

## Gothic: Generic Subversion in the Cinema

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### Introduction

“Gothic fiction is [not] ... a form of ‘popular’ cultural insurgence, as it is sometimes assumed to be in film studies”, argue Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall in their sometimes vitriolic, thoroughly critical overview of the history and tendencies of Gothic criticism (226). Their claim is striking – and mistaken, in several respects. First, film studies rarely if ever addresses issues of literary genres. Second, film studies rarely if ever ‘looks down’ or criticizes “‘popular’ cultural insurgences”. Finally, film studies – and why stop there, let us include the specific fields of film history, film criticism, and film theory as well – has never ever seriously addressed the issue of Gothic whatsoever, let alone Gothic fiction. The reason for this is simply that the annals of the history of film and of genre theory and criticism have never registered a film as purely *Gothic*. (Those addressing “Gothic film” more often than not tackle issues of horror and psycho-thriller films, never looking at the literary origin and original motifs of Gothic.)

As I will discuss, there are ‘cross-generic’ labels, such as ‘Gothic horror’, but the name refers to a filmic tradition of horror films that is quite different from the definition provided by the literary tradition. One may start distinguishing between ‘Gothic’ and ‘Gothic horror’ by looking at horror motifs, which are exhaustingly listed in Linda Williams’s “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess”, and which seem to make up the typical clichés of the so-called “body genre”, which concerns the excessive or even extreme uses and representations of the body in film (207–221). The original concept of Gothic fiction is far from the concerns of the body: characters are used to stand for symptoms of an unknown and haunting past, carriers of unwittingly transmitted secrets. It is with the generic category of the body genres – all kinds of horror films, Gothic horror among them – that one can tackle the issue of the body in this context (one is invited to list hundreds of horrors with a Gothic touch, as it were, such as the classics: Tod Browning’s *Dracula* [1931] or James Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein* [1935]).

In the present essay I wish to explore some basic motifs and themes that recur in film with a clearly identifiable origin in Gothic fiction and see how they are employed in a different tradition and context. In so doing, my final aim is paradoxical to the above standpoint: I will prove that the generic category of “Gothic film” does exist, although at the expense of being utterly subversive of the generic categories inspired, in varying degrees, by Gothic fiction. I will base my argument on the analysis of two recent films, *The Others* (2001, dir. Alejandro Amenábar) and *Gothika* (2003, dir. Mathieu Kassovitz).

### Gothic: the insistence on the non-existent

The sensationalist sub-title of this section alludes to a clearly non-sensational issue in film history: while we have the genre of the literary Gothic in literature, one can hardly find any reference to a clearly Gothic film in the past hundred years of the cinema. In fact, fans of Gothic have categorized the sub-genre Gothic horror film, which features ruined castles, dark

and haunted graveyards, eerie noises and atmosphere (Näyhä). Nonetheless, the main focus of this category remains the horror aspect, i.e. a strong obsession with the body, thus leaving Gothic the role of a simple classificatory adjective based on clichés of ghostliness. The virtual non-existence of Gothic as a film genre is striking, since several typical motifs of Gothic fiction have fertilized the film genres of horror, *film noir*, thriller, psycho-thriller, fantasy and adventure films, recently even family films, as Lisa Hopkins argues in her recent book *Screening the Gothic*. Starting from the more traditional view on Gothic, she traces the dispersion of generic particulars of Gothic fiction in contemporary films, especially in “family films” (i.e. films that are usually seen by the whole family together) such as *The Mummy Returns*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, or *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. According to her,

These films feature mummies, ghosts, trolls, wizards, goblins, vampires, revenants, and a range of other monsters; but all of these together generate merely a pleasurable frisson. What these films find really frightening is, in fact, families. It is perhaps appropriate that only in the heart of the family, in the form of family-oriented viewing, can the dark, anarchic energies of the Gothic still be seen fully pulsing. (Hopkins)

Indeed, this formulation insists on the importance of the family and implies the pivotal role of the genealogy or family ancestry in Gothic fiction. This takes us from the horror genre towards an avenue that evades categories of the thriller or psycho-thriller, but even that of sheer and clear-cut fantasy films. What Hopkins seems to imply here is an attempt to find a generic category which has long existed in the history of film genres, yet has not surfaced in its own right.

