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## Contemporary Gothic Horror Cinema: The Imagined Pasts and Traumatic Ghosts of *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *The Woman in Black* (2012)

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## Contemporary Gothic Horror Cinema: The Imagined Pasts and Traumatic Ghosts of *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *The Woman in Black* (2012)

Xavier Aldana Reyes 

Among the hundreds of horror films produced so far in the twenty-first century, there have been quite a few prominent trends, many of which are explored elsewhere in this special journal issue: found footage horror, “torture porn,” zombie films, possession films, and so-called “post-horror” or “elevated horror.” Overwhelmingly, these horror strands set events in the present or near future. The most industrious of these strands, found footage, is characterized by its foregrounding of modern video recording and telecommunication technologies (Aldana Reyes, “Reel Evil” 124; Turner 54–78), most recently of immersive, diegetic laptop screens and mobile phones.<sup>1</sup> The second, torture porn, best exemplified by *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005), and *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (2009), emphasizes spectacles of torture and gruesome murder reminiscent of online execution videos.<sup>2</sup> The third, the zombie film, has been associated with post-9/11 terrorist fears, capitalism, apocalypticism, and posthumanism (Wetmore 159–64; Keetley). The twenty-first century has also seen contemporary updates of the possession film that rose to fame in the 1970s, best represented by *Paranormal Activity* (2009) and *The Last Exorcism* (2010).<sup>3</sup> As for post-horror, some of the most commercially and critically successful films of the 2010s, such as *Get Out* (2017), *Midsommar* (2019), and *Candyman* (2021), tackle head on very timely socio-political issues like racial tension in the U.S. or toxic masculinity.<sup>4</sup> In short, post-millennial horror has its finger firmly on the pulse of the here and now.

In this article, I place the focus on a different manifestation of contemporary horror cinema that, despite being less dominant than in the 1930s and 1960s, still commands considerable audience and critical interest: Gothic horror.<sup>5</sup> *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), *The Wyvern Mystery* (2000), *The Others* (2001), *Dorian Gray* (2009), *The Awakening* (2011), *The Lodgers* (2017), *The Little Stranger* (2018), *The Wrath* (2018), *Rebecca* (2020), and *Eight for Silver* (2021) are only some of the many films that have been labeled “Gothic” by reviewers and critics since the turn of the millennium.<sup>6</sup> Despite its modern fragmentation and dispersion (Punter 145–46), the Gothic mode has thrived in the twenty-

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first century in literature, television, and cinema. This ubiquity has been surveyed in edited collections and monographs that have chronicled various aspects of the contemporary Gothic and emphasized its global and transmedia qualities.<sup>7</sup> Generally considered a “negative aesthetics” interested in darkness (literal and figurative), irrationality, excessive passion, arcane or occult phenomena, villainy, and vice (Botting 1–2) and manifesting visually in a predilection for “intensive chiaroscuro, crowded space, intricate detailing, distorted proportions, a saturated colour palette, ornate fonts and deliberately retro or aged styling” (Spooner, “Twenty-First-Century Gothic” 184), the post-millennial Gothic connotes a number of ideas and depends on certain formulae. Although many Gothic horror films are either inspired by or adapted from novels, many others are original narratives that do not draw on existing franchises and monsters. Gothic horror is recognizable beyond direct adaptations of, and allusions to, canonical texts like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) due to its *mise-en-scène*, characters, and settings. Gothic cinema can be said to work indexically (via recurring themes, motifs, and images) and temporally (by invoking specific periods in history that are re-presented from a contemporary vantage point).<sup>8</sup> The past in the Gothic is generally a nostalgic, fantastic, and anachronistic imagining, a hyperreal tapestry of images and locales taken from the submode’s aesthetic history—not just from older horror films, but also from other visual works and artifacts, from phantasmagoria shows to the paintings of Salvator Rosa and Francisco Goya.<sup>9</sup>

Through a brief reading of two illustrative post-millennial Gothic horror films—*Crimson Peak* (2015), Guillermo del Toro’s love letter to the Female Gothic tradition, and *The Woman in Black* (2012), adapted from the 1983 ghost novel by Susan Hill—I show that the Gothic’s enduring power in contemporary horror is a direct consequence of the cultural work it carries out. Far from suggesting that the Gothic has accidentally lingered in an empty metareferential manner, I tease out its role within post-millennial horror film. In my reading, the Gothic stages temporal conflict, pitting present values, beliefs, and behaviors against those of previous times, themselves cast as regressive, outmoded, and either superstitious or actually haunted. Under this light, the Gothic can be understood as a specific, yet simultaneously pliable, aesthetic connected to given tropes: darkness, doubling, monstrosity, and madness are only some of the most prevalent.<sup>10</sup> Among these, restless ghosts are key articulators of repression and trauma. In *Crimson Peak*, full of viscerally abject but otherwise benevolent apparitions, horror stems from the story’s context (a time when women’s freedoms were even more curtailed by marriage and social expectations than they are today) and characters (a scheming pair of incestuous lovers who stand for patriarchal oppression). *The Woman in Black* rests on the figure of the unappeasable wraith, who serves to articulate grief and injustice. Although seemingly disparate examples

of post-millennial horror, their shared use of the Gothic aesthetic to evoke contemporary issues and their utilization of the past as a fictional space of exploration of what Robert Miles and Catherine Spooner have termed the “Gothic cusp,” discussed in detail below, demonstrate that aesthetics, *mise-en-scène*, and ideological purpose typically underscore one other.

