## 3.1. Gothic and Silent Cinema

**Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown**

Made in 1930 in a period of transition between silent and sound film, Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr: The Strange Adventure of Allan Gray* (1932) is arguably the silent cinema's last great Gothic masterpiece. It establishes its Gothic credentials from its opening titles, crediting the film as 'freely adapted from the book *In a Glass Darkly* by J. Sheridan Le Fanu', clearly associating the film with Gothic literary traditions. The very first intertitle draws upon Gothic language as it describes the unfolding narrative as representing the 'fantasy-experience of young Allan Gray, who engulfed himself in studies of demonology and vampire-lore. Preoccupation with the crazed ideas of past centuries turned him into a dreamer and a fantasist, lost on the border between reality and the supernatural.' This reference to demons, vampires, being haunted by the past, and existing in the nether world between reality and the supernatural draws upon many traditional Gothic themes. The film also uses its visuals to set a Gothic tone. Intertitles are printed over the graphic design of an elaborate cobweb, while the *mise-en-scène* is dressed with signs, paintings and sculptures that feature angels, skeletons and skulls. There is even an overt allusion to Death in the form of a man carrying a scythe to the edge of a river and ringing a bell to call the ferry to the shore. Through these images it is clear that Gray has entered a Gothic landscape, not just the netherworld between reality and the supernatural but between the living and the dead, populated by characters who, as Thomas Milne suggests, have a 'wraithlike, dislocated presence as though they had stepped out of a nightmare'.[1]

What lends the film its distinctive and unsettling Gothic atmosphere, however, is not solely the plot nor the choices of *memento mori* that litter the *mise-en-scène*, but rather the intrinsic uncanniness of the cinematographic. While we have described *Vampyr* as the last

Gothic masterpiece of the silent era, it is in fact not silent but rather a hybrid of sound and silent cinema that calls attention to the mechanics of its production. It was shot as a silent film with selective synchronised sound added later, and this disjunction between sound and image destabilises notions of verisimilitude as both silence and sound are rendered uncanny through their combination, with the result that the dreamlike realm into which Gray, and the audience, enter is both like and unlike the real world. Moreover, in the same way that the narrative world exists somewhere between reality and a form of Gothic expressionism, the film also hovers between the conventions of silent and sound cinema, being neither one nor the other, while at the same time bearing aspects of both. As such the film's haunted landscape is conveyed through the uncanny language of cinema itself. As Gray explores the Inn and the surrounding estates, trying to make sense of the strange events that he has witnessed, Dreyer follows him through a series of extended long takes. Dreyer's circular pans and roving dolly shots seem at times to both shadow Gray and to convey his point of view, while at others they are more autonomous, exploring the space independently. In each case, however, the camera movements suggest a ghostly presence. Furthermore, the images are often deliberately murky or cloudy in such a way as to call attention to the film stock, such as when the vampire Marguerite Chopin feeds off her primary victim Leone in a nearby meadow. As the vampire looks up towards the camera, it is as if she is peering through the grain of the film. David Rudkin describes these shots as 'hazy', as having 'a quality of being drained of light', and this visual texture is further enhanced by the repeated use of flickering luminescence and candles.[2]

Most significantly, the film is filled with the optical trickery that is a distinct uncanny feature of the photographic nature of the medium. As Gray searches through the estate he follows a series of disembodied shadows that flit across the screen, seemingly detached, like Dreyer's camera, from their human host. These and other shadows continue to appear and

disappear, haunting the landscape throughout the film. Later Gray falls asleep and, through the use of double exposure, a ghostly translucent version of himself separates from his body and continues to explore his surroundings. At the film's climax, an extreme close-up of the ghostly visage of the deceased father of Leone appears, superimposed over the frame of a window, dissolving in and out as lightning flashes across the screen, signalling his anger and desire for revenge on those who murdered him and threatened his family. These rich visual textures are rendered all the more uncanny by the disjuncture between silent imagery and the occasional use of synchronised sound effects and dialogue, rendering these spaces as both familiar and unfamiliar, every day and dream-like.

*Vampyr* therefore does not simply *present* a Gothic landscape but rather invites the audience *into* a Gothic landscape, recognising and utilising the fact that film exists on the border between reality and the supernatural. The effect of watching *Vampyr* is to be invited into a Gothic dream, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, but it is not necessarily the presence of ghosts and vampires that is Gothic but rather the language of cinema, galvanising an inherent synergy that exists between film and the Gothic. It is because of this that *Vampyr,* coming at the end of the silent era, is a crucial starting point to understanding the relationship between the Gothic and silent film, one that dates back to the invention of cinema, and yet is a film that is often overlooked. At its birth, the cinema itself was perceived as inherently Gothic, yet most studies of Gothic film assert that by the time *Vampyr* was released the Gothic's place in cinema was not as a part of the medium itself, but rather as a series of narrative tropes within an enclosed story world. This is not surprising. *Vampyr* was released the year after Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) sparked the birth of what David J. Skal has referred to as Hollywood Gothic and what Gary Rhodes, Alison Peirse and Kendall Phillips mark as the starting point for the American cinematic horror genre.[3] By focussing upon the advent of the horror film in

the early sound era, scholars like Phillips, Rhodes and Johnathan Rigby tend to present the Gothic in the era of silent cinema as a steady progression towards the birth of the horror genre by examining key early films that specifically draw upon and include Gothic elements within their narratives as a prelude to Browning's and Whale's respective masterpieces.[4] Yet with its focus on the uncanny nature of cinema itself, *Vampyr* marks the end not just of a period in cinema history that, to all intents and purposes, has taken on the mantle of pre-horror, but more importantly one in which the Gothic and cinema negotiated their nineteenth-century heritage as uncanny spectacle alongside an increasingly narrativised form of cinema. The aim of this chapter is therefore to reassess the relationship between the Gothic and the cinematic experience within the silent cinema era, focussing not upon story elements but rather upon the ongoing association between the Gothic and the cinematographic through the use of cinematic techniques to convey subjective states of being. In doing so this chapter will examine how the Gothic potential of the cinematic experience that was so fundamental to the era of cinema's birth did not disappear but rather remained, and continues to remain, embedded within cinema itself.

