Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema*
(Routledge, 2020)

In his 2020 book *Gothic Cinema*, Xavier Aldana Reyes offers an expert overview of the gothic in film, with a focus on its connections with gothic literature, its historical development, and what distinguishes it from the broader category of horror. Students beginning their studies of gothic cinema will be well served by this erudite but still highly readable introduction; more advanced students will find much to engage with, as well.

Aldana Reyes begins with an overview chapter that intends to define what, precisely, is meant by the category of 'gothic cinema'. Drawing on Fredric Jameson, Aldana Reyes describes gothic cinema as a 'mode,' suggesting that the term encompasses broader characteristics than is usually indicated by the term 'genre' (p. 14). Aldana Reyes's first task is an attempt to distinguish the gothic from the broader category of horror; they are naturally paired together and frequently collapsed into one another, a situation which Aldana Reyes finds understandable, as both are 'invested in darkness and negative affect' (p. 7). Aldana Reyes introduces this 'popular dyad', under which '[h]orror […] is seen as heavily graphic and explicit', whereas 'the Gothic is subtle and suggestive' (p. 8). So, as generally understood, *The Haunting* (dir. by Robert Wise, 1960) is gothic, whereas *Hostel* (dir. by Eli Roth, 2005) is horror. While this might seem intuitive, Aldana Reyes argues that the dichotomy is not nearly so sharp. Some films that are clearly gothic in nature, such as *Crimson Peak* (dir. by Guillermo del Toro, 2015), are filled with graphic depictions of violence, while many films that clearly fall on the horror side of this divide, like *Paranormal Activity* (dir. by Oren Peli, 2007), are slow-paced and suggestive. For Aldana Reyes, the gothic is 'identifiable at the level of surface' by 'its use of architecture and spaces' (p. 14). These spaces exist as a living past, in some ways standing in conflict to the present world around them. So while *Alien* (dir. by Ridley Scott, 1979) has frequently been read as a gothic film set in space, Aldana Reyes finds this to be an unworkable contradiction. The setting by itself is enough to disqualify *Alien* from the circle of gothic cinema (p. 9). However, Aldana Reyes agrees that many of the films under discussion in this book could be most profitably classified as 'Gothic horror', since until recent decades, 'the Gothic film was […] one of the most popular subgenres of horror cinema' (p. 25). Following on from this helpful discussion on genre, the rest of the book provides an historical overview of particular trends and developments within gothic cinema.

Chapter 1, entitled 'Transitional Origins', explores the silent films that laid the groundwork for the emerging gothic cinema. Aldana Reyes suggests that gothic cinema might

begin with Méliès's 1896 film *Le Manoir du diable*, for its 'various transformations […] all set against a painted backdrop that reproduces the entrance to an ancient castle' (p. 43). Aldana Reyes also proposes Alfred Scott's fifteen-second film from 1895, *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*. However, he finds that offering either of these films as the 'first' examples of the genre must be qualified, as they are more concerned with 'discoveries in cinematic technology' than with establishing a cinematic gothic mode (p. 44). As such, early gothic film should be understood as 'an accidental affair' (p. 46), with the settings and motifs that would come to be associated with the gothic largely being the product of the developing art form's connection to illusionism, a popular style of art that involved tricks of perception. So, for example, these earlier cinematographic tricks could be used in the service of fairy tales (like Méliès 1899 *Cinderella*) or religious films (such as the same director's 1898 *Temptation of St. Anthony*). These films are concerned primarily with exploring what can be done with the camera, with genre as a secondary concern. The gothic offered only one possible setting for the 'trick film.'

The second chapter, 'Monstrous Shadow', finds the gothic emerging as a full-fledged genre in the films of the 1910s and 20s. For Aldana Reyes, the most important development of this period was the 'medium-specific way of shooting the Gothic monster that would have a significant effect on horror cinema from 1923 to 1935', demonstrated by a number of German films that 'drew inspiration from the country's Romantic tradition in literature' (p. 72). Aldana Reyes notes several connections between *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920) and gothic literature, and also discusses the contribution to the developing gothic mode of films such as *The Student of Prague* (dir. by Henrik Galeen, 1926) and *Der Golem* (dir. by Paul Wegener and Henrik Galeen, 1914). The chapter spends an appropriately significant amount of discussion on *Nosferatu* (dir. by F. W. Murnau, 1922), noting Murnau's 'use of depth of field photography, his reliance on low-angle shots for certain horrific scenes and his tension-building editing' (p. 83). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the anthology film, which is frequently associated with the British film tradition, but which, as Aldana Reyes demonstrates, has its origins in German cinema.

Chapter 3, 'Franchise Gothic', moves to American films of the 1930s, which Aldana Reyes argues were 'most foundational in setting up a blueprint for the Gothic in cinema' (p. 98). He notes the shift in marketing between films such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (dir. by Wallace Worsley, 1923), marketed as a prestige historical film, and *Dracula* (dir. by Tod Browning, 1931), positioned explicitly as a horror film (p. 100). The bulk of the chapter consists of readings of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (dir. by James Whale, 1931), as well as the

