

## The ghost is just a metaphor: Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak*, nineteenth-century female gothic, and the slasher

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A brief overview of American film and television since the 1990s affirms María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren's conclusion: 'It seems that ghosts are everywhere these days.' [1] With the release of *Crimson Peak* in 2015, Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro did not only add another horror movie to his oeuvre, [2] but as a horror-ghost film [3] *Crimson Peak* joins a long list of cinematic representations of ghosts. It also displays del Toro's unique style, his vision of movies as 'durchkonzipierte und bis ins letzte Detail kontrollierte Gesamtkunstwerke [conceptualised and detailed, total works of art]'. [4]

Set in Buffalo, New York, around 1900, the film introduces Edith Cushing, the young, white, upper-class daughter of industrial mogul Carter Cushing, who spends her time writing ghost stories and trying to get them published. [5] When English baronet Thomas Sharpe and his sister Lucille arrive in Buffalo to find investors for Thomas' clay mining invention, Edith falls in love with him. Her father is very suspicious of the siblings and after black-mailing them to leave Buffalo following the revelation that Thomas is already married, he is killed by an unknown figure in black who is later revealed as Lucille. Edith, in grief, turns to Thomas, marries and accompanies him to England, to his estate 'Allerdale Hall', also known as 'Crimson Peak'. There, she is slowly poisoned by the siblings and repeatedly sees ghosts haunting the estate. Being prone to ghost sightings since her mother died, Edith starts investigating the origins of the hauntings, only to find out that the Sharpes have

an incestuous relationship, and have poisoned women before in order to access their fortune after their deaths. In the movie's climax, during which the Sharpes die, Edith, with the help of her best friend Dr Alan McMichael, who travelled to England to help her, fights back and escapes the estate.

*Crimson Peak*, a tale of horror and romance, is a predictable yet surprising horror-ghost film. It does not join the style of contemporary ghost-movie film series such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007-), *Insidious* (2011-) and *The Conjuring* (2013-), but is rather reminiscent of horror romances such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) or Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). Its plot, method, and style seem predictable, because del Toro and co-screenwriter Matthew Robbins quote other horror traditions, mapping the development of the genre from early gothic fiction, sentimentalism, and romance, to classic horror films of the 1950s, to *giallo* and slasher films, as well as to postmodern, self-referential horror. *Crimson Peak* is exemplary of Rick Worland's understanding of the horror film as a cinematic genre that 'draws together and transforms mythic and literary traditions, forming a pool of images and themes that filmmakers reference, vary, or revise', [6] and that 'often tacitly or directly references its forebears and acknowledges its place in a larger tradition, if only to invert or undercut the assumptions and expectations of those earlier works'. [7]

As I will show, del Toro directly references the female gothic as one of the genre's forebears. Authors like Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, Madelene Yale Wynne, Rose Terry Cooke, and at the turn of the century Edith Wharton, despite not only being known as gothic writers per se, used the ghost as a powerful metaphor to call attention to women's marginalisation in American society. [8] Del Toro proceeds similarly; he utilises the ghost to acknowledge the contested position of women in horror; ghosts, after all, 'reflect the ethos and anxieties of the eras of their production'. [9] Next to constructing a visually impressive, scary horror-ghost film, del Toro voices anxiety with regard to the representation of women and femininity in horror. This anxiety is also shown in the film's elaborate allusions to the slasher, which contest the slasher's supposed exploitation of female characters. If del Toro's work is to be read as a 'Gesamtkunstwerk', *Crimson Peak* highlights the gothic and horror genre's often-debated feminist undertones.