**Early Cinema and the Gothic**

In discussing the place of the Gothic within early and silent cinema, many scholars have used Maxim Gorky's now-infamous description of seeing the Lumière Brothers' film show at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair in 1896 as spending an evening 'in the Kingdom of Shadows' to draw parallels between the new medium of film and the Gothic.[5] Stacey Abbott notes that Gorky's comments signal how this new technological medium 'was perceived as being inherently ghostly in its representation of the world', while Murray Leeder similarly comments that 'Gorky did not need ghostly subject matter to perceive cinema as a supernatural medium'.[6] This reading of Gorky through the Gothic is consistent with Gorky's account of his reaction,

which is rich in Gothic imagery. His description of people 'frozen into immobility' before 'a strange flicker passes through the screen and the picture stirs to life' has echoes of the moment in Mary Shelley's novel when Frankenstein completes his attempts to 'infuse a spark into the lifeless thing' he has created when 'a convulsive motion agitated its limbs'.[7] Yet just as Frankenstein finds that at his moment of triumph 'the beauty of the dream vanished and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart', Gorky finds horror in these flickering images of people for 'their smiles are lifeless, even though their movements are full of living energy… their laughter is soundless… Before you a life is surging…. the grey, the soundless, the bleak and dismal life'.[8] Gorky's distaste for images 'dipped in monochrome… grey rays of sun across a grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces… the ashen grey-foliage of the trees' and for the lack of accompanying sound not only seems to suggest a Gothic world glimpsed through a thick moorland mist (an idea echoed in the opening of *Vampyr*) but also a spirit world filled with ghosts, glimpsed in a beam of light that momentarily pierces the veil.[9] He says of two men playing cards that 'it seems as if these people have died and their shadows have been condemned to play cards in silence unto eternity'.[10] In this he echoes Jean Badreaux, a French journalist, who argued that film would 'bring those who are no longer in this world back to life', thus fulfilling Frankenstein's promise that 'science has triumphed over death.'[11] The effect on Gorky was decidedly uncanny, and ultimately he found that 'the mute, grey life finally begins to disturb and distress you. It seems as though it carries a warning, fraught with a vague but sinister meaning that makes your heart grow faint'.[12]

Lifeless figures that burst into terrible motion, soundless ghosts captured in moments that they are condemned to repeat for eternity, and an overall effect that is both disturbing and sinister all equate in the most fundamental way to the Gothic. As Fred Botting points out, Gothic texts are 'alienating and full of menace' and offer an uncanny space that 'disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality'.[13] The effect of the Gothic on its

readers, Botting argues, is emotional rather than rational, 'exciting rather than informing, it chilled their blood', much as the Lumière films did for Gorky, and blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, just as the monochrome, silent images that Gorky saw rendered an uncanny double of the real world captured by the Cinematograph camera.[14] Lynda Nead goes further and suggests that 'each time the projector is set in motion… figures… step out of their frames and come to life… It was an invitation to a séance in which the medium – in every sense of the word – was film.'[15] What Nead articulates here is precisely what Gorky was suggesting, namely that in the early moments of cinema's birth the apparatus and the experience of film was inherently Gothic.

This connection between the Gothic and the cinema draws upon a synergy between the photographic and the supernatural or spiritual that pre-dates the cinema and has repeatedly manifested in literature and popular media in the nineteenth century. For instance, it underpins the Phantasmagoria as a form of late-eighteenth century optical entertainment, popularised by Etienne-Gaspard Robertson. The Phantasmagoria was a form of magic lantern performance in which ghostly images of the dead would be projected onto a screen and made to appear, disappear, transform and move toward the audience through the manipulation of the slides. As Laurent Mannoni explains, the name Phantasmagoria was 'derived from the Greek *phantasm*, '"ghost"… and *agoreuo*, "I speak"; an etymology which suggests a dialogue between the audience and the ghost called up by the magic lantern'.[16] As such, the equation of an optical entertainment with spiritualist medium predates Nead's similar commentary on early cinema. The Phantasmagoria was in fact advertised in May 1802 in the Hull Advertiser and Exchange Gazette as a form of projection technology that offered an encounter with 'PHANTOMS or APPARITIONS of the DEAD or ABSENT, in a way more completely illusive than has ever been offered to the eye in a public Theatre…'[17] Charles Dickens, an experienced showman who was well aware of the spectral properties and

potential of the Phantasmagoria and other magic lantern projection systems, drew upon these properties to convey a singularly magical encounter in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) when he told the story of how Goblins attempted to educate the miserable village sexton, Gabriel Grub, by presenting him with a series of moving pictures of human suffering. The potential of the magic lantern was subsequently fulfilled in the 1880s, when this chapter from *The Pickwick Papers* was adapted for an actual magic lantern slide show entitled *Gabriel Grub, or, The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton* (1880s–1910), bringing Dickens's relationship with the Phantasmagoria full circle.[18] While Mannoni notes that the Phantasmagoria regularly featured Gothic topics drawn from literature and mythology, including *Three Witches of Macbeth, The Head of the Medusa* and *The Bleeding Nun*, it was the animation and mobility of the images, 'appearing to rush toward a terrified audience who were certainly not used to such an assault of images', that fuelled the spectacle of the medium.[19]