Although Gothic is cited more often than not in connection with the horror genre in film, the stylistic features in terms of the *mise-en-scène* derive from the period of German expressionism in the cinema. The low-key lighting and “distorted, graphic style” of *mise-en-scène* characterize Expressionism in the cinema (Thompson and Bordwell, 109) which, along with the indispensable ghosts, trolls, golems, secrets, curses, and often the motif of *doppelgänger*, became the hallmark of horror and fantasy films. The kinship of the two genres (Gothic in literature and German Expressionism in film) is perhaps best described by the pivotal work of the Expressionist period in German filmmaking: Lotte Eisner’s *Haunted Screen*. Although “Gothic” is not mentioned, the tackling of films made by directors Robert Wiene (*Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*, 1919), F. W. Murnau (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, 1922), and the works of Fritz Lang explicitly refer to Gothic topics: the mad scientist, the haunted castle, Count Dracula (as *Nosferatu*), the victimized heroine, and an eerie, haunting atmosphere. It may be claimed that the transmission of Gothic into film happened not through horror films, but rather through the sometimes extremely stylized films of German Expressionism.

On this premise I argue that Gothic – without its horror or thriller overtone – had long been fed into the cinema before its explicit manifestations (such as in the films of Tod Browning and James Whale, or in the famous Hammer Productions). In this sense, there has been a long insistence on the ‘non-existent’ in film history, making symptomatic resurfacings in various genres through the decades. While I am well aware that many genre theorists and film historians, relying on the filmic canon, would state otherwise, I argue that Gothic as a separate generic category has finally made its way to appear fully in the cinema, without the interaction of any of the related film genres. This does not mean, of course, that this appearance does not bear intertextual traces of those related genres, since, obviously, as Gothic fertilized many genres in the cinema, the argument may be just as easily held the other way round: different filmic genres have influenced the genre of Gothic film as well. Indeed, the two films I will discuss in the present essay feed heavily on clichés of horror and thriller films, nonetheless, they do so by

subverting them to show their literary origins. In other words, the films I am going to engage with explicitly refer to specific modes of Gothic fiction and then present their relation to the established film genres.

Genre, as Steve Neale explains, however, is far from being a simple cataloguing of recurrent motifs or textual stereotypes. According to him, in the tripartite relationship of production, marketing and consumption, genre refers (beyond the cataloguing of the features of a group of texts) to the expectation and hypothesis of the spectator (his/her speculation or horizon of expectation on how the particular movie is going to end, see Neale, 46). Moreover, if film is a “cross-media generic formation” that keeps on referring to itself through certain established codes and conventions, it also means that a clear-cut generic definition in this area is simply impossible (let alone introducing aspects of intertextual transformation, which further complicates the issue, 62). What happens in terms of genre in film is possibly a continuous reworking, extending and transforming of the set of codes and conventions that originally categorize the given films (58). In the two subsections on *Gothika* and *The Others*, I will attempt to show how these films either reappropriate original fictional elements of Gothic, or subvert them in order to reiterate them even more forcefully. But as psychoanalytic theories will help me in claiming such ‘subversive reappropriation’, I will first turn to the relationship between Gothic and psychoanalysis.

## Gothic psychoanalysis

To discuss the ‘return of the Gothic symptom’, as it were, I will turn to psychoanalysis, the use of which will prove to be essential in the particular analysis of the two films I have selected. In her overview of psychoanalytic approaches to Gothic fiction Michelle A. Massé provides a thematic account on how this specific theoretical grid changed its methodology and agenda when faced with the genre. According to her, Gothic is a genre “that is important to psychoanalytic critical inquiry not solely for its ongoing popularity and easily recognizable motifs, but for the affinities between its central concerns and those of psychoanalysis” (Massé, 230). The list of theoretical ancestry starts – obviously – with Freud, followed by others like Jung, Bonaparte, Klein, Winnicott, Erikson, and finally Lacan, Modleski, and Chodorow.

