

**POPULAR TEXTS IN ENGLISH:
NEW PERSPECTIVES**

Editors:

**ANTONIO BALLESTEROS
LUCÍA MORA**

Associate editors:

**MARÍA DE LOS SANTOS ESPEJO QUIJADA
PERE GALLARDO TORRANO
MANUEL GONZÁLEZ DE LA ALEJA
BEATRIZ GONZÁLEZ MORENO
SARA MARTÍN ALEGRE
ÁNGEL MATEOS APARICIO**



Ediciones de la Universidad
de Castilla-La Mancha
Cuenca, 2001

The Long Shadow of Hannibal the Cannibal: Gothic Modulation in Contemporary Film

Pedro Javier Pardo García
University of Salamanca

1. Generic Mixture in the Film Gothic Revival

The release in the 1980s and 1990s of a significant number of films which may be considered Gothic, makes it possible to refer to this phenomenon as a kind of new *Gothic revival*, that is, a modern counterpart of the the mid-18th-century *Gothic revival* in architecture and the arts in general out of which the Gothic romance emerged. This new Gothic revival in film can be traced not only to new film adaptations of literary masterpieces such as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Mary Reilly* (based on a novel by Valerie Martin which re-creates *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*), *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, even of more recent titles such as Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, or to terror movies which make use of the traditional Gothic machinery, such as the Elm Street saga and its kind or the adaptations of Stephen King's novels, but also to the recourse to Gothic elements in films belonging to other genres, especially science and detective fiction. I will refer to this recourse, using Alastair Fowler's description of generic mixture, as *Gothic modulation* (this term points out the presence of features of a certain generic repertoire in a different genre), which may be slight or reduced to a few touches, but may also lead to the creation of full-blown generic hybrids. In fact the recurrence of the Gothic in these different generic territories—Gothic modulation—rather than its permanence in the more direct descendants of the Gothic genre—Gothic transformation—is the best testimony to its renewed vitality. Gothic modulation, however, adopts different shapes which go from the decorative and superficial to the functional and significant, with the additional paradox that sometimes what seems to be the most Gothic is in fact the least, and the other way

round. That is why any analysis of this revival in non—or other than—Gothic generic territories, and especially of the film which is perhaps its best representative and a full Gothic hybrid, *The Silence of the Lambs*, requires some kind of definition of the Gothic as a point of departure. The task, however, is not simple: firstly, because any generic description depends to a great extent on the corpus of works to be described, but the selection is made with a certain previous generic idea in mind, and thus the critic is caught in a variant of the hermeneutic circle; and, secondly, because, partly as a result of this, the Gothic genre has received very different definitions and the term *Gothic* has been applied to very disparate works, so it means so many things that it almost means nothing. One only needs to review the abundant bibliography on the Gothic, from the older studies by Birkhead or Varma to the more recent ones by MacAndrew or Day, or to examine the list of Gothic texts included at the end of Punter's wide-ranging study or of Botting's introduction, to verify this statement.

In this situation, the best we can do is perhaps to turn to the historical Gothic, to the works by Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis or Maturin, in order to find a definition. The historical Gothic, and this is something which is too easily and too frequently forgotten, is a form of romance. This implies, using Northrop Frye's description of romance, that action takes place at two levels of experience or worlds, the idyllic and the demonic, situated above and below our ordinary world of experience. One is a world associated with happiness, security, peace; the other is a world of adventures which involve separation, loneliness, pain. This vertical perspective is reflected in characters, who belong to either of these worlds and are therefore wholly and extraordinarily good or evil, heroes or villains; and is reflected in plot, which is always some kind of movement between the idyllic and the demonic, usually a cyclical movement of descent into the demonic world and return to the idyllic one. In the Gothic romance these features are very clear, since the Gothic world is possibly the most powerful and explicit representation of the demonic world of romance. This is so, firstly, because it is cast in a characteristic architectonic shape, the Gothic building, with all its subterranean cells, dungeons and charnel-houses, which make the Gothic world quite literally an underworld; secondly, because it is presided over or dominated by an evil figure, the Gothic villain, who is a kind of human demon—as is underscored by the fact that he sometimes has some sort of dealings with the Devil himself—and perfectly embodies the demonic nature of the place—or maybe it is the other way round, the place embodies the demonic nature of the man, the architectonic is a metaphor for the mental; and, thirdly, because this underworld is the stage of death, terrible crimes, and the supernatural, and these aspects are enhanced through a conventional set of devices—the Gothic machinery—used to create fear and suspense.