Paul Forster similarly recognises the connection between the Gothic and the cinematic, though here through the examination of Gothic literature, arguing that 'there was something cinematic about the late-Victorian Gothic revival', noting the recurring inclusion of proto-filmic elements within the Gothic fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde. For instance, Forster, quoting Laura Marcus, notes how 'later *fin-de-siècle* texts like H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) suggest "the direct influence of early cinema, in particular its play with velocity and with reverse motion"'.[20] Similarly, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Jonathan Harker uses the language of optical illusion to explain the strange things that he sees while in Transylvania. He describes the seeming translucence of the coach driver taking him to Castle Dracula as an 'optical effect'; he later tries to explain Dracula's uncanny ability to crawl down the wall as a 'trick of the moonlight' or a weird 'effect of shadow'.[21] Finally, he describes Dracula's vampire brides' literal disappearance, after they have attempted to seduce him, as a 'fade' into the rays of the

moonlight.[22] Effects, tricks, shadows, fades are all terms that apply to the optical entertainments such as the magic lantern and Phantasmagoria that would inform the development of cinematic language at precisely the time of *Dracula*'s publication.

Scholars writing about early cinema have continued to focus on this synergy, trying to make sense of early cinema through its relationship to nineteenth-century precursors in the form of painting, photography, magic lantern performances and other optical illusions. Lynda Nead's discussion of the 'haunted gallery' positions early cinema alongside painting and photography as a means to explore how 'the transformation from stasis to movement and the varieties and velocities of motion possessed all forms of visual media, from high art and art criticism, to still photography and magic lantern slides, popular optical toys and projected film'.[23] Tom Gunning relates his discussion of early trick films to the perception of nineteenth-century photography 'as an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating a parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses verified by positivism'.[24] Stacey Abbott explores the spectral nature of early cinema and how the language of spectrality that haunts early cinema is drawn from the nineteenth century, and the extent to which it informs developments within cinema language and special effects.[25] Whether describing Gothic literature as 'proto-filmic' or early cinema as 'haunted', 'uncanny' or 'spectral', these scholars collectively recognise that there is something inherently Gothic about the medium of film.

Yet, as noted above, moving beyond the first moments of cinema, the exploration of the connection between cinema and the Gothic tends to turn away from the cinematographic and look instead to narrative, charting not the ongoing relationship between the Gothic and the technology and materiality of cinema, but rather the appearance of Gothic tropes within the filmic text. Whereas, as Leeder notes, the Lumière Brothers' films seen by Gorky contain

no specific Gothic elements but are, instead, recordings of everyday scenes where the apparatus itself provides the uncanny Gothic twist, the next step for Gothic scholarship has been to examine key early films that specifically draw upon and include Gothic elements within their narratives.[26] Tying the Gothic into early cinema's fascination with 'sensation', Ian Christie, for example, highlights how pioneer filmmakers 'instinctively turned' to Gothic elements. 'Consider,' Christie argues, 'the typical Méliès settings of castle, laboratory and magic theatre stage, or those of Robert Paul's trick films of 1901, *The Haunted Curiosity Shop, The Magic Sword* and *Scrooge, or Marley's Ghost*, which span the locations associated with the Gothic'.[27] Christie's position is that the emphasis in these films on so-called 'trick' effects, in which the camera was stopped and elements substituted, or double exposures were used to present ghost-like figures, was a natural confluence of cinema's ability to present the impossible and the popular desire for sensationalism and novelty that drove the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic revival, which 'combined to produce a lively neo-Gothic of the supernatural'.[28]

Such a confluence of trick effects and Gothic imagery was a step in the gradual narrativisation of the Gothic, first combining the inherent Gothic-ness of cinema with narrative elements, and then subsequently transposing them into narrative elements alone. Kendall Phillips, for example, also considers Walter R. Booth's silent horror film *The Haunted Curiosity Shop* (1901), which features among other things a suit of armour that comes alive and a floating head, along with Edison's *Uncle Josh in a Spooky Hotel* (1900), in which a country rube is visited in his hotel room by a mischievous ghost. Phillips is writing about horror in general rather than the Gothic in particular, taking as his starting point the received notion that the horror genre was born in 1931 between the release of Universal's *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, as the discourse circulating around *Dracula* in the months after its release increasingly adopted the term 'horror' to describe the film.[29] For all that the period between February and November 1931 may mark the start of horror as a cinematic genre,

there were, as Phillips argues, a plethora of silent films that used similar tropes to Tod Browning and James Whale's films, and indeed there were early versions of both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. 'What about *Frankenstein* in 1910, and *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1908 (or even 1920)' asks Phillips.[30] His aim therefore is to consider 'how the elements that would later constitute horror films' – elements which he describes as 'horrific' – 'were treated within these (earlier) films'.[31]