I do not wish to discuss all of Massé’s claims here, but one point needs to be mentioned. Significantly, only one approach is left out or silenced in her account: the very approach that, in fact, uses the same vocabulary as that of the analyzed Gothic text. This is the approach signaled by the names of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, two Hungarian-born French psychoanalysts, whose work concentrates on silenced secrets buried alive in psychic crypts and vaults guarded by ghosts and phantoms, haunting generations by transmitting to unwitting subjects the unspeakable traumatic pains and sufferings of earlier generations. This, I should say, is the adaptation of Gothic *per se*, apt to figure on a theoretical level as well.

In her book, *The Trauma of Gender*, Helene Moglen explores the development of the English novel from a feminist perspective, devoting a chapter to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. In this chapter she discusses the novel from the perspective of the psychoanalytic theory of mourning developed by Abraham and Torok. Moglen puts *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysterious Mother*, Walpole’s biography and “the gothic fictions of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, [...] whose writings the originary gothic novel seems uncannily to anticipate” (Moglen, 110). In other words, she puts fiction and theory on the same level to initiate a dialogue that is expected to shed light not only on new interpretations, but also new methodological possibilities.

Indeed, the metaphors Abraham and Torok employ – such as “crypt”, “encrypted secret”, “exquisite corpse”, “phantom” and “intrapsychic vault” to mention only a few – derive from analysts’ accounts of their dreams and delusions, in other words, from the direct contact with what Massé would call a “beautifully elaborated fabric of language” (229). This way, as Moglen suggests, Abraham and Torok’s analytic discourse retains and “preserves the mysteries that it struggles to investigate” (Moglen, 125). They aim at restoring “the lines of communication with those intimate recesses of the mind that have for one reason or another been denied expression” (Abraham and Torok, 4). To reach this aim, they crystallize their understanding of basic psychoanalytical concepts like mourning and melancholia or introjection and incorporation, which often seem to merge into one another in Freud or later advocates of Freudian methodology. Resolving the often incoherent usage of these notions, Abraham and Torok argue that “it is introjection that facilitates mourning while incorporation blocks the introjective process and produces melancholia” (Moglen, 125). In other words, while the work of mourning is initiated by the process of introjection and progressing via working-through, melancholia is caused by the incorporation of the loss (the deceased beloved, usually), as if burying it alive in a “crypt”.

This causes a rupture in the psychic topography of the subject. For the secret encrypted to remain intact, the rupture gets objectified in the psychic formula of the “phantom” (Abraham and Torok, 171–176) – a guard that transmits this crypt from generation to generation, from person to person. This description seems to be the plot of a typical Gothic story: for the subject (the protagonist) usually inherits a secret that determines his/her life and deeds. It is as if a kind of daemonic power had seized the character, dragging him or her towards the inevitable *anagnoritic* scene: the disclosure of the painful, traumatic secret of his or her ancestry. This is one psychoanalytic approach (one as yet barely explored but highly effective) that I am going to employ in my discussion of the two selected films. The other one is a Lacanian approach, utilizing Lacan’s thoughts on Freud’s *unheimlich*, and suggesting how that term may be a useful concept in defining the category of the Gothic film.

### ***Gothika*: reappropriations of a literary genre in film**

The beginning of the third millennium saw a myriad of Gothic references in film, starting from the pop-techno-action remake of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (as *Dracula 2000* [2000] and recently its sequels, *Dracula II* [2003] and even *Dracula III* [2004]), through the slasher movie intended as a due commemoration of the monsters of the Universal Studio (*Van Helsing* [2004]), to films such as the vampire-werewolf action-horror *Underworld* (2004). While none of these explicitly take up or refer to their generic origin, significantly, one movie takes it as the very title: *Gothika*.

