

Representing Women in Gothic and Horror Cinema

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Foreword

The representation of female protagonists has been a central facet in both Gothic and Horror cinema. In the Hollywood Gothic films of the 1940s, the heroine is the primary focus as she navigates key tropes of the genre, including the exploration of the old dark house and the investigation of sinister marital secrets. These films, which have also been called the ‘Gothic (or paranoid) woman’s film’ (Jancovich, 2013: 20), were made at the same time as, and sometimes overlapped with, texts that are now known as *film noir*, and share many of the same visual and thematic elements. The Gothic films specifically re-work the Bluebeard story and/or establish a ‘woman-in-peril’ character archetype, as seen in films such as *Rebecca* (1940), *Gaslight* (1944) and *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947) (Waldman 1983; Doane 1987; Tartar 2004). These Gothic conventions have been revived and reworked recently in contemporary cinema with films such as *Ex Machina* (2014), *The Babadook* (2014) and *Under the Shadow* (2016) employing Gothic tropes in a variety of ways. Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak* (2015) is a particularly self-conscious example of the trend.

Horror cinema has also been characterised by the portrayal of its female protagonists. The 1930s Universal horror films typically feature the endangered woman who is terrorised by the monster or villain. Indeed, as Rhona J. Berenstein notes, the image of a woman whose ‘mouth is open as if in midscream’ with ‘fear chiselled into her features’ is so familiar that one can argue it ‘succinctly signifies the American horror film’ (Berenstein 1996: 1). Later permutations of the genre sustain this focus on gender representations. This can be seen

within the transgressive qualities of ‘postmodern horror’ (Pinedo 1997) or, more specifically, the ‘slasher’ film: the horror subgenre which focuses on the brutal murder of several victims at the hands of a serial killer, with particular attention paid to the killing and/or survival of female character(s). *Black Christmas* (1974), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) exemplify these conventions and theorists have observed the centrality of the horror heroine within this genre. For instance, Carol Clover’s seminal work on the topic highlights the importance of the ‘female victim-hero’ and the complex gender representations inherent in this figure when she becomes the film’s sole survivor or ‘Final Girl’ (Clover 1992).

When comparing these historic representations of female protagonists in Gothic and horror cinema, one can identify many similarities between the two genres or modes in respect to their portrayal of women. In the examples above, Gothic and horror both privilege the depiction of the woman’s experience within a narrative arc which exposes her to a danger emanating from an initially unknown or misunderstood threat. This risk – which is normally made against her life – comes from the villain or antagonist conventionally gendered as male.¹ This correlation between Gothic and horror could be argued to stem from their shared heritage: it has been noted how the horror genre ‘has its roots in the English gothic novels of the 18th and 19th centuries’ (Penner and Schneider 2012). This lineage is further evident by the way the terms ‘Gothic’ and ‘horror’ have been applied interchangeably as delineating categories. Horror has been labelled as Gothic: both David Pirie and Jonathan Rigby write of the ‘English Gothic Cinema’ which includes Hammer’s films, whilst Bernice M. Murphy studies US horror from the perspective of ‘Rural Gothic’ (Pirie 2008; Murphy 2013; Rigby 2015). And Gothic has been called horror: Mark Jancovich points out how the 1940s Hollywood Gothics were also understood as horror films at their time of release (Jancovich 2013). Both Gothic and horror have also attracted considerable attention concerning their

depiction of women and discussions about whether such texts are ‘feminist’ (see, for example, Pinedo 1997; Freeland 2000).

Yet, there are also significant differences between Gothic and horror. The two modes or genres can be distinguished by variations in how the central female protagonist is depicted. The Gothics of the 1940s focus on the representation of the heroine within the intimidating space of the ancestral mansion, but the 1970’s slasher horrors emphasise the ‘Terrible Place’ (Clover 1992) where extreme violence is executed. Where the Gothic emphasises suspicion, suspense and mystery, the horror film showcases blood, torture and gore. Berenstein notes how the contrast between Gothic and horror is also present in ‘classic horror’ – pre-dating the slasher – where ‘[unlike] the Gothic novel, however, heroines are not confronted by the men closest to them [...] Instead, women are attacked or seduced by foreign male (and, sometimes, female) fiends’ (Berenstein 1996: 12). Gothic and horror also differ in their presumed target audience. The Gothic – an integral part of melodrama and the ‘woman’s picture’ – has traditionally been analysed in terms of the Female Gothic and its appeal to female audiences (Waldman 1983; Doane 1987; Modleski 2008). Conversely, the spectatorship for horror has been characterised as adolescent and male (Williams 1984; Clover 1992; Creed 1993).

It is with this context in mind that we hosted the conference ‘Women-in-Peril or Final Girls? Representing Women in Gothic and Horror Cinema’ on 25th – 26th May 2017 at the University of Kent, with the keynote address given by Xavier Aldana Reyes (all of which is detailed in the conference report by Catherine Lester, published within this issue). This special issue of *Revenant* represents a selection of the rich, thought-provoking and original papers delivered at the event which all, in their own ways, muse upon the various incarnations of the women in Gothic and horror films, be they witches, vampires, possessed

teenagers or young brides. What all the articles presented in this special issue have in common is their focus upon the visual medium: predominantly the feature length film. This focus speaks to the larger project the conference, and this issue, are contributing towards: Gothic Feminism. This research group, based at the University of Kent, hosted its first conference in May 2016 which inaugurated our intention to explore specifically the historic and contemporaneous on-screen representations of the Gothic heroine. This special issue of *Revenant* concentrates on the female protagonists of Gothic and horror more broadly, and the spooky, abject and frightful places they inhabit. At the heart of all the articles you shall read here is the question of feminism – the complexity of which is wonderfully outlined by Aldana Reyes in his introduction to this collection. What do these women-in-peril or Final Girls *really* represent? How should we interpret them? What do they say about the contexts within which they were made? It may be impossible to say for certain but you will find some illuminating and, appropriately enough, haunting suggestions within these pages.

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¹ This is true for the majority of the archetypes referenced here in both traditions. For example, the male threat against Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) finds new expression in the 1940s Hollywood Gothic films where films such as *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947) cast this villain as the heroine's husband (see Waldman 1983; Tatar 2004). 'Slasher' films such as *Black Christmas* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) similarly spectacularise male violence (see Clover 1992). This is not to ignore, however, how both Gothic and horror enable the villain/monster/killer to be read as queer – if not explicitly depicted as such. Similarly, these stories of threat and violence are often inextricably linked to the transgression of gender binaries. The articles in this issue discuss examples of Gothic/horror films which exemplify the complexities of such representations: the male *and* female violence in *Crimson Peak* (2015); the gender transgressions in *Daughter of Darkness* (1948); and the complicated portrayal of the vampire and witch figures, often coded as queer.

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