Phillips and Christie encapsulate two key elements of the schism at the heart of discussions of the Gothic and silent cinema. The first is that they embody that sense of a transitioning from the idea of cinema as inherently Gothic towards it acting as a repository for Gothic elements. Such an approach reflects the standard periodisation of pre-sound cinema history between the early period, routinely defined in relation to Tom Gunning's concept of the 'cinema of attractions' and what Gunning defines as 'the cinema of narrative integration', which emerges around 1907 as narrative films begin to rise to prominence, and becomes fully formed in the years immediately preceding the First World War.[32] These two concepts effectively split the development of cinema. The era of attractions was one in which film was exhibitionist in scope, reaching outwards to the audience through direct address and drawing attention to itself as a spectacle and a complete package that included film, audience and apparatus. In contrast, the cinema of narrative integration turned inwards to create a coherent and closed world within the film itself, no longer inviting the audience in through direct address but rather through character development and narrative intrigue. Considered within these two paradigms, it therefore makes sense that, as the open address of the cinema of attractions gave way to the closed world of the integrated narrative, so the Gothic would cease to be an element within the entire cinematic spectacle and reassigned instead a role as narrative component.

The second element that Phillips's discussion highlights is the slippage that takes place within discussions of the Gothic on film between the concepts of 'Gothic' and 'horror'. As Phillips notes, 'prior to 1931…there were no horror films. The language of horror had not yet solidified into a definable genre' but his argument is that 'the elements that constitute much of what we call "horror" were already present'.[33] He then goes on to state that the silent era saw 'a surprising number of films released … that dealt with elements that would later constitute the horror film: castles, cobwebs, monsters, maniacal killers, magical curses, avenging ghosts and undead creatures'.[34] These are all elements that are associated with the literary Gothic. In his definition of the Gothic, Jonathan Rigby, for example, cites 'dank crypts, rugged landscapes and forbidden castles … fatal women, vampires, doppelgängers and werewolves'.[35] These elements of the literary Gothic, when transferred to cinema, ultimately become subsumed within the generic concept of the horror film. After 1931, the Gothic becomes an element within the horror genre, much in the same way that Catherine Spooner describes the Gothic in relation to twentieth-century high-Modernist literature, in which it becomes, 'rather than the determining feature of the texts, one tool among many employed in the service of conjuring up interior terrors'.[36] The result is a conflation of the terms 'Gothic' and 'horror' in relation to film, a state in which the two concepts are often used interchangeably. Jonathan Rigby's survey of British horror films, for example, is entitled *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema*, while his companion piece on America is similarly named *American Gothic: Sixty Years of Horror Cinema*. Equally, Benjamin Hervey opens his discussion of contemporary horror cinema by asking the question 'What is Gothic?'[37]

Peter Hutchings addresses this issue in his discussion of modern horror cinema, noting that 'it is not uncommon in certain contexts for "Gothic" and "horror" to be used as if they were more or less interchangeable', whilst at the same time recognising that very often

‘the term “Gothic horror” when applied to cinema usually refers to a specific type of horror film, one that has a period setting and which relies for many of its effects upon what might be called here the visual trappings of late eighteenth century and early-nineteenth century Gothic, namely ruined castles, dank dungeons and the like’.[38] Hutchings therefore acknowledges that in horror the Gothic is primarily a narrative or visual element, but also suggests that the difference in cinema between the Gothic and horror is that the horror film is ‘best seen as a genre’ whereas the Gothic is ‘a distinctive mode which influences a wide range of cultural forms’.[39] This idea is extremely useful for approaching the Gothic in relation to silent cinema, an era that, as already stated, pre-dates the emergence of the horror film as an identifiable cinematic genre. While there is no doubt that Universal’s *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* both drew upon and cemented the Gothic as an essential element of cinematic horror, acknowledging the Gothic as a significant mode of representation that existed prior to the horror genre allows for an analysis of Gothic influences within silent cinema above and beyond its connections to horror. It opens up the silent era to Gothic analysis, creating a space in which it is possible to consider an alternate path taken by the Gothic from that early period, one in which it retains its role as what Laura Mulvey describes as ‘a technological uncanny’ and which is primarily associated with the cinematic event itself through the representation of subjective states of being, and which reaches its pinnacle not in the castles of Dracula and Frankenstein, but in the washed-out landscapes of Dreyer’s *Vampyr*.[40]

### Narrativisation, Respectability, Adaptation and the Gothic

As Gunning has argued, the shift towards narrative integration was primarily a drive towards respectability.[41] The proliferation between 1906 and 1908 of purpose-built cinema venues, the Nickelodeons in America and the Penny Gaffs or Penny Cinemas in the UK, was accompanied on both sides of the Atlantic by a growing moral panic about moving pictures,

in a very similar way to that in which Gothic literature was feared to be 'encouraging readers' decline into depravity and corruption'.[42] Nickelodeons and Penny Cinemas were cheap, often makeshift venues aimed at working-class audiences who, like the readers of Gothic fiction, enjoyed a diet of films whose 'plots appeared to celebrate criminal behaviour'.[43] The result was that both the venues and the films shown became subjects of concern to moral pressure groups. As Pearson and Uricchio note, in America 'film content uncontrolled by private or public interests and ill-regulated dark, crowded potential fire trap storefront moving picture shows frequented by immigrants and the working classes generated intense opposition from religious organisations and other civic activists'.[44] Anxieties about what could happen to 'respectable' patrons in the Nickelodeon's darkened halls were exacerbated by the content of the films themselves, and the trade press in the US urged producers to raise the tone of their subjects in order to appeal to a more 'refined' class of audience.[45] A similar situation occurred in the UK. In March 1908 the *Daily Telegraph* printed a letter from a vicar complaining about Walter Haggar's *The Life of Charles Peace* (1905). Peace was a burglar and murderer who was executed in 1879, and Haggar's film replayed some of the most infamous moments of Peace's life of crime. Its blend of sensationalism and violence was not uncommon, and led to calls from the Commissioner of Police in 1909 for tighter controls on violent films.[46] Such outcries were not lost on film producers, and the result was self-regulation of content, via the formation in the US in 1909 of the New York Board of Censorship (renamed the National Board of Censorship), and in the UK of the British Board of Film Censors in 1913. In addition to this, legislation in the US and UK resulted in cheaper cinemas being replaced with upmarket venues for middle-class audiences.