The central theme of the film, a Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde story on the surface, is the clash between rational and irrational, science (psychiatry) versus superstition (para-psychology). Distinguished psychiatrist Miranda Grey (Halle Berry), who works in a mental hospital for convicted women (set in a haunted-like castle building in the middle of nowhere, far from the nearest little village where most of the employees live) is driving home one night after work in thick rain. She is detoured by the police (by the sheriff, a good old friend of Miranda’s husband) due to an accident, so she calls her husband while crossing a little white bridge (at which the husband and the sheriff used to fish a lot). As the phone line breaks, she suddenly spots a half-naked girl in the middle of the road, and to avoid running over her, Miranda steers her car off

the road. Climbing out of the car she goes to see if the girl is injured, but when she touches her, an uncanny flame erupts and she finds herself imprisoned in the mental institute she used to work for.

While trying hard to understand how she got into the institute, and trying to remember the hours between the accident on the bridge and her awakening in her cell, it turns out that she is arrested for brutally slaying her husband. Miranda seems to produce symptoms of delusion and even looks as if paranoid psychotic, held by some 'daemonic power'. She scratches her arm with a blade to 'engrave' the words "not alone", which she also paints on the wall of her cell with her blood. These are the two words that the murderer painted on the wall of the room where her husband was killed. Having escaped the institute with the help of the 'ghostly power' that seems to take possession of, or ventriloquize, her, Miranda goes back home, to the scene of the murder to reconstruct what happened. In a fantasy projection the spectator can see her actually witnessing her murdering her husband with an axe, a scene in which she is, literally, not herself.

Finding some clue, she visits the little week-end house in which her husband was supposed to have spent his last day, and there comes across unspeakable secrets. It turns out that her husband tortured young girls before he – along with his best friend, the sheriff – raped them, and they recorded all this on video. It is on one of the tapes that she spots the girl she almost ran over on the bridge. She realizes that this was actually the ghost of the girl who tried to communicate via her body. Hence, the meaning of "not alone" is transformed from the suggested schizophrenia to the implication that the girl was not the only one tortured and eventually killed.

The story, entirely set in badly lit places and ostensibly haunted buildings, features typically Gothic motifs. There is an unspeakably traumatic secret buried in the life of a family which causes problems (symptoms, as it were) that cannot be rationally explained. Miranda is a tormented female character, whose life seems to depend on the disclosure of the ghastly past. She is haunted, or more precisely, possessed by a ghost, who not only communicates through her, but makes her act in a way that she can disclose the cause of its haunting.

It is at this point that the psychoanalytic strategies offered by the work of Abraham and Torok may be helpful for analysis. What happens to Miranda is precisely the inheritance of an unspeakable secret, transmitted in a crypt by a phantom (Abraham and Torok, 173). She produces symptoms that make doctors think she is schizophrenic or even psychotic, which is the work of the phantom, since the role and function of this psychic formation is to produce displays (visual symptoms) in order to hide the encrypted secret more effectively. By presenting false symptoms, the real secret may be preserved, as nobody will look for it when focusing on the compromise formations produced by the subject. As Abraham explains, "the phantom will vanish only when its radically heterogeneous nature with respect to the subject is recognized", and the ventriloquism is disclosed (174).

The unspeakable secret of the husband's crime travels via the suffering of the young girl in the two words of the cryptic phrase "not alone". These words become symptoms of Miranda, making her commit acts she would never have dreamt of. Interestingly, when she is propelled to act, her memory fails: she cannot reconstruct the time of phantomatic 'puppetry'. It is only after recognizing the essential and radical heterogeneity of the phantom (in the form of the ghost of the girl) that she may begin to explore the traumatic secret.