Gothic romances usually narrate the descent of a heroine or/and hero from a world which is the antithesis of the Gothic, to a Gothic underworld, which implies persecution and captivity in a Gothic building and confrontation with evil in the shape of a Gothic villain and with the supernatural. This villain, together with the heroine and her suitor, the hero, constitutes one of the key features—although neglected by many accounts of the Gothic—of the genre: the Gothic triangle. In

this respect it is worth noting, in the first place, that, unlike previous romantic genres featuring villains together with heroes and heroines, in the Gothic, villain and heroine are coupled in a closer relationship, even much closer—no matter how painful and harmful it may be—than that between hero and heroine; in the second place, that, although the heroine is the protagonist, as in previous romantic fiction, the villain takes on a new protagonism and is perhaps the most interesting character. Finally, it must be noted that, precisely because the universe presented in the Gothic is that of romance—with its subterranean and dark settings, its clear-cut separation between good and evil characters, and the intervention of positive or negative superhuman forces—and is very distant from ordinary or contemporary reality, the genre is close in certain aspects to fantasy and fairy tale.

With this definition of the Gothic in mind we can briefly examine some of the representatives of the Gothic revival in science and detective fiction films. We can find examples of the more decorative or superficial use of the Gothic mentioned above in the film adaptations of futuristic stories taken from comic books, such as Alex Proyas's *The Crow* (even his later *Dark City*, not inspired by a comic but clearly resembling one) or Tim Burton's *Batman*, which exploit the visual and connotative power of the Gothic setting and architecture. This visual aspect of the Gothic is also exploited but David Lynch's adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, and, in masterly fashion, by Ridley Scott in *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, which display an obvious debt to *Frankenstein*. Victor's creature casts his shadow over the replicants that move in the Gothic streets and buildings of a future Los Angeles and that, like Victor's creature, have been artificially created by a scientist but are an image of the human condition and its mortality, of the human essence, and therefore a questioning of the frontier which separates the human and the inhuman. The destructive *aliens* of the other film, coming from an abandoned Gothic spaceship to another Gothic cargo spaceship directed by a computer called *Mother*, are also human as far as they lead a parasitic existence, they can only reproduce in the bodies of human beings that nurture them (again like mothers) and that they finally destroy, so, like Victor and his creature, they represent an evil which is born within us and finally destroys us. This is made explicit in the last and also Gothic instalment of the *Alien* series, *Alien: Resurrection*, in which Ripley, the Gothic heroine of the original film, becomes the *mother* of one of those alien creatures and shares some of their features, and in which scientific experimentation, as in *Frankenstein*, is in the foreground. It is worth noting that the French director of this fourth *Alien*, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, had also used Gothic characters, plots and settings in films which were at the cross-roads of science-fiction, fantasy and fairy tale, *Delicatessen* and *La cité des enfants perdus*. And, finally, at the same confluence of genres and also in a close connection with Mary Shelley's masterpiece is Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, which also makes use of Gothic elements, especially of the polarisation of the idyllic and the Gothic, in order to subvert their meaning and traditional associations with, respectively, good, happiness, the human, and evil, unhappiness, the monstrous. In the film the idyllic becomes the site of tension and cruelty, latent and actual violence, and the Gothic is a safer place, identified with peace, harmony and stability. It also subverts the

creature's role as object of terror (this role is transferred to society) to turn him into an object of reflection, in the line of Mary Shelley's and science fiction's creatures (aliens, replicants, robots).

A similar subversion of the traditional implications of Gothic conventions, although in a different generic territory, detective fiction, and in a different medium, television, can be found in the American series *The X-Files*, created by Chris Carter, in which the detective recovers the Gothic element which was present in the origins of the genre—in Poe's Dupin—and becomes the man of the windowless office in the basement, always ready to descend into the darker and subterranean side of reality, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense: in specific cases he descends to real Gothic underworlds, but in general to a world which is below the ordinary level of human existence and perception, beyond the light of reason. In so doing he is searching for a truth that has been buried by technological development, and this descent and search are far from being something negative, but an attempt to recover for humanity a lost integrity or wholeness prior to the oppressive, stifling and reductive constrictions of science and reason. This positive assessment of the rational quest for the irrational explanation is highlighted by comparison with that of the detective in another TV series (although also turned into a film by his director, David Lynch), *Twin Peaks*, in which we find the opposite: a quest for the rational explanation which becomes itself irrational. Furthermore, the investigation in this latter will bring to the surface the monsters and ghosts hidden in the small and apparently idyllic country community. This coexistence of the Gothic and the idyllic side by side, living together in the same space, although at two different levels, one more superficial, the other deeper and concealed, was also the topic of Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, in which we can also find one of the most troubling and disturbing Gothic triangles in recent Gothic films. But no more disturbing, however, than that of *The Silence of the Lambs*, the film directed by Jonathan Demme and starring Jody Foster and Anthony Hopkins, which is perhaps the most Gothic—in the purest sense of the term—of all the films of this Gothic revival, including Alan Parker's *Angel Heart*, a detective story with Gothic overtones too complex to be discussed here, and the two excellent Gothic thrillers by the young Spanish film-maker Alejandro Amenábar, *Tesis* and *Abre los ojos*. In their interweaving of a plot turning around the investigation of a mystery and several crimes with Gothic triangles and with Gothic themes—conflicts between good and evil, normality and abnormality, associated with the outer and the inner, the social and the personal, and dramatised through heroines trapped between villains who look like heroes and heroes who behave like villains, or through split heroes caught between angelic and fatal women and sealing Faustian pacts with the devil (of course rationalised through a scientific alibi)—these two films approach very closely the intense Gothic modulation which turns *The Silence of the Lambs* into a Gothic hybrid.