## Ghosts and the female gothic

The beginning of the film references the gender-biased politics of the literary marketplace at the turn of the nineteenth century, as it focuses on Edith's attempts to become a writer of gothic, particularly of ghost stories. Her interest in ghost stories reflects women writers' dominance of that genre and its popularity at that time: '[w]omen's ghost stories spoke particularly to a female readership and drew their key concerns from women's culture, sometimes crossing with other genres.' [10] Until Edith falls in love and leaves for England, she is first and foremost represented as a writer who has difficulties fitting in because she is a woman. She is shown to be an outcast in both the sphere of urban, American fin-de-siècle femininity and the publishing world. Other women her age mock her as a spinster and Buffalo's 'very own Jane Austen', belittling her ambitions to be a writer instead of a wife. Their reactions to Edith are not only meant to arouse the audience's sympathy, they serve as a reminder of women writers' struggles (in the past and today), pulled between the seemingly incompatible expectations society has of women and, respectively, writers.

The scene in which Edith meets a newspaper editor demonstrates this incompatibility. Her appearance is deemed inappropriate, she has arrived too early, and traces of ink on her fingers and forehead demonstrate that she does not put much effort into her looks. Displeased that a woman would write a ghost story, the editor praises Edith's handwriting instead of the writing itself; he reduces her to aesthetics and disregards her talent for writing. He asks her to write a love story instead, assuming love is what she is familiar with. Yet Edith is familiar with ghosts, she therefore tries to outsmart potential editors by typing her story in her father's office. She attempts to erase her handwriting that 'exposes' her as a woman. In order to be published in this particular genre, she needs to become invisible as a woman, to erase her gender; she needs to become a ghostly figure if she wishes to succeed in the literary marketplace.

Edith tries to explain the value of her work by pointing out that 'the ghost is just a metaphor, for the past', and more than a supernatural tool meant to scare readers. Yet she simplifies the function of ghosts – they do not only symbolise the past, they are 'double-voiced or "bitextual" tools [that] explore and express anxieties and unacceptable desires in disguised form'. [11] Their haunting, Weinstock has shown, often refers to 'class conflicts, identified with the arbitrary power and dangers of corrupt nobility, hypocritical religious

authority, or rapacious plutocrats'.[12] In the nineteenth century, these conflicts found their outlet in gothic fiction, a method canonised writers like Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe used to address 'American pressures' such as 'the frontier experience, [...] the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy; the relative absence of developed "society"; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans'.[13]

While *Crimson Peak* does not address all these 'American pressures', it certainly reconstructs what Lloyd-Smith calls 'the fear of European subversion', or more specifically, the fear and general suspicion of obsolete anti-democratic ideologies, like aristocracy and feudalism. The foreign Other in *Crimson Peak* is, after all, the aristocratic European man who stands for an antiquated and supposedly exploitative economic and social system that is contrary to American democratic and industrial ideals. Carter Cushing, on the other hand, needs to be read as the embodiment of American optimism and pragmatism. The ghosts represent the antagonism between aristocracy and democracy, as well as the 'dangers of corrupt [or rather perverted] nobility' that threatens the American middle and upper classes. Yet del Toro does not solely focus on this antagonism; more importantly, as evidenced through the film's attention to Edith and the female ghosts, he addresses the pressures of gender norms, female anxieties, and desires.

According to del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, ghosts have 'representational and socio-cultural functions, meanings, and effects' that 'extend far beyond the rituals, traditions, ghost stories, folktales, and urban legends they populate'.[14] Since the so-called spectral turn in the 1990s – inspired by Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993) – the specter or ghost has been understood as 'an analytical tool'[15] whose liminality, the fact that it is positioned 'between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality',[16] is helpful for analyses of time, space, history, media, technology, and identity. Spectrality, and the unruliness and ambiguity it implies, introduces novel ways of approaching supposedly static and imperturbable concepts.[17] As Weinstock argues in *Spectral America* (2004), '[b]ecause ghosts are unstable interstitial figures that problematize dichotomous thinking',[18] they are an ideal metaphor in poststructuralist thought. They serve to interrupt 'the presentness of the present' by being from the past; their instrumentalisation thus suggests that 'there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of

events'.[19] The usage of ghosts as a method that destabilises grand narratives is not a result of the spectral turn though. Feminist scholarship on the gothic that emerged between the 1970s and 1990s as an effect of second-wave feminism stressed the close relationship between ghosts/ghostliness and the dichotomy of gender in American society.[20]