For Gunning, this led to changes to film content so that it was 'brought more in line with the traditions of bourgeois representation'.[47] Essential to this was adapting acceptable bourgeois entertainment forms such as the play and the novel in order to entice middle-class

audiences into these plusher cinemas. In Britain the result was a flurry of films based on Shakespeare and Dickens, including Will Barker's *Henry VIII* (1911); Cecil Hepworth's *Hamlet* (1913); and Thomas Bentley's *Oliver Twist* (1912) and *David Copperfield* (1913). American producers also turned to Shakespeare, releasing some 36 Shakespeare adaptations between 1908 and 1913, alongside other literary classics including *Les Misérables* (1909); *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1910); *A Tale of Two Cities* (1911); and *Pickwick Papers* (1912).[48]

Yet, while Barker, Hepworth and others were adapting Dickens and Shakespeare because 'the conception of film as an art like theatre worked to assuage anxiety about cinema by raising its cultural status', in 1910 Thomas Edison's film company released an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, directed by J. Searle Dawley.[49] As Christopher Frayling states, the film's publicity took pains to reassure viewers that the filmmakers had 'tried to eliminate all the actually repulsive situations' in favour of 'the mystic and psychological problems that are to be found in this weird tale'.[50] It also impressed that the film 'was based on an acknowledged classic', thereby borrowing that all-important cultural pedigree, and indeed a subsequent adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* (1912) was sold as 'an American classic'.[51] Thus, in the rush to adaptation and the borrowed prestige that accompanied it, high-cultural titans like Shakespeare and Dickens brought with them in their wake film versions of texts whose credentials were less associated with high art directly but rather with the higher end of popular literature, which encompassed a number of adaptations of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic stories, including Marie Corelli's 1895 novel *The Sorrows of Satan* (1917); Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* from 1897 (1919); Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1913); and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1915.

Gunning argues that while literary adaptations imported middle-class respectability and audiences to the film industry, the consequence was the development of new techniques of film language such as parallel editing, which were required in order to convey more

complex storylines.[52] However, a further outcome was the rise to dominance of bourgeois forms in the shape of narrative cinema, wherein the tropes of the cinema of attractions became subsumed to the primacy of story. This, alongside a process of familiarisation as audiences became used to cinema, hastened the transition of the Gothic nature of the cinematic experience and apparatus into primarily a narrative element, contributing to the notion that cinema in the silent era became a repository for Gothic imagery. And yet, just as Gunning argues that the cinema of attractions did not disappear with the advent of narrative cinema but rather went 'underground both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films', so too does the Gothic nature of the cinema itself continue in the silent and early sound era prior to the formation of horror.[53] The Gothic in silent film is not solely, as Phillips or Rhodes suggest, a narrative element waiting for the horror genre to be formed. Just as the cinema of attractions erupts into narrative cinema through moments of spectacle and special effects, the silent era also sees a perpetuation of the technological uncanny that so offended Gorky in 1896.

**Cinematic Experimentation and Technological Uncanny**

If the transition to the bourgeois forms of narrative cinema and literary adaptation saw cinema move away from most exhibitionist forms that extolled the wonders – and horrors – of the medium, filmmakers continued throughout the silent era to experiment with form and technology to develop a cinematic language, one that was distinct from literature, theatre and photography. Much of this experimentation, particularly around sound and colour, was part of a move towards increasing verisimilitude, but there was also a move to develop expressive forms able to communicate emotion and subjective experience, thus creating a space for the Gothic uncanny of cinema to continue to emerge. The inclusion of colour sequences in Rupert Julian's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), for example, serves both purposes. The

use of two-strip Technicolor in the masquerade ball offers a moment of spectacle and splendour, adding to the film's standing as a prestige production for Universal studios. Narratively, when the Phantom arrives dressed as Red Death, the colour process serves to make him stand out, bedecked in crimson robes, thus allowing for a dramatic entrance, but it also enables him to walk among the crowd, all of whom are masked and splendidly dressed in red and green. In utilising the Technicolor process, this represents a moment of spectacle, since Technicolor was relatively new in the mid 1920s. However, it also strives towards a degree of verisimilitude, because Technicolor, even in its limited two-colour form rather than the three-strip format that followed it, represented one of the most commercially successful attempts to introduce indexical rather than interpretive colour to the screen, something that would not become fully normalised until the introduction of Eastmancolor in the 1950s and 1960s. In the subsequent sequence, when the ingénue Christine and her love Raoul escape to the roof of the opera house, the experiment with colour serves a more expressive, Gothic purpose. In this scene, the film switches from Technicolor to blue tinting in the close-ups of the lovers, a standard technique for night-time scenes. These tinted shots are, however, intercut with long shots of the Phantom looming over the couple as he straddles the statue above their heads with his bright red robes blowing in the wind. This effect is achieved through the Handschiegl Color Process, which allowed for one element of an image to be coloured in thus negating verisimilitude and emphasising effect. Here, the contrast between the red robes and the blue tinting heightens the Gothic impact of the scene and presents the Phantom as a threatening figure of death.

