

BOOK REVIEWS: LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

B-Movie Gothic, ed. by Justin D. Edwards and Johan Höglund
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018)

Justin D. Edwards and Johan Höglund have compiled a collection investigating what might best be described as the hidden cinematic underside of horror and the Gothic, mapping the proliferation of a mostly underground network of b-movie industries that have cropped up worldwide in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The collection is composed of thirteen chapters and divided into three sections, each dedicated to regionally specific cinemas: Part I: the Americas, Part II: Europe, and Part III: Africa and Asia. The collection takes the reader through overlooked cinematic traditions, offering a glimpse into what is regarded as the ‘lowest form’ of cinema (horror is often considered as the most indecent, libidinal genre), while addressing the rather conspicuous lacuna in scholarship on regional horror. In this way, Edwards and Höglund zero in on ‘[t]he international and transnational territories of Gothic and horror [that] have been neglected by scholarship’, in order to stage an encounter with these overlooked traditions and academic studies on cinema (p. 6).

In the Introduction, the duo develops a robust theory of the Gothic, outlining its socio-political and cultural relevance, its proximity to the horror genre, as well as its geopolitical implications. The editors point out how the ‘[i]nternational dimension to Gothic and B-Movies’ developed largely due to the ‘hegemonic cultural forces’ of ‘Anglophone North Atlantic cultures’ (p. 1). This development indicates much more than a mere aesthetic absorption of the Gothic into international cinemas; it rather identifies the spread of European and American tropes via actual ‘economic and cultural forces’ (p. 1). Edwards and Höglund go on to point out how the ‘Gothic in film has become more multidimensional than the mode in literary texts’, as ‘movies can easily cross linguistic borders’, highlighting the special place of the cinema as a transnational and translinguistic apparatus (p. 2).

Whereas the Gothic’s ‘recognizable *mise-en-scène*’, with its ‘visual signifiers and narrative codes’, is so often ‘associated with the uncanny’, and thus largely in contrast to horror’s privileging of a ‘different affective response’ (p. 3) – physical violence, visceral disgust, gore, and so on – the editors are quick to note how the two often combine to take on a hybrid shape. This elucidating observation culminates in a(n almost Lacanian) definition of horror as ‘the real merg[ing] with the simulation’ (p. 4). This definition suggests that, while

horror often functions as a universal, affective cinematic mode, wherein the viewing body translates the image on the screen into a visceral, embodied response, the low-budget, b-movie Gothic offers what the authors call a '[v]ernacular cinema', which 'speaks to itself' (p. 7). This vernacular offers a more esoteric cinematic experience rooted in local traditions, and engaged in an ongoing conversation between its fans and producers, while allowing the exploration of 'alternative intellectual and affective spaces' (p. 7). This divide would seem to privilege the long-standing debate between semiotic and affective, or hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches to cinema; however, the collection cannot be said to find its footing on either side of this divide. Rather (and to the credit of the editors and authors), this volume explores hybrid forms of gothic and horror cinemas, therefore allowing both to find purchase, while ensuring that each is nurtured in tandem with one another.

Such insights are peppered throughout the Introduction, setting the scene for Edwards's own opening essay, 'Its, Blobs and Things: Gothic Beings Out of Time', on the American b-movie epidemic of the 1950s. Before we proceed, however, a note on the text is necessary: given the various theoretical, critical, and at times philosophical frames through which the collection discusses how the Gothic is regionally adopted and adapted through various economic, technical, aesthetic, and political means, the breadth and depth of this collection could never be captured adequately in this short review. Though this volume collects a host of excellent essays from a wide variety of regional, cultural, and critical perspectives, I will only be able to focus on several of the highlights, and thus I have chosen to examine at length only of one from each section. The essays I will not be able to explicate in greater detail are certainly no less worth reading.

Edwards approaches the Gothic as revealing a materiality that is directly at odds with human corporealisation and temporality at the very 'limits of alterity' (p. 19). From his perspective, the American b-movie Gothic features 'a Thing that confounds ontological and phenomenological conceptions of being or sentience' (p. 18); it has life, though a life not born from the temporal and spatial frame of anthropic *vérité*. For instance, in the iconic film *The Blob* (1958), Edwards contends, 'we see the stirrings of an embryonic life form merge from the expanse of an infinite void' (p. 26), 'reanimated from the depths of an abyssal time', its 'unstructured body [revealing] a temporal plane [...] that is at odds with our understanding of both Earth and the body' (p. 27). Edwards isolates the Thing as a 'primal terror' where '*the revenant of the unhuman is housed in a nameless body*' (p. 30, emphasis added). At the end of the first section, Daniel Serravalle de Sá's 'Gothic Forests and Mangroves: Environmental

Disasters in *Zombio* and *Mangue Negro*’ also discusses a similar theme; whereas Edwards describes a completely alien materiality and temporality, Sá unpacks two Brazilian b-movies, emphasising the ecological narratives out of which a particular kind of alterity emerges, evoking the popular Object-Oriented view of ecology espoused by Timothy Morton to do so.¹

In Part II, which focuses on the European b-movie tradition, John Edgar Browning examines the economics underlying the history of the Hammer-Studio phenomenon that came out of the UK in the 1950s, while Michael Fuchs offers a view of environmental and class critique via the Austrian film *Das Ding Aus Der Mur* (2012). But by far the most intriguing chapter belongs to Tuğçe Bıçakçı Syed, who offers an in-depth account of the Turkish gothic film industry, and particularly the film *Ölüler Konuşmaz Ki* (*The Dead Don't Talk*, dir. by Yavus Yalinkiliç, 1970). In this chapter, the reader is offered a valuable and rare glimpse into the history of the early-Ottoman, pre-Turkish-Republic cinema industry, which was funded, according to Syed, by the military. After the founding of the Republic in 1919, a b-movie industry eventually emerged in the 1950s. For Syed, the Turkish Gothic produced hybrid forms of the undead based on ‘similarities between vampires, zombies and *hortlaks*’ (p. 149),² representing a unique blend of European, American, and local folklores and religious influences, while ‘still convey[ing] a comprehensible narrative using B-Movie Gothic aesthetics’ (p. 147).