In *Crimson Peak* the ghosts reveal an untold story of female suffering. The movie begins as it ends, the narrative coming full circle with a close-up of Edith's face in a snowy, desolate, and cold landscape.[21] Pale, injured, and smeared with blood, she stares into the camera and in a voiceover admits, 'Ghosts are real, this much I know.' This voice carries an eerie ambivalence; it either suggests that the woman seen on screen has survived, or that she has died and what is heard is a ghostly voice from the afterlife. This uncertainty remains until the last moments of the film when it is revealed that Edith has survived the attacks on her life, and *Crimson Peak* retrospectively becomes a survivor's tale. After this sinister opening, Edith's belief in ghosts is explained by means of flashbacks to her childhood, to the death of her mother and the visit of her mother's ghost. This haunting changes Edith's present and future by warning her of 'Crimson Peak' 'when the time comes', thus destabilising time, life, and death.

While the spectral turn ignited a 'a new departure or a revisiting'[22] of ghosts and ghostliness, in the nineteenth century the interest and belief in ghosts was wide-spread and stimulated by the emerging spiritualist movement that responded to the spiritual crisis American society was experiencing in times of growing trust in science and reason. For spiritualists, who for instance attempted to capture the ghostly presence in everyday life through so-called 'spirit photography',[23] the natural and supernatural existed in a continuum. The uneasiness created by ghosts, namely the transgression of life and death and thus the collapse of clear-cut boundaries, was not regarded as horrific, but rather as a consolation for the loss experienced by death.[24] Ghost stories of that period narrate the consoling reunion with loved ones who are deceased, and the spiritual guidance ghosts can offer: '[a]lthough the encounter with the ghost can be uncomfortable, if not terrifying, the terror of death itself is diminished because separation from loved ones is shown to be only temporary.'[25]

Women writers did not only use the ghost as a consolation, but also as a metaphor for social dilemmas; the ghost's liminal existence mirrored the position of women in patriarchal, industrial America, and clearly had 'representational and socio-cultural functions, meanings, and effects' – to return to del

Pilar Blanco and Peeren. As a 'bitextual' tool, the ghost creates uneasiness and fright, *and* addresses uncomfortable social issues: '[T]he ghost, and its ambiguous return, [...] have far-reaching social consequences. History is reintroduced into the arena of the present, but in such a way that it threatens the fixity of existing social structures',[26] for instance of patriarchy. In the time *Crimson Peak* revisits, ghosts were employed by women writers to address the cult of domesticity, and the myth that the domestic sphere would protect a woman's purity and piety. This cult ultimately masked the oppression and abuse women experienced at home. The house haunted by women thus became 'an embodiment of female tradition'.[27]

It certainly has also become an embodiment of the gothic tradition and of horror films that often 'are really films about the space they haunt'.[28] Hauntings 'can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, spectres, or monsters (mixing features from different realms of being, often life and death) that rise from within the antiquated space [...] to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view'.[29] At *Crimson Peak* – a large, cold, secluded English mansion with a decaying, open ceiling, large corridors, an attic, subterranean and dangerous sealed-off rooms – nothing can be buried anymore. The house is literally devoured by the red clay it is built on. Resembling blood, it infiltrates the interior through the floorboards and walls, predicting the estate and its inhabitants' doom. Del Toro leaves no doubt that this domestic space is one of horror.