This article has the secondary aim of pulling away from two academic predispositions in the study of the Gothic. On the one hand, writing on literature and popular culture tends to collapse all horror into the “Gothic” label irrespective of whether individual texts reference this tradition.<sup>11</sup> On the other, Horror (Film) Studies rarely discusses the Gothic in any detail or attempts to define it as an aesthetic category.<sup>12</sup> This article seeks to legitimize the importance of separating Gothic horror from other strands of the genre—primarily in film, though a similar case can be made for literature (see [Aldana Reyes](#), “The Contemporary Gothic”)—while acknowledging their interdependence. The motivation is not merely taxonomic, nor does horror need the “Gothic” to be able to put forward strong messages about present attitudes toward gender relations or trauma. Instead, I ask why horror still finds the Gothic appealing.<sup>13</sup> I argue that the reason is intertextual—the Gothic builds additional meaning by virtue of association with previous films and fiction—and aesthetic: its clash of the arcane and the contemporary both distances events and brings them closer to viewers. Monsters can indeed inhabit twenty-first-century times and places, but when they align with a Gothic setting, they iconically reinforce ideas of secrecy, repression, and superstition. I turn to ghosts as particularly interesting Gothic creatures because they actively connect the historical past with unresolved tragedy and the return of that which was believed dead and gone. Ghosts largely thrive in Gothic terms and contexts, either in narratives situated in the past or by haunting buildings strongly linked to ruin, decay, murder, curses, and legends. This is no coincidence: they echo the atmospheric work of the Gothic building and embody the spatial-temporal tension at the heart of the mode.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Role of the Past in the Gothic Mode**

The Gothic negotiates tensions between the brutish past and the modern present, with aspects of the former acting as forces of oppressive evil and the latter as a heroic stalwart of contemporary customs and sensibilities. If the “Gothic” as a temporal marker became associated with the medieval period from which it also drew architectonic inspiration in first-wave Gothic novels such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1778), and Ann Radcliffe’s *Gaston de Blondville* (1826), this connection evolved with time. As [Robert Miles](#) has argued, Gothic novels tend to be set during periods that could be termed a “Gothic cusp,” that is, “a transitional phase, when the Gothic epoch came to an end, and the modern

one began” (87). Gothic fictions adapted to new concerns, especially once the Gothic was reframed by the Victorian sensation novel and *fin-de-siècle* classics such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The Gothic’s temporal dislocations found new representations in the form of atavistic fears that moved regression into the depths of the human psyche or the underbellies of great urban centers (Warwick 127–32), which made it possible to situate mysterious and supernatural events in the near past. It is certainly no longer a requirement for horrific, mysterious, and supernatural events to take place in “olden times,” especially following the modernization of horror cinema in the 1970s, but the reality is that much horror still does. Any previous age can be the potential backdrop of retrograde actions, even more so when connected to traumatic events. Temporal remoteness matters because it magnifies the thrilling and supernatural aspects of some narratives—say, the folkloric, religious, and superstitious beliefs in *The Witch* (2015) and *Hagazussa* (2017)—but Gothic horror is also interested in stories that can resonate with contemporary audiences, whose views will likely be reflected in the opinions of the protagonists.

Sometimes, remoteness might be connoted by the spaces the characters inhabit, rather than by the time in which actions occur. This is the case in the Female Gothic subgenre, whose main convention is the confinement of a female protagonist “to a great house or castle” and whose “experiences . . . become the focus of attention” (Punter and Byron 279).<sup>15</sup> Associated in literature with writers like Ann Radcliffe, the Brontë sisters, and Daphne du Maurier and, in film, with the cycle of women films of the 1940s, the Female Gothic codes temporal tensions architecturally. The medieval castle in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) acts as a labyrinthine prison for Emily St. Aubert, who must fight the villainous machinations of its owner, Signor Montoni. Thornfield Hall, the gloomy and isolated house belonging to Edward Rochester, operates similarly by concealing a first wife, the violent Bertha Mason, from the eponymous heroine in *Jane Eyre*. And Manderley, the vast estate belonging to the de Winter family in *Rebecca*, is portrayed, in both the 1938 novel and its 1940 film adaptation, as old-fashioned, disorienting, and hostile. It is also saturated with the memories of Rebecca, whose presence can be felt in every object in the house. It is typical for films in the Female Gothic tradition, such as *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) and *Dragonwyck* (1946), to align their houses with the strictures of the patriarchal order. In them, foreboding buildings that act as domestic microcosms become traps for inquisitive women to navigate and eventually master (Hanson 57–62).<sup>16</sup> It is possible, as in *Gaslight* (1940), that space, time, and events come together to strengthen the overall Gothic effect. The film’s vague late Victorian or Edwardian setting, determined by gas light, an obsolete and nostalgic form of lighting by the 1940s (Barefoot 35), is underscored by the murderous intent and history of

husband Paul (Anton Walbrook) and by their eerie London house. As Guy Barefoot notes, gas light plays an aesthetic role “as an element of the period furnishings, as a motivation for the film’s ‘expressionist’ lighting, as a means of heightening suspense, in terms of a convoluted narrative, and a woman’s subjective experience” (2). The spaces in the Female Gothic are representative of, even tainted by, a past full of secrets, violence, and repression, and they echo the cruel deeds of tyrannical husbands and avuncular men.

