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Review by Joana Rita Ramalho

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## **GOTHIC CINEMA (2020) BY XAVIER ALDANA REYES**

Review by Joana Rita Ramalho

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**Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Gothic Cinema*. Routledge, 2020. 256 pp.**

Horror and the Gothic have acquired an increasingly favourable position in academic circles over the last ten years, but while film criticism on the Horror genre has proven rife for several decades, monographs on Gothic cinema have been notoriously scarce. Aldana Reyes's *Gothic Cinema* (2020) is a comprehensive study guide that will likely become an invaluable resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Gothic. It contributes to a growing number of film-focused publications on the mode (Hopkins 2005; Hanson 2007; Forshaw 2013; Leeder 2015; Hubner 2018; Piatti-Farnell 2017; Hand and McRoy 2020) and stands out as the first sustained attempt in English-language scholarly criticism to produce a detailed overview of the Gothic as it manifests in global film. Bringing to the fore lesser-known productions alongside canonical ones, the volume is a fascinating and long overdue addition to the discipline's output, urging the reader to think about the cinematic Gothic generically, thematically, transnationally, and in direct relation to technology and shifting audiences.

Grounded in the author's extensive knowledge of the field, the breadth of the book's scope is remarkable, moving from the early experiments in proto-cinematic technologies to 'punisher films,' 'horrotica,' and postmodern romance Gothics. Attentive to the question of which films get labelled 'Gothic,' Aldana Reyes decisively contributes to the project of defining the cinematic Gothic beyond genre and national contexts. In doing so, the author reminds us of the screen language the Gothic created, as well as its widespread impact on film genres across a variety of periods and nations, a fact that has for far too long remained obscured by the critical attention directed towards its more popular counterpart, Horror. Specifically, Aldana Reyes seeks to understand and define the mode through an investigation of its aesthetic qualities rather than through its "alleged cultural purpose" (6). This is a refreshing – if unfashionable – critical perspective. Having followed a similar approach in my own work on Gothic cinema, I am particularly sympathetic to this engagement with 'the surface.' The question of whether Gothic cinema is only valuable so long as it is read as a metaphor – as a barometer of political upheaval and social anxiety – begs reconsideration. As Catherine Spooner observes in *Post-millennial Gothic* (2017), justifying "Gothic through its utility has resulted in a narrow understanding of its possibilities" (17). Aldana Reyes shares this perspective and emphasises the same caveat as Spooner – that these two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive; in other words, the focus on the artistic does not preclude or diminish the importance of social, historical, or political interpretations.

Arranged across seven chapters, the book unravels from the premise that Gothic cinema is characterised by technical innovation, technological developments, and audience tastes more than “the weight of a literary lineage” (3). Aldana Reyes acknowledges the monstrous heritage screen Gothic received from its literary ancestors, but eschews a limiting view of Gothic film as inescapably mediated by the Gothic literary tradition. This offers new possibilities of pinning down what precisely Gothic cinema is, what it does, and where its origins lie. That the filmic Gothic dialogues intimately and often self-reflexively with Gothic literature is indisputable. However, its many monsters, Aldana Reyes explains, owe more to folklore and superstition as represented in phantasmagorias, magic lantern projections, magic shows, and Grand Guignol than to Gothic novels (45, 47). Gothic iconography, then, “developed alongside the Gothic literary tradition, instead of strictly from it” (49), a point David Punter alerts us to as well in “The Original Gothics” (2013), arguing that the history of the “filmable Gothic” “does not conform to the literary one” (103). Increasingly, in fact, the mode, as Spooner elucidates, is “recognized and understood in visual terms that do not fully coincide with conventional literary definitions” (10).

The emergence of early Gothic cinema is perceptively analysed in the first chapter, “Transitional Origins,” as “an accidental affair” (46), in the sense that there was no concerted effort on the part of the filmmakers to produce Gothic films: Gothic elements were typically incidental and included for wonder and entertainment, reflecting the mode’s interstitial existence (54). This is a thought-provoking argument and it reminds me of Angela Wright’s observation in “Gothic, 1764-1820” (2014) that “‘Gothic’ as a literary form [...] began almost accidentally” (91). Wright is referring to Horace Walpole’s infamous subtitle – “A Gothic Story” – appended to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which might be read as a “convenient excuse for creating something so outlandish as a supernatural tale in eighteenth-century enlightened Britain” (Wright 91). An accidental genesis may therefore be construed as another meeting point between Gothic film and literature.