As domestic phenomena, ghosts of women that are trapped at home and in ethereal bodies mirror women's invisibility and powerlessness. They act as women's supernatural doubles, reminders of 'women victimized by violence in their own homes, of women dispossessed of homes and property, of the necessity of understanding female history, and of the bonds between women, living and dead, which help to ensure women's survival'.[30] The ghosts in *Crimson Peak* ensure Edith's survival. They are allies who help her face and escape a deathly fate caused by marriage and the entry into a domestic life. The first ghost Edith encounters is quite tellingly that of her mother. Despite the fear the ghost evokes through its representation as a smoky, skeletal figure with large, black fingers that grab young Edith, the warning is motivated by motherly love and care – the ghost eventually tries to comfort Edith as it gets into her bed to embrace her. The nature of the message and the method with which it is delivered are paradoxical yet typical of gothic narratives. The ghost 'functions as an agent of justice that violates

“natural” laws in order to ensure that crimes do not go undressed’.[31] Enola Sharpe’s ghost, the ghost of Thomas’ last wife, is such an agent. It seeks revenge, but also attempts to persuade Edith she is in danger. Ultimately, the bonds that the ghost creates with Edith are a means of protection, the passing on of otherworldly female knowledge about the dangers of patriarchal authority. Generally, the ghosts in *Crimson Peak* are ‘agents for the reconstruction of historical memory’;[32] they reach into the present to warn of the dangers domesticity held for them. Edith is terrorised by their gruesome, skeletal appearance and the unhuman noises they make, yet as soon as she starts listening to them, she realises that the real horror is actually posed by her new family and home. What is suggested here is that the real world and its social order are more threatening to a woman’s mind and body than the supernatural.[33]

Del Toro thus tells a distinctively female gothic story; ‘his’ ghosts function as cautionary figures who help and empower the heroine. This alludes to the female and oftentimes feminist extrapolation of this male-dominated genre. The term ‘female gothic’, as a product of the revision of women’s literary heritage in the 1970s, describes the ways in which women writers have taken advantage of the popularity of the gothic genre to circulate ideas of female emancipation.[34] Popular motifs of the genre include enclosed, predominantly domestic spaces, a quest for emancipation, negotiations of female sexuality as desirable and/or repulsive, the pathologisation of women’s emotions, and their concurrent treatment by male doctors or male guardians.[35] As Weinstock argues, the gothic method of storytelling was attractive for women writers in the nineteenth century because “‘under the veil” of fiction’, these writers could address social issues in a ‘less didactic and, therefore, more palatable’ way ‘which in turn translated into greater marketability’.[36] When the veil is lifted though, this ‘palatable’ fiction turns into a ‘site that stages the repressive construction of normative gender roles’.[37] Weinstock stresses the potential subversive potential of this genre, yet feminist critics have long debated whether these narratives are conservative, subversive, or both.[38] Diane Long Hoeveler proposes that the female gothic has contributed to what she calls ‘victim feminism’ – the representation of women as passive victims of patriarchy who are staged as weak, are exploited and need to be saved before they are reinserted into domestic life.[39]

*Crimson Peak* oscillates between a conservative and subversive representation of its female protagonists. Edith, at first a self-confident writer, seeks emancipation from ‘normative gender roles’ until she loses her father and

becomes a victim of these. She feels helpless, being denied the agency to pursue a career in writing. She is then staged as a fragile woman who seeks Thomas' protection and companionship, instead of staying in Buffalo and living self-sufficiently with her inheritance. In consequence, she finds herself trapped in a dangerous marriage and a domestic space that disables her mind and body, and almost turns her into a ghost. Her complexion turns pale, she is shown wearing long, white nightgowns, and in the end she is even bound to a wheelchair, which increases her dependence on Thomas and Lucille. Yet Edith does not remain a victim, but becomes an 'avenging hero',<sup>[40]</sup> an effect of del Toro's play with the tradition of the slasher film that infuses this female gothic story. Interestingly, both genres have been a subject of debate when it comes to their feminist or misogynist politics.