Alongside such affective experiments were other cinematic movements in this era that sought to galvanise the expressive potential of film language, developing techniques not only to tell those seamless character-oriented narratives that were emerging in Hollywood, but also to communicate mental states and the subjective experience of the world. In so doing they

were tapping into a notable preoccupation of the Gothic. As Linda Bayer-Berenbaum explains, the Gothic has a history of portraying ‘all states of mind that intensify normal thought or perception. Dream states, drug states, and states of intoxication have always been prevalent in the Gothic novel because repressed thoughts can surface in them’.[54] In portraying these states of mind, the Gothic invites the reader into this subjective experience brought to life through expressive language, ‘produc[ing] emotional effects on its readers rather than developing a rational or properly cultivated response’.[55] Cinema equally possesses a fascination with representing interiority. In early cinema, and in line with the previous discussion of the cinema of attractions, these vision states were presented as a spectacle of technology such as in *The Little Match Seller* (James Williamson, 1902), based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen. In this film a young girl freezes to death while trying to sell her wares on a wintry night just before Christmas. As she succumbs to the cold, she lights matches to keep warm, and each time she does so she has a vision. The visions – a warm fireplace, a turkey dinner, and a welcoming mother – are presented as image bubbles above her head, achieved through their superimposition on a black wall. While the story is moving, the visions are spectacle rather than immersive, and their subjective status is questioned in the film’s final moments, where after her death the seller is visited by an angel, presented in the same way. Four years later Edwin S. Porter’s *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906), loosely based on the comic strips by Windsor McCay, would use similar techniques of double exposure to attempt a more subjective viewpoint of a man suffering from the after-effects of eating too much melted cheese, but while the film sought to represent the experience of a dream-like state, it is nevertheless most notable for its avalanche of special effects which constitute, rather than support, the narrative.[56]

In the later silent era, various film productions and art movements sought to build upon these special effects to transcend the spectacle of vision states to convey a visceral

subjectivity, which like the Gothic, immersed the audience within an emotional experience. German Expressionism, for instance, was interested in projecting inner turmoil outwards as conveyed through *mise-en-scène* and cinematographic techniques, while the German *Kammerspielfilm* sought to do away with intertitles and communicate the narrative entirely visually, immersing the audience within a highly subjective narrative. Paul Leni explains that in filming *Waxworks* (1924), 'it is not extreme reality that the camera perceives, but the reality of the inner event, which is more profound, effective and moving than what we see through every day eyes, and I equally believe that the camera can reproduce this truth, heightened effectively'.[57] The French Impressionists similarly sought 'truth' and recognised the ability for film to communicate the subjective, seeing, according to Monica Dall'Asta, 'film as the revelation of an otherwise imperceptible reality… Such was the "miracle" of cinema: suddenly one could apprehend aspects and dimensions of life that the human eye had never seen before and that remained beyond the grasp of ordinary perception'.[58] It is in this search for an internal truth or subjectivity that the Gothic both emerges through, and merges with, the language of cinema.

The pursuit of the 'truth' led to experimentation with the communication of the subjective experience through dreamscapes, delirium, fantasy, passion and horror, achieved not just through optical trickery but a visceral cinematography. These experiments often take the form of momentary interruptions of narrative for Gothic flourishes in films that would otherwise be categorised as melodramas. F. W. Murnau's *Schloss Vogelöd* [*The Haunted Castle*] (1921) – a story of guilt and suspicion – features a dream sequence in which a guest at the mansion has a vision of a hairy Wolfman-like hand scratching at the window before pushing it open, reaching in and pulling him out. The sequence twice uses a dissolve to a medium shot of the man in the bed to signal the entry and departure from the dreamscape, while a match on action between the long shot of the arm stretching into the room and the

close-up of it reaching for the man suggests that the arm is abnormally long and inhuman, a factor that is reinforced by the large shadow that spreads over the wall as the arm approaches. These formal elements would be further developed in Murnau's most famous Gothic film, *Nosferatu* (1922), and later alluded to in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram's Stoker Dracula* (1992).[59] Similarly, in *Phantom* (Murnau, 1922), a poet's descent into romantic and sexual obsession is conveyed through a selection of optical tricks to signal that, like Allan Gray in *Vampyr*, he is lost, not on the border between reality and the supernatural but between fantasy and madness. As the protagonist loses his grip on reality and becomes increasingly consumed by his obsession, he walks out onto his village street to find the buildings seemingly tilting forward as if to collapse on him and smother him, an effect achieved through double exposure. In the next shot, the shadows of the buildings seem to pursue him along the cobblestones. Later, Murnau spins the camera 360 degrees in an early form of 'unchained camera' to capture the protagonist's hallucinatory experiences.[60] This is a delirious film that offers a subjective experience of the protagonist's reverie. Similarly, E. A. Dupont's *Varieté* (1925) repeatedly uses dynamic and visceral camera movements to convey subjectivity. This subjectivity is at first linked to spectacle and the carnivalesque by presenting the visceral experience of being on the trapeze as the camera swings through the air, positioned from the point of view of the trapeze artists. This carnivalesque cinematography blurs into an expression of passion, anger and violence as conveyed through the unchained movements of the camera, such as a 360-degree swish pan to convey the protagonist Boss Huller's overwhelming anger and horror at the discovery that his lover has been cheating on him with his partner. Later, Dupont features a shot in which the camera seemingly plummets from the trapeze to the crowd below, as Huller fantasises about dropping his partner in the middle of their act. The film also uses kaleidoscopic effects and blurred focus to convey Huller becoming overwhelmed by anger and jealousy.