subsequent franchise entries. The focus here is not only on the developing cinematic techniques that will become standard gothic fare, but also on the films' marketing and reception. Chapter 4 considers 'The Explained Supernatural', beginning with the 'Old Dark House' films of the 1920s and 30s, before moving to the 'Female Gothic' films of the 1940s. For Aldana Reyes, the female gothic becomes an important mode in this period, drawing from 'cinematic traditions as varied as the melodrama (especially the period drama), film noir, romance and horror' (p. 137). Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) was the 'path-opener' (p. 137), leading to heroine-centred films such as *Gaslight* (dir. by Thorold Dickinson, 1940; and dir. by George Cukor, 1944). Aldana Reyes (tentatively) sees this version of the gothic heroine as a possible 'prototype for the "final girl" of the later "slasher" film' (p. 141), as she finds herself struggling alone against a male murderer. Aldana Reyes notes throughout the chapter that this form of heroine develops against the backdrop of continual revisions of gender roles in Western Europe and the United States, largely as a result of the disruptions to the labour force brought about by World War II. This line of reasoning makes for an intriguing counterpoint to the roughly contemporaneous film noirs, which frequently offered a very different portrayal of female power. Both of these cycles, taken together, make it clear that Western Europe and the United States were re-thinking gender at this time; the shifting demands of the war-time and post-war economies make for a logical rationale.

In Chapter 5, Aldana Reyes turns to 'Technicolor Gothic', starting with Hammer's films of the late 1950s and 60s. Along with the addition of colour, Aldana Reyes notes the introduction of more graphic violence, beginning with the scene in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (dir. by Terence Fisher, 1957) in which the monster is shot in the eye. Aldana Reyes refers to this moment as 'one of Gothic cinema's most important, signalling the possibility of bloodier approaches to the source material' (p. 156). It's the first indication that gothic cinema is willing to 'leave behind restraint' (p. 156). These early Hammer films would set the template for gothic cinema of the time, featuring 'period settings and British casts, Manichean fights between good and evil and, above all, alluring colour" (p. 158). These trends would endure through the 60s but began to lose steam in the 70s, as more contemporary-themed horror rose to prominence, such as *The Exorcist* (dir. by William Friedkin, 1973). The chapter also explores Roger Corman's 1960s film adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction, arguing that Corman uses colour in these films to 'explore and connote the warped recesses of the human mind, especially the diseased one' (p. 172). In contrast, Hammer's films of the same period feature a primarily affective use of colour, emphasising 'its potential to shock and disgust' (p. 172). For Aldana Reyes, there's a clear distinction between the psychological depth of Corman's adaptations,

and the Hammer films' focus on surface affects. While this distinction is certainly defensible, it also runs the risk of downplaying the important contribution that shock and disgust can make to thematic complexity.

Chapter 6 turns towards 'Exploitation Gothic'. As Aldana Reyes asserts, '[t]he 1960s and 1970s were defined by the rise of exploitation cinema […] which normally privileged the key ingredients of violence and sex or else openly imitated other successful films' (p. 183). This is first seen in Italian vampire films that took the latent sexual content of the Universal and Hammer pictures and made it explicit, leading to a cycle of films that recycled well-known gothic characters and storylines. However, this also led to the creative output of filmmakers such as Mario Bava, who participated in the 'amplification and exploitation of sensuality and violence' (p. 188) that would become the dominant feature of 60s and 70s gothic cinema, while also demonstrating that this could be accomplished with great skill and thematic depth. Aldana Reyes also sees this as the decade during which the gothic would move out of the mainstream and into the underground, with mainstream horror gradually becoming more modern in tone and setting. As he puts it, '[i]f the Gothic's trappings had once allowed for the exploration of repressed desires, the gradual liberation cinema had undergone since the 1960s would make its aesthetic trimmings unnecessary, even passé' (p. 198). For Aldana Reyes, the gothic was primarily enticing to viewers for its ability to explore these dangerous desires; it became less useful as relaxed censorship rules allowed these desires to be explored in more direct ways.

The book concludes with a chapter that explores 'Late Dispersions', as the gothic becomes a rarer occurrence, frequently relegated to the 'chronotopes of the secluded Gothic castle and the secret-ridden cathedral' (p. 211). But even so, the gothic mode continues to resurface in the cycles of recent decades. Aldana Reyes highlights films centred on cults and witchcraft in particular since, in these films, gothic trappings 'have been recuperated for the anachronistic values of the ideologies and beliefs behind them' (p. 213). Even more than this, Aldana Reyes finds that the generic features of the gothic have become well known enough that the gothic can be 'decoupled' (p. 215) from horror, making its way into period dramas such as *The Elephant Man* (dir. by David Lynch, 1980); the musical comedy *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (dir. by Jim Sharman, 1975); or the hard-to-categorise oeuvre of Tim Burton. Films such as *The Devil's Backbone* (dir. by Guillermo del Toro, 2001) and *The Orphanage* (dir. by J. A. Bayona, 2007), he argues, use the gothic obsession with repressed events of the past to explore our relationship with memory. This 'new Gothic' requires an 'intimate acquaintance with cinematic history' (p. 227), increasingly an expectation of audiences in a wide array of genres. As this book demonstrates, having an understanding of the historical

sweep of gothic cinema puts the viewer in a position to meet these expectations. Gothic cinema is a form that is constantly evolving but also looking backwards in appreciation.

Aldana Reyes has provided an expert introductory textbook. Students and scholars alike will benefit from his discussions of genre and his encyclopaedic knowledge of film, always with a focus on how each particular film participates in the gothic mode, or expands our understanding of this mode. Both novice and expert readers will benefit from the way in which Aldana Reyes gathers together a wide array of films, organising them into a coherent narrative of gothic cinema.

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