## Turning to the slasher

*Crimson Peak* borrows from the American gothic and its subgenre, the female gothic, to narrate a tale of ghost-horror that is motivated by an interplay of capitalistic greed, female anxiety, and deviant emotional and sexual longings. Del Toro's iconography of the gothic, created by the uncanny setting, the visual fixation of the ghost as a diaphanous, red or black skeleton that is repeatedly shown in full shots, occasionally turns into body horror that is common for slasher films, a genre that thrives on its visibility and materiality, and seldom features supernatural elements. These concrete genre allusions destabilise genre hierarchies by bringing together the 'high' and 'bottom':

[o]n the high side of horror lie the classics: [...] films that by virtue of age, literary ancestry, or fame of director have achieved reputability within the context of disreputability. [...] At the very bottom, down in the cinematic underbrush, lies – horror of horrors – the slasher (or splatter or shocker) film: the immensely generative story of a psycho-killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is himself subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived. <sup>[41]</sup>

The film adheres to the 'generative story' and features the classic slasher elements: a killer, a 'terrible place', specific weapons, a variety of victims, a shocked audience, and the Final Girl.<sup>[42]</sup> The references start with the deadly attack on Edith's father in the bathhouse. Unexpectedly appearing out of nowhere, through the bathhouse's steam, the murderer's identity is concealed as the audience only sees the torso and black leather gloves. The father's head is repeatedly smashed on the sink, and later, in the morgue, a close-up shot



shows his head in its full horrific mutilation. In yet another intertextual moment, the killing of the father is reminiscent of killing scenes typical for the Italian *giallo* genre of the 1960s and 1970s, especially for Dario Argento's female killers who are often mistaken for men, because only their gloved hands are visible during the murder scenes.[43]

Rather surprisingly, Lucille turns out to be the killer and the mastermind of the siblings' murderous deception; she is the one who chooses Thomas' female victims and poisons them. The evil counterpart to Edith's weakness and innocence, Lucille is a murderess with deviant sexual desires she is not ashamed of. Hers is a destructive, perverted femininity that is contained through her death. Killing seems to be a legacy for her; during the movie's climax Edith finds out that she also killed her and Thomas' abusive and distant mother. The horror of the murders and the siblings' incestuous relationship becomes even more shocking as it is revealed that Lucille and Thomas had a child together – a child Lucille killed because it was born with disabilities. Edith uncovers both secrets with the help of the ghost of Enola Sharpe, and audio recordings on which Enola documented her slow poisoning. She then understands that her love for Thomas will cause her death and that she needs to save herself.

The film thus destabilises victimhood, going beyond Hoeveler's 'victim feminism'. The 'psycho-killer' is a woman, a version of Carol Clover's 'angry woman'[44] whose anger, like that of male 'psycho-killers', derives from childhood experiences with a cruel mother, and from the fear of being abandoned by her brother and lover. During an argument with Thomas during which he confesses his sincere love for Edith, Lucille realises that their incestuous and murderous relationship will have to cease. Unable to deal with the consequences, she stabs his body and face – a scene that is shown in its full explicitness, including Thomas' attempt to extract the knife from his face. This is the second spectacularly graphic display of a wounded body in the film. Lucille is the human monster of this narrative, an 'unacknowledged, wretched creature [...], object [...] of exclusion and thence figure [...] of fear and threat'.[45] Yet, because monsters 'come to manifest the effects of systems of domination and dehumanization that create them',[46] Lucille is also a victim, because she is the product of the social restrictions on womanhood and female sexuality. The real horror, del Toro suggests, are not the ghosts but patriarchy, because it traumatises women and turns them into ghosts and monsters. This mirrors the female gothic's 'critique of the oppressiveness of patriarchal constraints', yet in contrast to this, the genre conventions of the

slasher do not allow for the creation 'of a reordered, more egalitarian cultural distribution of power',[47] as the writers of female gothic had imagined. Del Toro plays Lucille off against Edith; although both women struggle with the femininity they are expected to perform, they fight one another in a final showdown of good versus evil. The film then re-stabilises the categories of 'good' and 'evil' the ghosts initially transgressed in order to enable the victory of Edith, the Final Girl.