For contemporary writers and filmmakers, it is often the turn of the previous century—the late Victorian and Edwardian periods—that has become the new “Gothic cusp.” This is because the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been conceptualized as “site[s] of struggle between incipient modernity and an unenlightened past” (Spooner, “Gothic in the Twentieth Century” 44). Post-millennial Gothic texts that set their events roughly between the 1880s and 1910s are numerous. They include novels such as John Harding’s *Florence and Giles* (2010), Kate Mosse’s *The Taxidermist’s Daughter* (2014), and Michelle Paver’s *Wakenhyrst* (2019), films such as *From Hell* (2001), *Van Helsing* (2004), *The Wolfman* (2010), and *Victor Frankenstein* (2015), and television shows such as *Penny Dreadful* (2014–16). It is likely that our perception of the late Victorian period’s development of some of the most enduring Gothic archetypes—Dracula, Dr. Jekyll, Dorian Gray, and Jack the Ripper—have helped reify the *fin de siècle* as almost synonymous with the Gothic. Apart from reflecting the legacy of Victorian beliefs and mores on current social attitudes toward, for example, gender and sexuality, the prevalence of turn-of-the-century myths makes sense in terms of the Gothic’s temporal tug of war and its self-reflexive propensity.<sup>17</sup> Reducing the distance between the educated present and the barbaric past enables a provocative critique of modernity itself. The many technological and social advancements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may themselves mask a continuation of the “uncivilized” behaviors, desires, and repressions once retrojected to more ancient pasts.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the Gothic confronts opposing forces that stand for contemporary views and ossified socio-political beliefs to comment on personal and national traumas and systemic inequalities. While it is not unique in doing so, the Gothic is well-placed to carry out this cultural work by virtue of its predominant anxious narratives, thematic tensions, and associated monsters.

In what follows, I consider the ideas of temporality and locale in relation to *Crimson Peak* and *The Woman in Black*. In both, the Gothic becomes an aesthetic device that has an eminent ideological purpose inextricable from structures connected to pastness: of time, place, and metonymical supernatural emanations. In *Crimson Peak*, an example of the Female Gothic, this aesthetic helps to channel ideas of women’s rights and female empowerment. In this film, less concerned with the function of the ghost as a marker of unresolved trauma and more with the claustrophobic elements of a system

where women are still seen as commodities, the Gothic is evident in terms of its time (the years 1887 and 1901), setting (Allerdale Hall), and social structures (ensnaring marriages and coveted inheritances). The role of its ghosts is primarily cautionary: the protagonist must learn from the errors of the dead women whose watchful spirits inhabit the Sharpes' property if she is to escape alive and regain her independence. In *The Woman in Black*, a revenge story of sorts, the Gothic extends from the setting to a transgenerational curse that renders visible the indelible repercussions of grief and anger. In this film, the Gothic effect is created by activating fear toward the unappeasable titular woman, who gains aesthetic resonance in the house she haunts. The Gothic here is more affective; it relies on audio-visual thrills that intend to shock and entertain, but it also recasts the ghost as a metaphor for psychological instability and the difficulty of overcoming the loss of a loved one. Despite their differences in focus, both films align the Gothic, its evocation of the restless and dangerous past, with modernity, encapsulated by the main characters and their pragmatic attitudes. Although I am focusing on two examples in the interest of space, my reading applies to many of the abundant Gothic horror films made in the twenty-first century.

The Gothic aesthetic, its temporal retrojection to superstitious, claustrophobic, and darker times, is what keeps it a significant sub-strand of contemporary horror. For this reason, the Gothic needs to be understood as separate from horror and as more than a purely citational sub-mode. The Gothic continues to be popular because it activates several ideas and signifiers that travel intertextually. It is a thematic repository of motifs that allows filmmakers to comment on timely issues by raising the spirits of the (fictional) past via anachronism and counterfeit (Mulvey-Roberts xxi), via ideological throwbacks that serve specific narrative and cultural purposes. While the interplay between past and present is not exclusive to (Gothic) horror, being the anchor of historical fiction and historiographic metafiction, the Gothic usually utilizes supernatural or seemingly inexplicable events to move beyond the strictures of realism.<sup>19</sup> It organizes a series of juxtapositions: light/dark, rational/irrational, good/bad, safe/dangerous, and past/present. These dyads speak to a long fictional tradition going back to foundational texts such as Walpole's *Otranto*, Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). In a sense, Gothic horror establishes two temporal dialogs: one between the representational then and now (intradiegetic) and one between the current film and those that came before it (extradiegetic). The formulaic, almost repetitive, nature of the mode—the fact that it is “self-referentially dependent on traces of other stories, familiar images and narrative structures, intertextual allusions” (Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 10) that themselves create thick, meaningful mosaics—means that its characters and plots are always self-conscious and consumed in full knowledge of their ironic interactions.