2. *The Silence of the Lambs* as Gothic Hybrid

The Silence of the Lambs presents us with one of the fullest and richest—if not the fullest and richest—use of the Gothic conventions, which is the most

surprising if we consider that the story follows the pattern, at least in appearance, of a detective investigation and is set in a perfectly recognisable and believable contemporary world. The very first scene of the film is already a statement about its hybrid generic identity: a woman is running alone, maybe away from something or somebody, in an ominous wood. The image of the maiden in distress is thus evoked, although it is soon discarded when we learn that she is a would-be FBI officer in her training. An ambiguity between the passive Gothic victim and the active detective, however, has already been created around the protagonist of the film, and this will be maintained throughout it. In fact, on her way to the FBI headquarters, she passes by a sign stuck on a tree: "Hurt, Agony, Pain: Love It". The sign is obviously part of the FBI psychological training apparatus, and it marks a real territory, the training camp; but it is also part of the Gothic psychological reading apparatus, and thus it also marks a generic territory. The sign is both referential and self-referential or metafictional; it points to a real space, the detective's, and to a reading one, the Gothic. This double reference becomes a clear indication of the twofold generic territory that the heroine—whose name, by the way, is Clarice, which evokes Richardson's Clarissa, a proto-Gothic heroine—is treading on.

As we are about to find out, the movie will turn around a criminal case. It features as its basic narrative thread the investigation by FBI agents, basically Clarice and her boss, Crawford, of a series of crimes committed by a serial killer, nicknamed Buffalo Bill because he skins his victims. The investigation includes the traditional elements of the detective plot: interviews and autopsies, research and search, talking and thinking. But even at this level, in which the detective plot is at its most evident, this latter is loaded with Gothic overtones. Buffalo Bill is no vulgar psychopath: he kidnaps his victims, of course always women, and, before killing them, he keeps them a few days in captivity in his underworld, located in his house basement, which is turned into a maze of subterranean corridors and chambers thanks to a very skilful use of camera movements and montage. Furthermore, to make this underworld deeper, his victims are kept prisoners in a dark well whose stony walls are stained with blood from previous victims. The victims' experience is thus similar to that of the Gothic heroines—a descent to a Gothic underworld to suffer pain and death—and this underworld is evidently a metaphor for the Gothic villain's mind, for his unconscious where his irrational drives are repressed and can lead an existence of their own. The mental dimension of setting is further stressed by the presence in the film of another physical space representing the killer's psychological one. When Clarice questions Hannibal Lecter about the killer's identity, his answer is puzzling: "Look in yourself". He seems to suggest that the solution to the mystery is in the detective's mind; but, as Clarice finds out later, there is a *Yourself Store Facility* in Baltimore. So she will look in *Yourself*, that is, in a locked storage place, to find the head of one of the psycho's first victims (in this case a man) locked inside a car together with a headless dummy with a woman's dress on. The head of a man and the body of a woman is a clear embodiment of the psycho's sexual identity problems which are the hidden agenda behind the crimes: his transexual desire to be a woman seeks

fulfilment by means of a new dress or body he is making with his victims' skin. Therefore we can say that Clarice is somehow peeping into the killer's mind, into his unconscious represented by that dark and locked storehouse, but also, as suggested by the word-play on *Yourself*, into everyone's mind or unconscious, including her own. The detective, the film seems to hint, must be both a psychoanalyst, and this will be certainly the case when Lecter appears onstage, and the object of psychoanalysis, as will be the case with Clarice herself, as we will see. The locked car can also be related to the van where the killer kidnaps the women, and thus to the pervading presence of the very Gothic enclosure motif, beyond its most evident manifestation in the confinement of several characters.