Part III focuses on both African and Asian iterations of b-movie Gothic, although only ‘*Filamu Ya Kutisha: Tanzanian Horror Films and B-Movie Gothic*’ by Claudia Böhme represents the former. One of the high points of Part III is Katarzyna Ancuta’s ‘Hong Kong Gothic: Category III Films as Gothic Cinema’. This chapter examines the aesthetic, cultural, and political ramifications of the 1997 Hong-Kong Handover on the region’s b-movie Gothic.³ Ancuta’s contribution is the most politically salient of the entire collection, offering

¹ Timothy Morton is known for his scholarship on ecology and ontology, aligning with the burgeoning school of speculative realism. One of Morton’s more notable contributions is his concept of ‘hyperobjects’, which are non-local, n-dimensional entities such as global warming, radioactive materials, seismic activity, and so on, and which transcend our conventional anthropocentric notions of space and time. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

² Guy de Maupassant’s short gothic tale ‘Le Horla’ (1887) about a strange ghostly presence demonstrates the etymological link to the myth of the *Hortlak*. We find as well a strange mythological parallel in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930): Ma is inadvertently and somewhat comedically stilettoed through her head while being fitted for her coffin – as Syed points out, this is a well-known feature of the *Hortlak* myth, which is said to ensure that the dead remain dead. If anything, these parallels simply bolster the editors’ claim to the universal import of the Gothic through its particular regional and cultural manifestations.

³ The 1997 Handover was the formal transfer of Hong-Kong sovereignty from British colonial administration back to the Chinese authorities. Hong Kong maintains a unique status as a site of separate administrative power

both an in-depth survey of the extreme gore of Category-III films, and a robust history of the ‘Gothic borderland’ between Communist China and capitalism. For Ancuta, Category-III films serve a ‘dual purpose [...] depict[ing] the exploitative nature of capitalist society characterized by “rabid consumption” [...] but also feed[ing] the racial tensions, a constant reminder that Hong Kong is about to be consumed by its primitive and cannibalistic Communist mother’ (p. 197).

This collection juxtaposes discrete regional and cultural iterations of b-movie gothic cinema, offering a useful – crucial perhaps – account of the horror and gothic tropes that we in the West come to rely upon and take for granted in cinema and scholarship alike. In sum, the mutability of gothic motifs through time and region proves in many ways not only to demonstrate the universality of the gothic aesthetic, but also perhaps to offer an inherent critique of the hegemony of Western literary and cultural forces. Depending on how the proliferation of the Gothic across the globe is interpreted, the genre demonstrates both the strength and weakness of its hegemony; in order to thrive, the Gothic *necessarily* must have spread like a virus to other cultures and regions, after which it was reanimated and kept alive synthetically through the b-movie industry – an industry which has long been understood as representing the most deep-seated and often taboo libidinal desires of the public.

Although Edwards and Höglund identify a common thread between culturally discrete iterations of the Gothic, the collection demonstrates how this common thread is in a sense inherently uncommon to itself to an almost Hegelian degree. Despite falling under the universal banner of ‘Gothic’, the b-movie form (and culturally specific manifestations thereof, which translate its precepts through economic, political, and social constraints) necessarily alters these precepts and colours the universal with indelible flecks of cultural, social, and regional residues. This collection thus hinges upon something of a formalist paradox; insofar as the Gothic has become universal, in the sense of composing a more-or-less-consolidated genre with specific aesthetic sensibilities, the genre still nonetheless necessarily must become particularised in and through its discrete cultural manifestations. *B-Movie Gothic* is undertaking more than just rearranging the contents of the gothic form, giving them a linguistic and/or visual twist (for instance, instead of a castle in the English countryside, a mangrove forest in Brazil) – rather, it actually comes to identify the formal shifts inscribed in the gothic genre itself. Without the viral proliferation of the Gothic across the globe through the particular medium of the b-movie, it could be argued that perhaps the

and economic practices, which differ from those practiced in mainland China. The recent 2019 protests over Hong Kong’s extradition bill make Ancuta’s chapter especially prescient.

genre itself would have dissolved long ago into relative obscurity. In this way, the book presents the radical albeit implicit thesis that the survival of the Gothic as such may well have been wholly dependent upon its various iterations in culturally specific contexts.

Certainly, a deeper dive into the African b-movie industry would be warranted, as in the present volume the continent is represented by one solitary chapter, Claudia Böhme's excellent contribution on the Tanzanian b-movie gothic genre *filamu ya kutisha* (frightening film). This shortcoming ought to, and very well could, be remedied in subsequent editions. Although there may not be much demand for critical exegesis – and this is the fault of scholarly neglect surely – this collection, both in its strengths and its inadequacies, invites others to pick up and develop where it has both left off and left out. For these reasons and others, it will be exciting to see how this volume is utilised in scholarship in the coming years.

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