## The Gothic Past in *Crimson Peak*

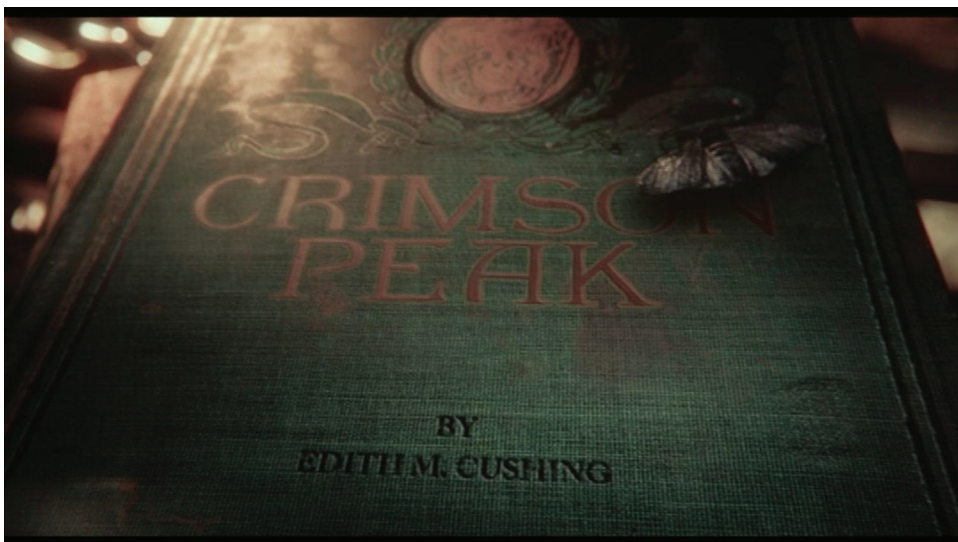
Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak*, set initially in North America and then primarily in Cumberland (U.K.), exemplifies the workings of Gothic temporality and locale described above. The film centers on Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska), a budding author struggling to assert her authorial voice and independence in a world primarily run by men.<sup>20</sup> Warned of *Crimson Peak* by the ghost of her mother, Edith nevertheless marries the charming owner of that estate, baronet Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston), who turns out to be an incestuous Bluebeard figure with a sinister sister to match, Lucille (Jessica Chastain). Both lure wealthy women to the family's crumbling mansion, Allerdale Hall, where previous brides have been summarily murdered for their inheritances and stashed away in the underground mines. The opulent house, fallen into disrepair and sinking into the pits of red clay upon which it was built, necessarily metaphorizes the dark desires and sins of its inhabitants, the moral and monetary decay, as well as the hubris, of a failed lineage of social and economic privilege. As Devendra P. Varma once wrote, the establishment of the Gothic building as grandiose relic "recall[s] the scenes of ancient chivalry and whispers a moral of departed greatness, inspiring us with a feeling of melancholy awe" (18). The film's *mise-en-scène* finds its moral equivalent in the history of the aristocratic Sharpes; they are the broken product of an abusive childhood and a fading family business. That Allerdale Hall is a place in tatters matters beyond indicating the dwindling fortunes of the Sharpes and concurrent mental decline, much as the mansion does in a text like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). It evokes nostalgia for past greatness and fearful sublimity; it inspires reverence, as well as sadness and fear. Allerdale Hall is also a modern reinterpretation of the medieval castle where the heroines of late eighteenth-century writers were once subjected to the conspiracies of gold-digging husbands and despotic uncles. Once the winter snow descends, it becomes a prison that prevents Edith from escape.

It is not just Allerdale Hall's former glory and present disarray that fills the story with sublime awe. The literary and filmic tradition of the Female Gothic pervades *Crimson Peak* beyond its aura of homage to the literature of Radcliffe and the Brontës. For example, the gradual poisoning of the heroine, so central to films like *Suspicion* (1941) and *The Two Mrs. Carrrolls* (1947), plays an important role in setting events in motion. Vitality, knowledge of the Female Gothic elicits some expectations the film then playfully subverts. Key among these is the motif of the hapless damsel in distress in need of rescuing by a male hero, which is overturned when a conventionally frail Edith finishes off her attacker with a shovel. The other main trope, the husband as monster, is also revised. Thomas is, of course, one half of the "marriage and murder" scheme that threatens to end Edith's life prematurely, but he is presented as rather

feckless and ineffective, especially when, in the climax, it becomes apparent he has actually fallen in love with Edith. It behooves Lucille to play the role of irredeemable, jealous villain, not least because it transpires that she and Thomas have been in an incestuous relationship. Beyond money, Lucille has a burning desire to prove Edith weak and worthless and, following Thomas's death, to avenge him and assert her control. If men have the upper hand in the modern world, Allerdale Hall is dominated by Lucille, whose shadow looms large even after she expires. One of the closing shots pans over her ghost playing the piano, a reminder that her presence is forever bound to the place.

*Crimson Peak* is, importantly, temporally Gothic. Edith's adult story begins in America, in 1901 Buffalo, New York. As Del Toro has explained, the city was explicitly selected because, at that time, it was the most modern, full of promise and "electrified" in a country that defined itself against the Old World.<sup>21</sup> Edith, the rich daughter of a businessman, dresses in golden colors and tones that make her stand out against the darker shades (teal and black) of Allerdale Hall and Tom and Lucille's costumes. In fact, she acts like a beacon of modernity and prosperity in an old dark house that, by contrast, is full of architectonic throwbacks (neo-Gothic and medieval masonry and woodwork). The echoes of the past are literalized by the ghosts of the dead wives submerged in the clay vats who regularly appear to Edith. Noticeably, Edith is more curious about the gruesome phantoms than necessarily scared by them, an indication of her pragmatism and investigative strain. Like her mother, the clay ghosts have good intentions: they are the portentous bearers of warnings and prophecies, rather than vengeful monsters. Their visceral physicality is horrific but also a reminder of the violence visited against them.<sup>22</sup> Edith also unlocks the metaphoric padlock of the mysterious death trap set out for her by listening to a phonograph cylinder. Like the projection photography displayed elsewhere in the film, this recording technology symbolizes the modern present, yet is capable of capturing the past. By listening to the ghosts and, crucially, taking action and fighting back, Edith survives and regains her voice. The closing image in the credits (Figure 1) is of her novel, entitled *Crimson Peak*, an implication that the events being watched may be her story—or, at the very least, that she has managed to tell a version of it herself.