In contrast, Jean Epstein merges this visceral cinematography with frenetic montage to convey internalised trauma and fear in *Coeur Fidèle* (1923). In this film, the heroine Marie has been given away to the criminal Petit Paul by her adopted parents. Forced into this relationship and unable to escape, Marie feels trapped and helpless and this is conveyed in the scene where Petit Paul takes her to a fairground and they ride the carousel. The sequence cuts between a fixed-camera medium shot of Marie and Petit Paul, as the background swirls by, with subjective shots of the crowd taken from their perspective on the spinning carousel. While Petit Paul is exuberantly laughing and enjoying the ride, Marie stares blankly, showing no emotion. But as the scene progresses, Epstein begins to cut in a flurry of close-ups of the crowd in a frenetic montage that, with its juxtaposition with the swishing camera movements, signals the unspoken hysteria that is building within Marie, particularly as Petit Paul tries to kiss her.

In *La chute de la maison Usher* [*The Fall of the House of Usher*] (1928), Epstein brings all of his techniques to bear to infuse the established Gothic melodrama by Edgar Allan Poe with what Ian Christie describes as a 'modern uncanny'.[61] A clear precursor to Dreyer's *Vampyr*, Epstein's film possesses a delirious atmosphere of reverie, hallucination and nightmare achieved through the film's 'ostentatious filmic devices, such as swirling camera, rapid editing, slow motion [and] extreme close-ups'.[62] The film marks a fusion of the technological uncanny with the narratively Gothic. The story is replete with Gothic motifs, including a decaying mansion, cavernous empty halls and corridors, billowing curtains, isolation, mist, tombs, physical and spiritual degeneracy and premature burial. These familiar tropes are reinvigorated cinematically through Epstein's visual style. For instance, the arrival of the narrator at the Inn that opens the film is rendered uncanny by the inexplicably slow pace of the patrons' reactions to the new arrival and his request for transport to the house of Usher. This creates a subjective mood that gives the impression of the traveller arriving at a

place of strangeness and dislocation. This mood is maintained throughout the film. The lethargy of Roderick and Madeline Usher is conveyed through the film's subtle use of slow motion, while Roderick's obsession with his painting of her is captured via frenetic editing and the use of double and triple exposure that reinforces the sense that the painting is somehow draining her of life. The similarity between the opening of *La chute de la maison Usher* and *Vampyr*, and the comparable ways in which they create an overall sense of the uncanny, demonstrate that the two films are clearly connected. Epstein's film was made towards the end of the silent era, while Dreyer's film marks a transition to sound, but together they are representative of the cumulative move toward immersing the audience within a visceral experience of subjective states that is the hallmark of the silent Gothic.

**Conclusion**

Dreyer's *Vampyr* marks two key moments of transition, first between silent and sound cinema, but secondly, and more importantly, between the silent cinematic Gothic that it represents, and the sound horror genre that began with the contemporaneous releases of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. If Gorky's experience of seeing the first films projected as part of the Lumière Cinematograph performance in 1895 was Gothic, then the selection of films that we have discussed in this chapter demonstrates how technological developments and experiments in film language in the silent era continued to capture a similar uncanny experience. The examples presented here are not intended to be exhaustive but rather indicative of a continued preoccupation with, and evolution of, the technological uncanny throughout the silent era. They represent a parallel history of the cinematic Gothic, one that remained concerned with the Gothic nature of the experience of film viewing, rather than as an element of narrative, deliberately enticing through stylistic experimentation the kind of subjective viewing experience articulated by Gorky. If the sound era is dominated, as Rigby

and Phillips have argued, by Gothic *horror*, then the silent period is primarily the age of Gothic *cinema*, a fusion of the cinematic and the Gothic on the experiential level.

**Notes**

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[1] Thomas Milne, *Vampyr*, reprinted in Accompanying Booklet to *Vampyr* DVD (Eureka, 2008), pp. 44–56 (p. 53).

[2] David Rudkin, *Vampyr* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), p. 53.

[3] David J. Skal, *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990); Gary D. Rhodes, *Tod Browning's Dracula* (Sheffield: Tomahawk Press, 2014); Alison Peirse, *After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013); and Kendall Phillips, *A Place of Darkness: The Rhetoric of Horror in Early American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

[4] Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*; Rhodes, *Tod Browning's Dracula*; Jonathan Rigby, *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema*, 2nd edition (London: Reynolds and Hearn Ltd, 2002); and Jonathan Rigby, *American Gothic: Sixty Years of Horror Cinema* (London: Reynolds and Hearn Ltd., 2007).

[5] Stacey Abbott, 'Spectral Vampires: *Nosferatu* in the Light of New Technology', in Stefan Hantke (ed.), *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), pp. 3–20; Murray Leeder, 'Introduction', in Murray Leeder (ed.), *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (New York, London, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 1–14; Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*; and Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film, c1900* (London: Yale University Press, 2007).