What this brief account shows is that *Gothika* – true to the implication of the title – utilizes and enhances several textual and stylistic features of Gothic fiction, putting them to work in a contemporary visual and narrative framework. While retaining basic elements of the literary genre of the Gothic, the film avoids the expected recourse or detour towards the horror genre, which would nurture the subgeneric category of the Gothic horror film. Instead it pivots around

the thematic and stylistic cohesion characteristic of the literary genre even at the expense of undermining spectatorial expectations. Indeed, it is undermining expectations of the Gothic horror and the conscious reappropriation and reiteration of the literary features that posit *Gothika* as a Gothic film.

### ***The Others*: the subversion of the genre, or the problematics of inside and outside**

Alejandro Amenábar's 2001 film, *The Others*, is perhaps the best example of the generic category of the Gothic film. Set in the late years of World War II on the extremely foggy and dark, secluded island of Jersey, it presents the life of Grace (Nicole Kidman) and her two children in a castle. Light cannot enter the building as the children suffer from a rare and strange illness: they are allergic to light. As Grace explains to the new household staff of three entering the castle one gloomy day, "no door can be opened in this building until another one is closed".<sup>1</sup> The three household employees, an elderly woman, an old gardener (who usually acts as an echo of the woman), and a mute young girl act in a strange way, they do not even wish to be shown around the place before taking their job, as they "have already been around here some time". One day strange noises invade the house: it is as if somebody were living there in secret. Although heavily religious and rejecting even the slightest implication of superstition, Grace starts to hunt for ghosts in the castle. The noises become more and more frequent, including very elaborate piano music, too. Grace's daughter, Anne says she meets the ghosts (a man, a woman, a boy named Victor and a "witch") every day, and she explains that they make the noises and want Grace and the family to leave the place. Anne is punished for her suggestion.

As Grace's behavior becomes more and more intolerable, the three employees decide to reveal their true identity: they are in fact dead. The disclosure of the secret happens when the "intruders" or "the Others" attempt to reach Grace and the family by holding a séance led by the "witch" (who is in fact a blind elderly lady, trying to establish the lines of communication with Grace and the children). Anne is willing to communicate and reveals the secret at the core of the little fatherless family: they are the ones who are dead. Then Grace tells the truth to the children, according to which she killed them by pushing pillows to their faces until they suffocated, and then killed herself with a gun. Fearful of ghosts, the "live" family leaves Jersey, letting the ghosts (Grace and the children, and the three employees) continue to haunt the castle.

The trick the film plays on the spectator is not conspicuous at first. The film starts and goes on until the very end as if we were watching a typical ghost story unfold: a young, beautiful but tormented woman moves to the empty castle to take refuge from the raging war. Her husband being enrolled and fighting somewhere on the continent, she hires staff to be able to spend her life with the children who suffer from that very strange and incurable illness. The point of view is entirely allocated to the female protagonist, Grace, so the spectator is made to believe what she does and how she perceives things: that the castle is haunted by ghosts. The unconventional trick is that the castle is haunted by ghosts indeed, but this time the ghosts are the ones we believe to be the living.

This way the traditional Gothic ghost story set-up is turned upside down. This might mean a kind of anti-Gothic perspective, a critical stance towards the literary genre; however, I suggest that it is precisely this seemingly subversive logic of the narrative that establishes Gothic as a

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent quotes, unless indicated otherwise, are my transliteration of the film.

film genre *per se*. Since the literary Gothic motifs that fertilized or enriched many a genre in film history are today considered to be *par excellence* generic features of the respective film genres, those original Gothic motifs may hardly be listed as typical features of a Gothic film. If the tables turn, however, that is if the original motifs are kept but subverted in an uncanny way (uncanny being explicitly a Freudian reference here in the sense of the “familiar unfamiliar”), the film cannot be listed under the generic headings of film studies.