Del Toro's film pits a modern, self-sufficient understanding of femininity against an older order (the Sharpe family) associated with manipulation, deceit, and corruption. This point is underscored by the scene in which Edith stabs her executor, Lucille, in the chest with the very quill foisted upon her for the signing of her will. *Crimson Peak* is ultimately a bildungsroman in which Edith grows into adulthood by learning to love and by reasserting her rights. Like the butterflies that symbolize her throughout, she escapes Allerdale Hall's killing jar; she partially overcomes the social impositions placed upon her as a woman and finds her self-worth and strength in the process of avoiding falling victim to her assailants. That the story takes place



**Figure 1.** *Crimson Peak*'s final montage gives Edith authorial ownership.

in the U.S. and the U.K. in 1887 and 1901 is relevant in terms of gender history, too. Despite being presented as a forward-thinking haven, the U.S. was still some years away from extending suffrage to women by the turn of the century, and by 1887 there were still states where married women were not legally entitled to their earnings (Warren 52).<sup>23</sup> As for the U.K., the year 1903 would see Emmeline Pankhurst found the Women's Social and Political Union in reaction to the perceived lack of progress for women's votes. The suffragette movement, as it would come to be known, would routinely engage in civil disobedience to protest gender inequality. Edith, whose property rights, prosperity, and even life are at stake in *Crimson Peak*, necessarily acts as a radical feminist proxy. Her quandaries echo historic gender struggles and speak to post-millennial conceptions of female independence and empowerment.

As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik explain, the Female Gothic asks us to “pay close attention to the representation of women's experience, particularly in relation to the family dynamic and family roles within it; economic dependency or independence; the relationship between law, property, and gender” (116). The Gothic aesthetic is not the only tool at horror's disposal to carry out this type of cultural work. Its temporal tensions, however, reinforce the distance between the beliefs of the past and those of the present, so that advancement can be highlighted by contrast to a nowhere tainted by behaviors and ideas considered regressive and unwelcome. *Crimson Peak* situates its events during a period of rapid change and social advancement that instituted some of the legal pillars for our current notions of womanhood and equality.<sup>24</sup> The turn of the century is presented as a time of contrast, where

certain elements are quickly modernizing and some long-held values are becoming obsolete. Edith is therefore of her time (a progressive thinker) but is simultaneously shaped by post-millennial conceptions of resourcefulness, cunning, and persistence, attributes that grew into staples of the self-sufficient “final girl” of late twentieth-century horror.<sup>25</sup>

### **Gothic Ghosts and *The Woman in Black***

*The Woman in Black* offers a complementary, yet contrasting, Gothic paradigm. In it, the weight of the past becomes synonymous with the superstitions of the rural world and with psychological trauma. Opening with a pre-credits sequence that takes place in 1889 and which largely serves to set up a dreary, melancholic tone, *The Woman in Black* soon moves to 1906 London. Lawyer Arthur Kipps (Daniel Radcliffe) is instructed to retrieve the documents of a deceased woman, Alice Drablow, from a desolate estate in the fictional town of Crythin Gifford, situated somewhere in the northeast of England. Eel Marsh House sits on marshland (Figure 2) and is only accessible from the mainland by a causeway that lies underwater for significant parts of the day—a geographic indicator of its isolation. The house is home to a malignant spirit, Jennet Humfrye (Liz White), a local woman once deemed by her sister’s doctors to be “mentally unfit” to raise her own boy, Nathaniel. After he drowned in the nearby marsh, Jennet committed suicide and vowed never to forgive her sibling, Alice, whom she deemed responsible for their estrangement and the boy’s untimely end. Jennet takes revenge from the grave by visiting her curse upon Crythin Gifford. Following her death, sightings of



**Figure 2.** Eel Marsh House towers ominously over Arthur in *The Woman in Black*.

Jennet's ghost become a bad omen signaling the violent death of a local child. Much like the body of her dead son, neatly preserved in the adjacent mud, Eel Marsh House and its environs channel the presence of the vindictive ghost, who is apparently able to move objects, open and close doors, and psychically control the actions of children. Like Jennet, the house is desolate, oppressive, and tinged with an aura of sadness and regret. Nowhere is this uncanny atmosphere more evident than in the locked nursery, a monument to arrested development. The ominous room, replete with unsettling toys, is a neglected version of a space once intended to nurture life.

Protagonist Arthur hails from the metropolis, a bedrock of Western civilization governed by strict laws and men of industry. He is contrasted with the superstitious locals of Crythin Gifford, whom landowner Sam Daily (Ciarán Hinds) refers to at one point as "still living in the Dark Ages." Arthur is inquisitive, connected to light and reason. He is shown repeatedly lighting candles, digging up Jennet's story, and investigating various mysterious phenomena with pig-headed persistence. When, later, he tells Daily he has seen Jennet, the man reassures him that "even the most rational mind can play tricks in the dark," an indication that, to others, Arthur evokes reasoning and bureaucratic fact, rather than fancy and hearsay. The apparition's existence is unequivocal, however, and Arthur is inspired into action by what he perceives as Jennet's unfair treatment at the hand of a conservative community that casts out those who are different. As in *Crimson Peak*, the Gothic in *The Woman in Black* manifests in the supernatural presence that takes over Eel Marsh House and the terrible place she inhabits, and in the retrojection of the story to a superstitious "long time ago." Crythin Gifford, as a closed-off village made visibly uncomfortable by the presence of visitors, augments the uncanny effect of Eel Marsh House. It is of colossal dimensions, difficult to navigate, antagonistic and secretive—with parts of it closed off. In other words, the Gothic building supplements the temporal dislocation to the early twentieth century, the seclusion of the village, the unfriendliness of the locals, and, in the last instance, the aggressive ghost. Arthur's own psychological discombobulation only adds to these aesthetic motifs and thematic tropes.