Of particular interest to Gothic students and scholars is the renewed attention the book affords to the categories of ‘Horror’ and ‘Gothic’. Often used interchangeably, Aldana Reyes sets out to show us both how they differ and the extent to which they overlap. To the common assertion that Gothic conceals while Horror reveals, the author adds some much-needed nuance, reminding the reader that Gothic films, such as Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak* (2015), are often graphic too, even though the Radcliffean tradition has been historically favoured to the detriment of bloodier imagery in the tradition of Lewis or Maturin. This point, which the author examines at length in *Body Gothic* (2014), attests to the fact that the intersections between these neighbouring film forms are more complex than much extant scholarship might indicate. Unlike the Gothic, Horror is an established genre, which Aldana Reyes defines through affect (11; see also *Horror Film and Affect*, 2016). Grounding the distinction primarily on affect seems nevertheless insufficient, especially if we define the Gothic as a “literature of terror” (Punter, *The Literature of Terror* 1980), as Spooner remarks (28). In *Gothic Film* (2020), Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy also stress the Gothic’s affectivity, claiming that it “is a way of arranging literary and cinematic elements to create a particular affect” (3). Aldana Reyes suggests that the Gothic is instead “governed by the elicitation of suspense,” which operates at the level of setting, narrative, and characters (12). Another distinctive feature between

Gothic and Horror pertains to time and space: while Horror is “freed from historical periodisation” (107), Gothic transposes the mystic qualities of old Europe to a mythicised urban present, which is often not as immediately appealing to audiences. Read through this lens, the Gothic is primarily psychologically affective, which does not exclude a recurring reliance on gory imagery; importantly, however, the fear it seeks to instil is inextricably tied to specific narrative, spatio-temporal, and aesthetic elements, while Horror is “not bound to a certain type of landscape, setting or character” (11).

On this, T. S. Kord’s detailed investigation of the topic would have been a helpful addition to the discussion (*Little Horrors*, 2016), namely her argument that “What the horror film wants from us is not fear but an admission of guilt” (7): through point-of-view camera angles, Horror aligns the audience visually with the killer’s perspective at crucial narrative moments, privileging the “perspective” over the victim’s position (8). This undermines our ethical allegiance with the victim, thereby precluding compassion – a feature of Gothic films. “Without compassion,” Kord claims, “fear is not an option” (182). Kord concludes that Gothic productions (“suspense films”) “center on fear, declaring that it can be conquered,” whereas “horror movies focus on guilt and show that it can’t” (10). She argues that a hopeful ending is the province of the Gothic, as is the centrality of the unknown. Horror, in turn, “epitomize[s] predictability and repetitiveness” (11, 181). These points would have nicely complemented Aldana Reyes’s observations, as they concern not only narrative and thematic elements, but also film technique. Nonetheless, the author’s careful attention to the specificities of Gothic and Horror furthers critical thinking on this significant issue and succeeds in locating the Gothic aesthetic within – and outside – Horror.

One of the book’s strengths is the agility with which it moves across different iterations and aspects of the filmic Gothic, from *fin-de-siècle* trick films to the dark superhero films of the post-millennium. In between, it highlights the significance of colour tinting, colour photography and sound technologies; the shift in the representation of female heroines; the work of individual directors and studios; the changes in laws about onscreen sexuality and violence; the crystallisation of the Horror formula and its successful global commercialisation; and the celebratory register of postmodern gothic films. The chapters alternate between a more overt concern with cinematic style and character types (chapter two) to corporate strategy (chapter three), themes and narrative (chapter four), technology and studio rivalries (chapter five), market logic and Continental Gothic (chapter six), and the mainstreaming of the mode (chapter seven). I found the shift between historical, thematic, and formal analysis slightly less effective in the last chapter, as I believe it would have been helpful for students to see a clearer temporal progression of the ‘decoupling’ of Gothic and Horror. This is a drawback of the overall emphasis on thematic structuring, but the chapter remains valuable for its careful consideration of the Gothic “as an aesthetic marker” (214) across different genres, from melodramas to sitcoms, cartoons, mystery films, fantasy, and Tim Burton’s oeuvre.

In conclusion, Aldana Reyes draws upon a wealth of experience in the field of Gothic and Horror studies and produces another valuable addition to both fields. Given the book’s format as a study guide, the proposed journey through the world of Gothic film is necessarily concise. Nevertheless, the author supplies a detailed filmography and bibliography at the end of each

chapter, alongside plenty of in-text references to directors, films, studios, technologies, theoretical debates, and visual entertainments that are not discussed in depth, but which might hopefully pique the interest of students, inspiring them to continue researching this ever-timely mode.

I would have welcomed a note about Gothic cinema and streaming platforms, which could have furthered and nicely wrapped up earlier arguments about changing audiences and demographics. Similarly, the deployment of special effects, particularly CGI, has helped shape and revitalise the Gothic on the screen, making it more palatable to a younger demographic. This point could therefore have been more closely explored, especially in the final chapters. Finally, perhaps an appendix containing a taxonomy of the manifold subcategories the mode has splintered into as a consequence of greater critical attention would have been useful to students, too. These are nonetheless minor observations in what is a welcome, engaging, rigorous, and thoroughly global study guide that will no doubt become a staple in reading lists.

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## BIONOTE

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