*The Others* then is a study of the Freudian *unheimlich* but with a narratological and indeed visual trick. Hence perhaps it is more appropriate to use the Lacanian rendition of Freud’s concept: the *extimate*. According to Parveen Adams, Lacan’s rendering of the term in French blurs the border between inside and outside (‘in-timate’ and ‘ex-timate’) in a way that – similarly to Freud’s original concept – the term contains both sides of the binary opposition (Adams, 149). As Adams explains, Lacan’s term demonstrates the psychoanalytical claim that “far from being complementary opposites, inside and outside rely on a certain coincidence rather than opposition” (148). This way the border between outside and inside, between ‘us’ and the ‘others’ is questioned. Elizabeth Bronfen, blending Abraham’s theory of the phantom with the notion of extimacy goes further to claim that Lacan’s concept is essentially useful, since it can “designate the phantomatic, encrypted presence of kernels of the real traumatic knowledge in the Symbolic”, where this encrypted *nescience* (i.e. not knowing that one is the carrier of a secret) “returns not only as a hallucination but as an embodiment with both psychic and somatic reality” (Bronfen, 385). This is how Mladen Dolar puts it in his essay on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*:

It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is *unheimlich*. (Dolar, 6)

The Gothic in *The Others* is manifested in the confusion of the ‘others’ and ‘us’, which happens in terms of life and death, inside and outside, defenders of the home and intruders. As Susan Hayward explains, until the 1960s, witnessing the birth of the psychological thriller, films (most significantly what some call the Gothic horror films) presented the monsters or aliens outside us (Hayward, 190). This means that the subjects’ repressions, the unconscious impulses, the id, were projected outside to be able to tackle the integrity of the subject and, at the same time, to keep it intact. Nonetheless, what was projected and thus perceived as outside, originated from the innermost recesses of the inside, thus the invisible became visible, the forgotten remembered, to add a few more binary oppositions to the above.

The discussion of the blurring of the boundaries of these very basic dichotomies may also help to fully reconsider the Gothic project in the cinema. As Moglen explains, Gothic fiction focused on topics “excluded from dominant myths of the cultural symbolic”, deconstructing the very “boundaries that separate legitimated elements of the hegemonic culture from their illegitimate others (e.g., the integrated from the fragmented self, sanity from madness, rationality from irrationality, social sameness from difference, and defined from indeterminate meanings)” (Moglen, 111). What *The Others* seems to achieve is precisely this originally Gothic fictional project. Tackling the irrational, it does not claim to disclose a higher truth, but it rather points to meanings that fail to be registered in language, i.e. in rational discourse.

Through the subversion of genres (both filmic and to a certain extent literary, as well), *The Others* reworks the codes and conventions of the Gothic fiction in order to extend and transform the generic requirements of film. This marks the birth of the Gothic film. *The Others* plays heavily on the conventions of Gothic fiction, horror film and psychological thriller, but does

so in order to turn them upside down. This way the spectator's expectation is detoured from the generic stereotypes towards a more active and interpretive participation in the production of meaning. The spectator is interpellated, as it were, to reconstruct landmarks of his or her own horizon of expectation in order to tackle the experience generated by the film. This reworking, however, means both a return to and a return of the Gothic base. Subversion thus becomes an act of establishing a genre in film.

## Conclusion

The aim of the present paper has been to argue for a long repressed tradition present in the history of film genres, manifest only via other generic categories: the Gothic film. I have discussed two recent films, *Gothika* and *The Others*, which seem to point beyond the already existing categories of film genres, more or less explicitly taking up and utilizing features and motifs the origins of which can be located in the literary genre of the Gothic fiction. To argue for the existence of the genre of the Gothic film means to show the way these films subvert in a paradoxical way not only the horror and/or thriller categories of film, but to a certain extent (playing with the clichés of Gothic fiction) those of the literary origin, as well.

*Gothika* reappropriates many generic features of Gothic fiction, while refusing to keep the easily recognizable ones of the Gothic horror genre. This way the film modifies or rather activates the spectator's interpretive skills leading to a kind of updating of the Gothic fictional mode. *The Others* presents a different case: the film subverts the features of both the filmic genres akin to Gothic and, to a certain extent, of the literary origin as well. This way of reworking familiar material results in the establishment of a new generic category: that of the Gothic film.

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