*The Woman in Black* is somewhat different from *Crimson Peak*, largely because it is not an example of the Female Gothic tradition. It is not fundamentally a film about women's rights but an exploration of the cruelty of humanity and the difficulty of moving on from traumatic episodes. Arthur is attuned to Jennet's destiny because his own wife, Stella (Sophie Stuckey), died during childbirth. As is clear from the first scenes, in which Arthur is seen struggling at work and his son paints him as a stick man with a sad rictus because that is "what [his] face looks like," the lawyer's life is marred by grief and absence even years after her death. Like that of the woman in black, Arthur's story is a tragedy beyond a happy ending—at least in this, the physical world. Arthur assumes recovering the corpse of Jennet's son and

uniting it with his mother's will be sufficient reparation to put an end to the violence. Yet both Arthur and his son are soon after killed by a train. As they walk toward the light alongside Stella's spirit, Jennet is shown still keeping watch. As she wrote in her letters to her sister, she holds too strong a grudge and will "never forgive." Jennet refuses to concede and thus hails from a different order than the cautionary ghosts in *Crimson Peak*. She takes on the role of Gothic curse, operating as traumatic repetition and as eternal reminder that actions have repercussions. Jennet appears to take solace solely in the company of the children she kills, the offspring whose caring she was denied, and the process of punishing others. If *Crimson Peak* utilizes the Gothic's temporal distancing to rethink femininity and its relation to patriarchy, *The Woman in Black* reverts to the Gothic tradition to tell a story about the real effects of tragedy on the present, about psychological haunting. Jennet's suicide is apparently propounded by her sister's intervention, which adds the possibility that she might have been perceived to suffer from hysteria. And yet, even if we accept that the film might pass a comment on the ease with which madness was ascribed to women in the late nineteenth century and even into the twentieth (Showalter), this aspect is still largely incidental.<sup>26</sup> Arthur and Jennet are more than hunter and prey; their tragedies synchronize, with the former standing as supernatural intensification of the latter. To put it more prosaically, neither character is truly able to forget or let go.

Films like *The Woman in Black* associate the Gothic nature of an anachronistic past (a Crythin Gifford that never was and where people follow the rules of previous Gothic horror films) with the immanent figure of the restless ghost. As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben contend, "*neo-Victorianism is by nature quintessentially gothic*: resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life, reliving the period's nightmares and traumas" (4, italics in original). Of course, not all historical fiction and films are Gothic and neither is neo-Victorianism or neo-Edwardianism synonymous with it, but Kohlke and Gutleben's point is that inherent to an exploration of the past is the strange uniqueness of that time and place, what makes it foreign and arcane to contemporary audiences. It is no surprise that this past often finds a representational, monstrous echo as a curse or nightmarish presence that returns to exert its suffocating grasp or to impose a revision of repressed or secret events and memories. For Chris Baldick, the "Gothic effect" is precisely a combination of "a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration" (xix). Jennet

materializes throughout Crythin Gifford but is at her most memorable in Eel Marsh House, where her otherworldliness augments that of the mansion.

Like *Crimson Peak*, *The Woman in Black*'s architectonic and spatial-temporal coordinates establish direct links between the nature of the buildings and their narrative purpose. Eel Marsh House, like Allerdale Hall, is a slowly disintegrating, baleful country house where the present cannot exist without the burden of the past. This relationship is also communicated by the ghost, a figure that has become almost inextricable from the Gothic: an apparition either in need of acknowledgment or reparation, a warning to the curious, or else a cold-blooded weapon of vengeance. As Susan Owens has argued, although the ghost does not originate in the Gothic novel of the late seventeenth century, Alfonso's specter in Walpole's *Otranto* powerfully linked the wandering spirit to the fearful machinery of this type of fiction. She proposes that, "[i]n binding together ancient history, old buildings, ruins and ghosts with the glue of psychological horror, Walpole invented a new, highly charged way of looking at the world"; he "revived the medieval idea, expressed in saints' biographies, that ghosts could be visitors from the distant past, stirred into violent retributive action by injustice" (124). Studies of the Gothic from *Otranto* onwards (see, for example, Byron and Punter, Armitt, Watkiss) have tended to include, if not privilege, ghosts because they underline and reflect the cultural work carried out by the mode's temporal out of jointness: the righting of wrongs—with its necessary consideration of what these moral and ethical categories mean in any given era—but also the exploration of trauma.<sup>27</sup> In *The Woman in Black*, Jennet is a narrative device through which to mediate ideas that have remained important to the ghost story, namely, "questions of . . . memory and mourning" (Brewster and Thurston 3). *The Woman in Black* is as interested in conjuring up a certain Gothic time and place for affective reasons as it is concerned with the lingering effects of grief on the people and places it touches.

Unlike other contemporary horror films in which acknowledgment is enough to at least partially placate supernatural havoc, as in *Ringu* (*Ring*, 1998), *Mama* (2013), and *Atlantique* (*Atlantics*, 2019), or those where understanding one's own ontological state is the main conceit, as in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *The Others*, *The Woman in Black* depicts its ghost as an inexorable force, as an anthropomorphic rendering of relentless rage, pain, and anger. The reunion of Jennet's and Nathaniel's souls is not enough to lay the ghost to rest; bent on adding Arthur's son to her infant coterie, the woman in black sets a successful deadly trap. And yet, even though the protagonist does not survive the film, the ending is not completely tragic. Arthur and Joseph are shown happily reunited with Stella, and perhaps because they die together, Jennet is unable to steal the boy. Like *El orfanato* (*The Orphanage*, 2007), which has its protagonist, Laura (Belén Rueda), commit suicide so she can join the ghost of

the adopted son she accidentally killed, *The Woman in Black* proposes a confounding metaphysical “happy” ending that partially offsets the shock of the passing of a likable hero. Since Jennet acts as a species of doppelgänger for Arthur, both characters can be understood as explorations of loss. Arthur and Jennet are living and undead counterparts, metaphors for the difficulty of moving on from unexpected, life-changing events. Ghosts are manifestations of the past that continue into the present, like the lingering tracings in our memory of better times or reveries of those who are no longer with us. For this reason, they can embody unresolved trauma and stasis. This idea extends beyond the personal into the sociological and national realms, with ghosts signifying the legacy of complex discourses about gender, class and race—especially the historical exclusion of certain individuals (Gordon 17) and buried or unspeakable acts of atrocity (Schwab 1).

