language', instead of worrying over categorisation and generic boundaries we may understand horror and the gothic as different dialects of a shared language. They may differ in some ways, but have some fundamental similarities, fluidly morphing and blurring with one another from text to text, making each text unique in its execution and meaning.

Aldana Reyes' keynote highlighted another common theme of the conference: that of female agency and choice. Titled 'What Final Girls Did Next: Horror Heroines in the Age of Postfeminism', Aldana Reyes contextualised recent female-centric horror in an era in which postfeminism appears to be increasingly associated with 'antifeminist' figures, such as Kellyanne Conway, Counsellor to President Trump. Citing Conway's assertion that she is not a feminist, but rather a postfeminist because she is 'a product of her choices, not a victim of her circumstances' (qtd. in Heim 2017), Reyes sought to reinstate the importance of choice and agency in relation to films such as *Crimson Peak*, *The Witch*, and *Under the Shadow* (2016). Interestingly, however, these films are written and directed by men: Guillermo del Toro, Robert Eggers and Babak Anvari, respectively. Indeed, Reyes acknowledged the gendered financial and industrial barriers still preventing many aspiring female filmmakers from breaking into horror, despite the recent success stories of Alice Lowe (*Prevenge* [2016]), Ana Lily Amirpour (*A Girl Walk Home Alone at Night* [2014]) and Anna Biller (*The Love Witch* [2016]). This disparity highlights the ineffective binary of Conway's conception postfeminism: female filmmakers can be both agents of choice, fighting for their place in the production of contemporary horror, as well as 'victims of circumstance' of a film industry still dominated by, and favouring, men.¹ Aldana Reyes, humorously and somewhat self-deprecatingly acknowledging his own status as a 'moderately cisgender male', concluded by noting the improvements for horror's 'Final Girls' both in front of and behind the camera, while also calling for greater representation of not only women, but also queer and non-white voices in horror.

While finding a solution to the ongoing lack of diversity in horror is not simple – and outside the scope of an academic conference of this size – the use of the plural 'Final Girls' in Aldana

Reyes' talk, rather than the more common singular, alluded to one more key theme that was an underlying current of the conference: that of female solidarity. Indeed, *The Final Girls* (2015) – a self-aware play on the slasher sub-genre with a touching mother-daughter relationship at its heart – was a frequent reference point over the three days. In other examples like Robyn Ollett's paper on *The Handmaiden*, Lee Broughton's on *Haunter* and Andra Ivanescu's on *Gone Home*, the importance of understanding, empathy and support between female characters (whether platonic, familiar or romantic) was revealed as paramount. No longer do we need to consider women in horror and the gothic as solitary exceptions, surviving at the expense of the deaths of their sisters, but as collectives of women standing and fighting together. *Thelma and Louise* (1991) arose as a comparison more than once, but the other texts studied suggest an altogether happier future for women in, and in producing roles of, horror and the gothic on screen. Similarly, to look around at a conference and see a room of mostly women (albeit mostly white) and some valued male allies proves the importance of projects like Gothic Feminism, as well as *The Final Girls*, a London-based screening series that explores the intersections of horror and feminism. In the words of Sarah Ahmed, 'Once we find each other, so much else becomes possible' (qtd. in Fitzgerald 2017). This reviewer hopes to return to Kent for a third time, and many more beyond that, to continue exploring these possibilities for women in horror, the gothic and everything in between.

Bibliography

Billar, Anna, 'Fun fact: most of the crew on THE LOVE WITCH (with a few exceptions) hated what we were shooting and did not even see the movie after it was done', *Twitter*, 7 December 2017, available from: <https://twitter.com/missannabillar/status/938829359456051200>.

Clover, Carol J., *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Doane, Mary Ann, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Fitzgerald, Adam, 'SARA AHMED: "ONCE WE FIND EACH OTHER, SO MUCH ELSE BECOMES POSSIBLE"', *LitHub*, 10 April 2017, available from: <https://lithub.com/sara-ahmed-once-we-find-each-other-so-much-else-becomes-possible/>.

Heim, Joe, "'They never saw this coming': A Q&A with Kellyanne Conway" [online], *The Washington Post*, 26 January 2017, available from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/they-never-saw-this-coming-a-qanda-with-kellyanne-conway-on-trumps-victory/2017/01/26/2bf64c10-da96-11e6-9a36-1d296534b31e_story.html?utm_term=.a8fdc2fecc63.

Kavka, Misha, 'The Gothic on screen' in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.209-28.

ⁱ Highlighting this, Anna Biller has been vocal on her Twitter account about the attempts of male crew members to undermine her authority and sabotage production of *The Love Witch* (Biller 2017).