As the Final Girl, Edith combines 'the functions of suffering victim and avenging hero'.[48] She kills Lucille and promises Alan, her friend who originally came to save *her*: 'I'm going to get us out of here.'[49] What follows after Lucille's murder of Thomas is a knife fight between the two women, which is typical of the slasher, whose preferred weapons are 'pretechnological'.[50] In reaction to Edith grabbing a kitchen knife to fight, Lucille takes out a larger butcher's knife. The image of a woman holding a disproportionately large knife is staged as grotesque. With these obvious phallic symbols, both women 'man up' for the fight, as Clover would put it.[51] Lucille pursues Edith and both women fight outside in a snowstorm that is aesthetically the perfect setting to emphasise the bloodiness of the fight. Lucille warns Edith twice: 'I won't stop 'til you kill me or I kill you!' Protectively, Thomas' ghost appears and distracts Lucille. Edith takes her chance and reaches for an unlikely weapon, a shovel, and finally kills Lucille by smashing her head. In the fashion of powerful one-liners known from both slasher and action movies, the heroine responds, 'I heard you the first time', a self-assured, sarcastic statement that suggests superiority and full emancipation.

Whether the Final Girl is a symbol for female emancipation has been discussed since Clover's publication of 'Her Body, Himself', the article that inspired her monograph of 1992.[52] While she acknowledges that the slasher is 'a genre with at least a strong female presence',[53] she clarifies that thinking of the 'Final Girl as a feminist development [...] is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking'.[54] This 'figurative meaning' refers to Clover's argument that

[t]he Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine. [55]

This gender transgression supposedly disqualifies the Final Girl from being an emancipatory figure within the rather misogynist slasher genre. And indeed, while Edith is visually not boyish, the loss of a female role model, her

mother, is used as a rather simplified explanation for her 'unusual', unfeminine character. Growing up as the only child of a dominant but seemingly loving father has enabled her to develop a rebellious and resilient character. She is, like most Final Girls, 'intelligent and resourceful'.<sup>[56]</sup> Next to her supposedly unfeminine aspirations of becoming a writer, she shows no interest in frequenting with other women her age; the only moments of intimacy that are shown are between her and other men (her father, Alan, and Thomas). She might choose to not participate in established rituals of femininity, yet this does not masculinise her. As Christian Knöppler argues with reference to Isabel Cristina Pinedo's criticism of *Clover*, 'if a female character has to be read as male when she is aggressive, there can be no female agency'.<sup>[57]</sup>

Edith and Lucille's aggression displays female agency, because it is ultimately tied to patriarchy and the ways in which it smothers attempts of female emancipation (both professionally and sexually). The slasher here 'functions as a fantasy of female rage and an opening for feminist discourse because women are not only victims, but allowed to retaliate'.<sup>[58]</sup> Edith survives by listening to the ghosts of women who seek revenge. In the end, she saves herself and Alan, who in another kind of film would be the hero in the scenario. The final shot del Toro leaves his audience with is the classic image of 'survivors fleeing a collapsing, burning, exploding or sinking gothic structure', in this case a decaying former grandiose property.<sup>[59]</sup> Yet instead of seeing a man (the hero) carrying a woman (the victim) away from danger, in del Toro's interpretation Alan needs Edith's help to escape. The friends' reunification can be read as a hint that she might accept Alan as her partner, yet this is mere speculation, as nothing has pointed towards her having romantic feelings for him. What is not speculation is that Edith eventually became a published writer. Returning to the beginning of the movie, the audience now understands that she is the one who wrote the gothic novel *Crimson Peak*. She thus does not find closure in another romantic relationship, or as a wife, but as a writer.

## Conclusion: The ghostliness of horror

*Crimson Peak* needs to be read as an homage to ghost stories published by American women writers in the late nineteenth century (cf. Alcott, Beecher Stowe, Cooke), an homage to the female tradition of gothic writing. Although the horror-ghost film, in general, 'tends to gravitate toward the quieter, less

exuberant, and less emphatically self-referential side of the horror film genre',[60] del Toro's interpretation is remarkably self-referential. It is clearly embedded into the tradition of (female) gothic fiction, for instance through the opening credits that visually start out as a book named *Crimson Peak*, through references to the gendered nineteenth-century American literary market, and the feminist appropriation of ghosts which are cautionary, helpful figures instead of mere monsters.