Past times in the Gothic appear in aggressive forms: curses that visit future generations, wraiths bent on having their tragic deaths avenged, malevolent beings who will torment those who awaken them. Like the medieval castle or derelict country house, the ghost embodies the Gothic; it is a literal figuration of the past irrupting into, where not combatting, the present. The most obvious way to literalize this disruption is to show the ghost as visually distinct. Edith’s mother in *Crimson Peak* is skeletal and wears a black shroud of death set in stark opposition to the purity-white of Edith’s gown. Jennet’s monochrome attire in *The Woman in Black* operates in a comparable manner; its crow-black garments are a reminder of her Grim Reaper attributes. Ghosts do not simply upset the reactionary quiescence the past epitomizes but normally attempt to manipulate the fortunes of the living. For characters, survival may rely on their capacity to comply with the requests of apparitions. Their transitional state renders them perceptually “Other” but also casts them as potential agents of change. As noted, in *Crimson Peak*, the clay ghosts primarily guide the actions of Edith, who must take heed from Sharpe’s dead wives if she is to avoid their fate. In *The Woman in Black*, Jennet’s fury cannot be abated; the past cannot be put to rights, only mourned and retraced. The difference between the films could be understood as one of tone, with the former emphasizing female empowerment and the latter melancholic contemplation and spiritual consolation. Yet both stories put forward a similar message: the past cannot be altered. In them, the Gothic orchestrates a tension between the antiquated, negative, sin-tinged past and the ebullient, reactive, and confident present.

### **Conclusion: The Value of the Gothic Aesthetic to Contemporary Horror**

As illustrative examples of contemporary Gothic horror, *Crimson Peak* and *The Woman in Black* re-present the historical past for affective and narrative purposes. They use it to generate fear, with monster, location, and *mise-en-*



*scène* synching to create dark moods and dread, and to reflect on behaviors no longer representative of modern ways. They also rely on the past for thematic reasons, to put forward specific stories of female empowerment or the pervasiveness of the grieving process. *Crimson Peak* and *The Woman in Black* are underpinned by a tacit reification of the paranormal world that contrasts with the “modern science” of the deductive thinking of their sympathetic hero(in)es and, by extrapolation, empathetic viewers. In Gothic horror films, the deadly past returns to affect the present, and the very pastness of the film’s timelines and locations mediate anxieties about social progress and “civilized” behavior. The Gothic in the twenty-first century functions by reasserting the progressiveness of contemporary values, whether these be specifically about gender relations or the difficulty of overcoming traumatic experiences like the death of one’s spouse or child. Although the Gothic may appear to be a predominantly backward-looking phenomenon, it is in fact always about the immediate time of production of a given text. In a book about the Gothic novel, Victor Sage wrote about it as “a specialised form of the historical romance, a form of fantasy about past history and alien cultures which has meaning for its present audience through a variety of cultural and political reflexes” (17). The Gothic aesthetic offers twenty-first-century horror filmmakers an iconography with a long literary and visual history that is still able to articulate contemporary concerns due to its permeability, adaptability, and inherent spatial-temporal frictions.

The Gothic recycles images, themes, and motifs, gaining meaning through palimpsestic accumulation and by channeling the type of allegorical work Fredric Jameson once associated with “nostalgia” films and their representation of history as “glossy images” (287). Both *Crimson Peak* and *The Woman in Black* produce ancillary meaning by virtue of their relationship with the Gothic tradition, our expectations about actions, reactions, and likely denouements. Both follow many of its conventions but disrupt others in a bid for originality that negotiates unique post-millennial points of view. *Crimson Peak* offers viewers a familiar Female Gothic scenario only to surprise with a startling ending that nevertheless emphasizes female agency. *The Woman in Black* introduces identifiable ghostly patterns only to then turn them on their axes to comment on grief and mortality. Their intertextual functions are strengthened by the spatial-temporal aspects that go hand in hand with the Gothic aesthetic. Gothic places, removed from twenty-first-century viewers and located in times associated with political or technological change, continue to serve a similar metaphorical purpose to the one they did for late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers. They signify “the dark and superstitious past,” “benighted belief system[s] that, in [their] effects, [are] indistinguishable from the experience of horror and terror,” an age marked by “barbarism, threat, violence, religious corruption, and perverse sexuality” (Townshend 44). Gothic horror therefore needs to be grasped as more than

the remnant of once financially successful horror cycles shuffling mindlessly on in the shape of endless remakes of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. It also needs to be conceived as more than a catch-all term for all forms of horror film, even though many of its motifs and images have escaped the confines of the Gothic and infected the genre more generally.<sup>28</sup> The messages its temporal clashes advance, its ghosts and haunted spaces, are as vital to twenty-first-century cinema as other forms of horror that, due to their contemporary times and settings, appear more ideologically-minded or better suited to capture the zeitgeist. Tracing the evolution of Gothic horror through the decades, its constants and innovations, reveals how aesthetics are intimately tied to ideology and social relationships.