This is how we get a first glimpse of the Gothic triangle, with the serial killer as villain, his female victims as heroines, and Clarice, who, as detective, plays the part of the rescuing hero—she will actually kill the psycho and rescue the last victim at the end. This triangle, however, is kept in the background: the villain psycho, his victims, and the relationship between them, are not much developed. The Gothic simply provides the background for the main detective plot. But there is another triangle which will be foregrounded and will become a plot of its own, a secondary or rather a second plot which challenges and subverts the detective one. And this has a lot to do with the ambiguous part Clarice plays in the investigation.

Clarice is sent by Crawford to talk to a confined serial killer, Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lecter, a former psychiatrist, under the pretext of convincing him to fill in a questionnaire for the elaboration of a psycho behaviour profile which may be helpful for the Buffalo Bill case. Crawford's presentation of Lecter as a monster and his warning—"Don't let him inside your mind"—as well as the real reason behind his choice of Clarice for the mission—the fact that her attractiveness and youth may lure him into co-operation—show a clear sliding of Clarice's role from detective, or subject of an investigation, to Gothic heroine, or male villain's object of desire. This sliding is sustained by the setting of their interviews: the subterranean cells of a mental hospital where Lecter is locked, with its stone walls, are closer to the Gothic underworld than to a 20th-century hospital. The image of Clarice going through a series of barred doors and finally downstairs to reach Lecter's dwelling is a powerful visualisation of the heroine's descent to the villain's underworld. As usual, this is the dwelling of madness, the irrational, or, as one of the inmates who flings his sperm at Clarice's face makes clear, of sexual repression; it is the objective correlative of the darker side of consciousness, including again her own, for she will start experiencing there a re-enacting of her childhood traumas. The sliding to the Gothic is confirmed when we notice how the roles shift: she becomes vulnerable to Lecter's power, in this case of speech and mind, he starts psychoanalysing her and, curiously enough, he will become the detective. In their first interview, Lecter, in Sherlock Holmes fashion, deduces her background and many details of her life from her appearance, and later on he will give her the clues that will lead to the solution of the case: Moriarty has become Holmes. Clarice thus transfers her detective role to the Gothic villain and becomes the besieged heroine in the hands of a villain who is king in his underworld of insanity.

This Gothic relationship develops till it reaches a stage of some kind of mutual attraction or understanding, especially on Lecter's part, since, at the end, he seems to be in love with Clarice (Gothic villains usually feel some kind of attraction to their victims), as is revealed by his drawings of her. Their relationship, in which repulsion and attraction coalesce, is typically Gothic. But this axis heroine-villain must be completed by that of heroine and hero if we are to have the Gothic triangle, and this is effected through Lecter's remark (carrying all the authority of an expert on the human mind and all the accuracy shown by his other remarks) about the mutual attraction between Crawford and Clarice despite his age. His age, subtly pointed out by Lecter, suggests his parental role (underlined by the fact that he was Clarice's professor), and it is a key element to understand her attraction to him and to make it more credible, since Clarice is still suffering from the trauma of the early death of her father, which left her orphaned. Her attraction to a parent figure perfectly fits into this psychological pattern, as Lecter undoubtedly understands. (Crawford's dual role as lover and father is highlighted by the final good-bye scene, in which he hesitates between his unconfessed attraction and his parental role, which is finally triumphant when he says "your father would have been proud of you".) The real Gothic triangle of the film (Lecter-Clarice-Crawford) is thus complete, although in this one she does not play the part of the active detective hero but of the passive Gothic heroine.

She seems to recover her role as detective—actually she never loses it, it is always there in an ambiguous tension with the other role—in her final descent to Buffalo Bill's underworld to arrest him and to free the last victim. This matches her initial one to Hannibal Lecter's cell, and, as happens with this latter, what starts as an investigation gradually slides towards the Gothic and results in that ambiguity which we saw in the very first scene of the film. The descent to the villain's territory always seems to put her condition as passive female in the foreground and her detective activity in the background, and this is cleverly shown in the film: being in full darkness, the killer can see Clarice by means of some kind of sophisticated optical artefact he is wearing, whereas she cannot see him, thus losing her subject position and becoming again an object. Her fear and vulnerability are now visualised in her intense agitation and convulsive shaking. In fact this ambiguity of her position as detective and victim, subject and object, has been hinted at by the frequent reminders of her female condition in an aggressive and sexist male world: in the FBI academy (Clarice squeezing into an elevator packed with muscular young-men is a very significant scene), in the scene with the country Marshall and his deputies, in the several proposals she receives for dates while being on duty. We see how her detective role is erased by men so as to focus on her gender. Clarice is the apex of two Gothic triangles (acting in one as Gothic heroine, in the other as detective hero, which explains her ambiguous position), but she is also the point in which different kinds of male aggression converge. Furthermore, she is a heroine trapped in a Gothic universe between two villains; but even in the police sphere to which hero (Crawford) and father belong and in which she should feel safe, she is also the victim of male desire, love, protection, turning her into an object. Her condition, in this sense, is similar to