Del Toro's film also crosses generic lines and unites the 'classics', namely the classic horror-romance and the gothic, with the 'cinematic underbrush',[61] the slasher, which is known for its exuberance. The scenes of persecution, the explicit presentation of wounded and dying bodies, as well as the spectacular display of bloody attacks are pronounced references to this genre,[62] which has been defined as highly repetitive and formulaic, and is therefore quite comparable to gothic narratives that also rely on a specific formula. The intersection with the slasher suggests this film's 'overwhelming historical self-consciousness, signalled by many direct quotations and allusions to earlier, well-known texts'[63] that is characteristic of postmodern methods of narration. Following Isabel Cristina Pinedo's definition, 'the post-modern paradigm blurs the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle is at best ambiguous'.[64] The film's intertextuality (a central feature of postmodernism) and the ways in which del Toro reviews the genre's history make *Crimson Peak* an intriguing text.[65] The slasher sequences, in addition to the usage of ghosts as metaphors for the oppressive regimes of patriarchy and aristocracy, support the film's feminist and democratic undertones, ultimately narrating the emancipation of an American woman from patriarchy and English tyranny. Yet *Crimson Peak* is not wholly a postmodern horror film, but much more elusive. In the end, all conflicts are undeniably resolved as del Toro restores order through the death of the Sharpes and Edith's survival.

Being more than a film about emancipated ghosts and Final Girls, *Crimson Peak* acknowledges what del Pilar Blanco and Peeren haven called 'the ghostliness of new media'.[66] Del Toro suggests that there is a haunting presence of the past in today's horror. Similar to Murray Leeder's argument that 'cinema's supernatural qualities' are a result of the 'innumerable technologies and practices that anticipated it',[67] the horror film today is a result of the technologies and traditions that anticipated it. It is no coincidence that the plot is set at the turn of the nineteenth century, when film technology was invented: '[w]ith its ability to record and replay reality and its representation

of images that resemble the world but as intangible half-presences, cinema has been described as a haunted or ghostly medium from early on.[68] Del Toro stresses the ghostliness of 'new' media in the nineteenth century by referring to spirit photography and sound recordings that capture and recreate the past in the present, through images and sounds. Herewith he cites more contemporary movies such as Oren Peli's *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2002) in which 'ghosts inhabit contemporary technology'.[69] As del Pilar Blanco and Peeren have argued with regard to these films, 'the increasing ghostliness of new media influences the representation of ghosts in media'.[70] In *Crimson Peak*, the ghostliness of old media demonstrates the continuity of media history and the horror genre. Del Toro's numerous genre citations show that filmic and literary manifestations of the gothic and horror infuse one another, thus they cannot be and should not be hierarchised.

## Author

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## Notes

- [1] Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2010, p. ix.
- [2] Cf. *Cronos* (1993), *Mimic* (1997), *El Espinazo del Diablo* (2001), *Blade II* (2002), and *Laberinto del Fauno* (2006).
- [3] I differentiate the horror-ghost movie from other ghost movies that are comedic (cf. *The Ghostbusters* I-III, *Dark Shadows*, Disney's *The Haunted Mansion*, *Heart and Souls*), or romantic (*Practical Magic*, *City of Angels*, *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, *Just Like Heaven*).
- [4] Urschel 2011, p. 302.
- [5] The protagonist's last name alludes to British actor Peter Cushing, an icon of the 1950s Hammer Films, who is especially known for his portrayal of characters such as Victor Frankenstein and Doctor Van Helsing.
- [6] Worland 2007, p. 2.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- [8] Cf. Jeffrey Weinstock, *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women* (2008). Alfred Bendixen has published a comprehensive collection of women writers' supernatural stories in *Haunted Women* (1985).
- [9] Weinstock 2004, p. 6.
- [10] Carpenter & Kolmar 1991, p. 8.
- [11] Weinstock 2008, p. 8.
- [12] Worland 2007, p. 28.
- [13] Lloyd-Smith 2004, p. 4.
- [14] Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2013, p. 1.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- [17] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 9.
- [18] Weinstock 2004, p. 16.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- [20] Cf. Carpenter & Kolmar, Fleenor, Hoeveler, Moers.
- [21] This double framing of the film is reminiscent of del Toro's *El Laberinto del Fauno* (2006).
- [22] Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2013, p. 31.
- [23] *Crimson Peak* directly refers to this nineteenth-century practice when Dr Alan McMichael shows Edith ghost photographs, thus admitting to the belief in ghosts and the fascination with this way of approaching reality. For more on spirit photography, see Clément Chéroux et al.'s *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 2005). For more on American spiritualism and its role for women's rights, see Anne Braude's seminal work *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- [24] Cf. Weinstock 2008.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 8. For examples of the consolation ghost sightings can offer, see for instance Rose Terry Cooke's 'My Visitation' (1858) and Sarah Orne Jewett's short story 'The Foreigner' (1900). In both