## Notes

1. New terms, such as “desktop horror” (Hallam 2020), have emerged to define found footage horror films such as *The Den* (2013) and *Unfriended* (2014), where phones and webcams replace traditional camcorders. For Steven Shaviro, the fact that social media and videorecording technologies have influenced filmmaking techniques is a sign that we live in a “post-cinematic” digital world (1–2).
2. In fact, it has been proposed that, in a sadistic loop, films such as *Saw* may have in turn influenced the violence of propaganda cartel videos (Kerekes and Slater 403).
3. The various strands intermix. *Paranormal Activity* and *The Last Exorcism* are also found footage horror films.
4. For the context of “post-horror,” its labeling and meaning, see Church.
5. I mention these decades because they were dominated by Universal and Hammer’s horror films, the most famous and successful of which belong to the Gothic and/or adapt literary classics from this tradition.
6. An exhaustive list is beyond the scope of this article, but for a representative sample of reviews that have termed these films Gothic, see Ebiri, Laffly, Lodge, Macdonald, and McCabe.
7. See Danel Olson’s *21st-Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels since 2000* (2010); Brigid Cherry, Peter Howell, and Caroline Ruddell’s *Twenty-First-Century Gothic* (2010); Victoria Nelson’s *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (2012); Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien’s *New Directions in 21st-Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass* (2015); Catherine Spooner’s *Post-millennial Gothic: Comedy Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (2017); Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes’s *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2019); Megen de Bruin-Molé’s *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mash-Ups and Frankenfictions in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Culture* (2020); and Spooner and Dale Townshend’s *The Cambridge History of the Gothic, Volume III: Gothic in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (2021).
8. I use the term “re-present” (i.e., to present something again) intentionally, and alongside “represent” elsewhere, to emphasize the fact that Gothic versions of the past are not concerned with factual accuracy or mimetism.
9. For more on this artistic lineage, see Jones, Davenport-Hines, among others.
10. See Cavallaro 1–17.

11. The history behind this labeling preference is complex. In the main, it is a consequence of funding priorities (the Gothic is seen as a more respectable subject for academic funding than horror) and the fact that the Gothic has, in academic discourse, come to encompass a plurality of non-mimetic modes, even become itself a critical reading tool. For more on these debates, see [Aldana Reyes](#), “Genre Trouble.”
12. The main examples are [David Pirie’s](#) *A New Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema* (2008), originally published in 1973 as *A Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema 1946–1972*, and [Jonathan Rigby’s](#) *English Gothic: Classic Horror Cinema 1897–2015* (2015 [2000]), *Euro Gothic: Classics of Continental Horror Cinema* (2016), and *American Gothic: Six Decades of Classic Horror Cinema* (2017). Influential as they have been, none of these volumes puts forward a precise definition of the Gothic or separates it from horror cinema more broadly. My own *Gothic Cinema* (2020) is partly a response to this perceived dearth of theorization around the filmic Gothic.
13. When horror emerged as a genre category in film in the 1930s, many horror films employed a Gothic aesthetic or were based on literary Gothic texts. Most horror films today are set today or in the near present.
14. While I am not suggesting that all ghost stories are “Gothic,” many are set in the “Gothic” past or in buildings that connote archaism and decay and/or contain buried secrets.
15. [Ellen Moers’s](#) initial definition of the Female Gothic as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (90), has been revisited and retheorized as a more inclusive and “fluid” category ([Wallace and Smith](#) 11). Novels such as [Wilkie Collins’s](#) *The Woman in White* (1859) and [Sheridan Le Fanu’s](#) *Uncle Silas* (1864) suggest that an author’s gender is less important than the text’s themes and perceived social function ([Punter and Byron](#) 280).
16. [Kate Ferguson Ellis’s](#) seminal study, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Ideology* (1989), explicitly connected the Gothic castle with the strictures of domesticity and discourses of gender.
17. As [Brenda Ayres and Sarah E. Maier](#) propose, neo-Gothicism is “doubly reflexive as it reflects on the reflection of the past” (8).
18. I use the word “retroject” to mean a projection of events into the past, as literally the opposite of “projecting” a story into an uncertain future.
19. Not all Gothic texts are fantastic, but the vast majority rely on potential supernatural elements for suspense. In the “explained supernatural” tradition, these thrilling moments are proven to be ruses or ploys from flesh-and-bone characters ([Aldana Reyes](#), *Gothic Cinema* 126–53).
20. The heroine’s name deliberately echoes that of American writer [Edith Wharton](#) and her surname that of British horror actor [Peter Cushing](#).
21. This comment is taken from [Del Toro’s](#) audio commentary for the Arrow Video 2018 release of *Crimson Peak*.
22. As a horror film, *Crimson Peak* naturally exploits the fearful aspect of its ghosts even though it eventually establishes them as helpful omens.
23. New York was not one of them, and this may be another reason the first part of the film takes place there.
24. Naturally, I do not mean to suggest that gender equality has been reached in the twenty-first century, simply that we have made important advances in the legal representation for women.

25. The “final girl,” or typically female survivor of the modern horror film, has been associated with the blurring of gender boundaries and thus can be said to be progressive in terms of the filmic representation of women (Clover 35–41).
26. My point is that there is no evidence that Jenet was truly insane or that she really did mistreat anyone. The film merely shows these accusations to be the rationale used to dispossess her from Nathaniel. Susan Hill’s novel portrays Jenet as potentially more sympathetic—a woman punished by society for having a child out of wedlock—and has been read as an openly feminist text that deals with “women’s social position” and perceived “threats to families” (see Wisker 216, 219).
27. Filmic ghosts are inextricable from the haunted nature of cinema (Leeder) as a new electronic medium (Sconce), but this aspect is beyond the scope of this article.
28. For example, *The Invisible Man* (2020) is set in the twenty-first century but plays with some classic motifs from the Female Gothic tradition.

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