the victims', these are simply a more dramatic embodiment of her plight, and perhaps of all women's plight. Being the detective or the victim does not seem to make a difference: gender levels all differences. In this way the film can be interpreted as a reflection through the Gothic conventions on the condition of women in a male-dominated world.

It is evident from the preceding arguments that in *The Silence of the Lambs* there is more than some isolated Gothic elements surviving in an alien generic territory: there is a full Gothic plot superimposed on a detective one, so the film is a real generic hybrid. The detective formula of criminal and detective linked by an investigation becomes a Gothic one by making the detective a Gothic heroine and by adding another criminal, Lecter, as well as another detective hero, Crawford, who will give shape with Clarice to the Gothic triangle. The investigation is thus turned into the heroine's descent to the villain's underworld to confront him, the evil and irrationality he represents, and also her own phobias and phantoms; it is also creates a very interesting parallelism between Gothic heroines and women in general as victims of male aggression in many different forms, and therefore a reflection on women's condition. This is a highly original use in a contemporary story of the old Gothic conventions that, as the success of the film demonstrated, are still effective. In fact it is the Gothic that gives depth and significance to what would be otherwise one more detective film. Can we think of a better proof of the vitality and strength of a genre?

References

- AMENÁBAR, Alejandro, (dir.) (1996) *Tesis*. Las Producciones del Escorpión.
 _____ (1997) *Abre los ojos*. Las Producciones del Escorpión.
 BIRKHEAD, Edith (1921) *The Tale of Terror: A Study of Gothic Romance*. London: Constable.
 BOTTING, Fred (1996) *Gothic*. London: Routledge.
 BRANAGH, Kenneth, (dir.) (1994) *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. American Zoetrope.
 BURTON, Tim, (dir.) (1989) *Batman*. Warner.
 _____ (dir.) (1990) *Edward Scissorhands*. 20th Century Fox.
 COPPOLA, Francis Ford, (dir.) (1992) *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Columbia Tri-star, American Zoetrope, et al.
 CORMAN, Roger, (dir.) (1990) *Frankenstein Unbound*. 20th Century Fox, Mount Company.
 DAY, William Patrick (1985) *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 DEMME, Jonathan, (dir.) (1990) *The Silence of the Lambs*. Orion.
 FOWLER, Alastair (1982) *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
 FRANKENHEIMER, John, (dir.) (1996) *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.
 FREARS, Stephen, (dir.) (1996) *Mary Reilly*. Tri-Star Pictures.
 FRYE, Northrop (1976) *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- JEUNET, Jean-Pierre, (dir.) (1997) *Alien. Resurrection*. Brandywine, 20th Century Fox.
 JEUNET, Jean-Pierre, & Marc CARO, (dirs.) (1991) *Delicatessen*. Constellation.
 _____ (dirs.) (1995) *La cité des enfants perdus*. Constellation.
 JORDAN, Neil, (dir.) (1994) *Interview with the Vampire*. Geffin Pictures.
 KOSMINSKY, Peter, (dir.) (1992) *Wuthering Heights*. Paramount.
 LYNCH, David, (dir.) (1984) *Dune*. De Laurentiis.
 _____ (dir.) (1986) *Blue Velvet*. De Laurentiis.
 MACANDREW, Elizabeth (1979) *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press.
 PARKER, Alan, (dir.) (1987) *Angel Heart*. Tri-Star.
 PROYAS, Alex, (dir.) (1994) *The Crow*. Miramax, Dimension Films.
 _____ (dir.) (1997) *Dark City*. New Line Cinema.
 PUNTER, David (1980) *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. London: Longman.
 SCOTT, Ridley, (dir.) (1979) *Alien*. TCF, Brandywine.
 _____ (dir.) (1982) *Blade Runner*. Warner.
 VARMA, Devendra P. (1957) *The Gothic Flame*. London: Arthur Baker.
 ZEFFIRELLI, Franco, (dir.) (1996) *Jane Eyre*. Rochester Films Ltd.