stories, the female protagonists have lost a loved one, a loss that causes distress in the present, until the ghosts offer them guidance, forgiveness and solace.

- [26] Huggan 2000, p. 354.
- [27] Carpenter & Kolmar 1991, p. 16.
- [28] Hantke 2015, p. 184.
- [29] Hogle 2002, p. 2. *Crimson Peak* offers many allusions to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), for instance the intimate and destructive relationship between the Usher siblings that is mirrored in the Sharpes, the importance of the decaying ancestral home, and the demise of a family dynasty.
- [30] Ibid., p. 10.
- [31] Weinstock 2008, p. 17.
- [32] Huggan 2000, p. 354.
- [33] This is a common moral or warning in women's ghost stories. See for instance Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'The Ghost in the Cap'n Brown House' (1870), and Louisa May Alcott's 'A Whisper in the Dark' (1863).
- [34] Cf. Moers 1976, pp. 90-98.
- [35] Fleenor 1983.
- [36] Weinstock 2008, p. 19.
- [37] Noble 1998, p. 165.
- [38] Cf. Veeder 1998, pp. 20-39.
- [39] Cf. Hoeveler 1998.
- [40] Clover 1992, p. 17.
- [41] Ibid. 1987, p. 187.
- [42] Ibid. 1992, p. 26-42.
- [43] The Italian *gialli* were also the inspiration for the early American slasher films like Bob Clark's *Black Christmas* (1974) and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). The title *Crimson Peak* might be understood as a reference to Argento's work, specifically to his use of colour, for instance in his film *Profondo Rosso* (*Deep Red*) from 1975. Both films, in addition, feature buildings crumbling and the revelation of a dark past. [I would like to thank my colleague Mark Schmitt for pointing out this parallel to Argento's films.]
- [44] Clover 1992, p. 17.
- [45] Botting & Spooner 2015, p. 2.
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] Weinstock 2008, p. 11.
- [48] Clover 1992, p. 17.
- [49] Del Toro 2015.
- [50] Clover 1992, p. 31.
- [51] Ibid., p. 49.
- [52] Cf. Christensen, Williams, Pineda.
- [53] Clover 1992, p. 53.



- [54] Ibid.
- [55] Ibid., p. 40.
- [56] Ibid., p. 39.
- [57] Knöppler 2017, p. 225.
- [58] Ibid.
- [59] Worland 2007, p. 29.
- [60] Hantke 2015, p. 179.
- [61] Clover 1987, p. 187.
- [62] Cf. Shelton 2008.
- [63] Worland 2007, p. 109.
- [64] Pinedo 2004, p. 94.
- [65] Cf. Hutcheon 1988, pp. 124-140.
- [66] Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2010, p. x.
- [67] Leeder 2017, p. 10.
- [68] Ibid. 2015, p. 3.
- [69] Hantke 2015, p. 196.
- [70] Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2010, p. x (emphasis original).