[6] Abbott, ‘Spectral Vampires’, p. 11; Leeder, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

[7] Maxim Gorky, ‘Last Night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows’, reprinted in Colin Harding and Simon Popple (eds), *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema* (London: Cygnus Arts, 1996), pp. 5–6 (p. 5); Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*, edited by Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 38–9.

[8] Shelley, *Frankenstein* (2008), p. 39; Gorky, ‘Last Night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows’ (1996), p. 5.

[9] Gorky, ‘Kingdom of Shadows’, p. 5

[10] Gorky, ‘Kingdom of Shadows’, p. 5

[11] Quoted in Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, p. 26.

[12] Gorky, ‘Kingdom of Shadows’, p. 6

[13] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 2, 11.

[14] Botting, *Gothic*, p. 4.

[15] Nead, *The Haunted Gallery*, p. 1.

[16] Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000), p. 136.

[17] Anon., ‘Winged Skulls and hot air balloons: The grave of Étienne-Gaspard Robert, pioneer of phantasmagoria’, *Flickering Lamps* (3 July 2016) <https://flickeringlamps.com/2016/07/03/winged-skulls-and-hot-air-balloons-the-grave-of-etienne-gaspard-robert-pioneer-of-phantasmagoria/> [last accessed 30 August 2018].

[18] The slides for *Gabriel Grub – or, The Goblins who Stole a Sexton* are included on the *Dickens Before Sound* DVD collection produced by the British Film Institute 2011.

[19] Mannoni, *The Great Art*, pp. 162–3, 136.

[20] Paul Foster, ‘Kingdom of shadows: *fin-de-siècle* gothic and early cinema’, in Fred Botting and Catherine Spooner (eds), *Monstrous Media / Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic from the*

*Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 29–41 (p. 32).

[21] Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, edited by Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 16, 35.

[22] Stoker, *Dracula* (2011), p. 40.

[23] Nead, *The Haunted Gallery*, p. 1.

[24] Tom Gunning, 'Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny', in Murray Leeder (ed.), *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (New York, London, New Delhi, and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 17–38 (p. 18).

[25] Abbott, 'Spectral Vampires'.

[26] Leeder, 'Introduction', p. 6.

[27] Ian Christie, 'The Visible and the Invisible: From "Tricks" to "Effects"', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 13:2 (2015): 106–112 (p. 107).

[28] Christie, 'The Visible and the Invisible', p. 107.

[29] Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, p. 2.

[30] Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, p. 5.

[31] Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, p. 5.

[32] Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Cinema, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', *Wide Angle* 8:3/4 (1986): 63–70.

[33] Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, p. 3.

[34] Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, p. 5.

[35] Rigby, *English Gothic*, p. 11.

[36] Catherine Spooner, ‘Gothic in the Twentieth Century’, in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 38–48 (p. 40).

[37] Benjamin Hervey, ‘Contemporary Horror Cinema’, in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 233–241 (p. 234).

[38] Peter Hutchings, ‘Tearing your Soul Apart: Horror’s New Monsters’, in Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith (eds), *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 89–103 (p. 89).

[39] Hutchings, ‘Horror’s New Monsters’, p. 89.

[40] Laura Mulvey, *Death at 24fps: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 27.

[41] Tom Gunning, ‘Weaving a Narrative: Style and Economic Background in Griffith’s Early Films’, in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 336–47.

[42] Botting, *Gothic*, p. 6.

[43] Botting, *Gothic*, p. 6.

[44] Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, ‘How Many Times Shall Caesar Bleed in Sport?: Shakespeare and the Cultural Debate about Moving Pictures’, in Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer (eds), *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 155–68 (p. 156).

[45] Gunning, ‘Weaving a Narrative’, p. 339.

[46] Simon Brown, ‘Censorship Under Siege: The BBFC in the Silent Era’, in Edward Lambertini (ed.), *Behind the Scenes at the BBFC: Film Classification from the Silent Era to the Silver Screen* (London: BFI Publishing, 2012), pp. 3–14 (p. 4).

[47] Gunning, 'Weaving a Narrative', p. 339.

[48] Pearson and Uricchio, 'How Many Times Shall Caesar Bleed in Sport?', p. 158; Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer, 'Feature Films and Cinema Programmes', in Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer (eds), *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 187–95 (p. 188).

[49] Grieveson and Krämer, 'Feature Films and Cinema Programmes', p. 188.

[50] Christopher Frayling, *Frankenstein: The First Two Hundred Years* (London: Reel Art Press, 2017), p. 99.

[51] Frayling, *Frankenstein*, p. 99.

[52] Gunning, 'Weaving a Narrative', pp. 336–47.

[53] Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions', p. 64.

[54] Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982), p. 25.

[55] Botting, *Gothic*, p. 4.

[56] See Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 340–42.

[57] Quoted in Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans Roger Grieves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 127.

[58] Monica Dall'Asta, 'DEBATES: Thinking About Cinema: First Waves', in Michael Temple and Michael Witt (eds), *The French Cinema Book* (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), pp. 82–90 (p. 85).

[59] See Abbott, 'Spectral Vampires' (2004). Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* includes a nod to the uncanniness of this sequence when Dracula's coach arrives at the Borgo

Pass to pick up Jonathan Harker. As the driver reaches out to Harker the camera tracks into a close-up of him as the hand extends into the frame, grabs him and pulls him into the coach.

[60] Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, p. 191.

[61] Christie, ‘The Visible and the Invisible’, p. 61.

[62] Christie, ‘The Visible and the Invisible’, p. 61.