

THE GOTHIC ANTI-HOME AS A PLACE OF MEMORY AND MOURNING

I have chosen to discuss the image of the house with regard to that which is traditionally known as 'Gothic film'. This includes films from the 1920s, 1930s and the female gothic cycle of films from the 1940s.

The house is one of the most recurrent and defining settings in the Gothic imagination. Throughout the years, however, its image has shifted between two opposites: it has been hailed as a place of happiness, safety and bliss just as frequently as it has been deemed a prison and, in this respect, a place of danger and fear, an anti-home. The anti-home has likewise acquired a whole variety of forms, from an imposing and remote castle, such as the one in *Vampyr*, to a small town family home, like the one in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*. Regardless of the shape it is given, it is most often represented as an isolated edifice with a seemingly ever-growing maze-like interior of rooms, where endless windows, doors, spiralling staircases, corridors, locked gates, two-way mirrors, sliding panels, trapdoors, and secret chambers force the characters to experience space in a certain way.

Gothic narratives are generally characterised by a decisive change in location that takes place at the beginning of the stories. The hero or heroine customarily starts the film in the peaceful and sheltered comfort of a provincial family home, presented as an ideal of domesticity from where he or she moves into a new, unknown and dangerous place. Moving from one's home is never a purely geographical dislocation, but is always accompanied by an emotional journey. Take the example from the short conversation at the beginning of *The Queen of Spades* (1949).

'I was so happy once... home'.

'And you will again'.

'Will I? Sometimes I feel I'll never leave this house'.

This dialogue clearly presents the two antithetical types of habitation that co-exist in the narratives -- the home and the house. In this particular conversation, Lizavieta directly associates the loss of her

home with the loss of happiness. The familial cosiness of the home is thus opposed to the claustrophobic anguish the character experiences in the anti-home.

More than a mere lexical idiosyncrasy, the representation of these edifices varies markedly, in form as well as content. The home is traditionally built to human scale and characterised by mostly horizontal lines that give shape to small, sunlit, everyday-looking rooms. On the other hand, there is a privileging of vertical lines, spiralling spaces and high-ceiling chambers in the anti-home.

Whatever form it takes, the house's spaces seem to respond to human presence and to engage the dwelling self in a complex sensorial game. As the action unfolds, the house accentuates the paradoxical nature of its spaces; spaces can be simultaneously welcoming and repulsive, open and claustrophobic, symbols of both home and exile. For instance, whilst its numerous rooms would seemingly allow one to effortlessly move between them, and to appear, enter, hide, or escape at will, the fact is that most objects and places, rather than facilitate transition from the inside to the outside or from room to room, actually end up creating a profusion of barriers to the characters' dislocations, guaranteeing their entrapment. Windows and doors do not always open or close, and when they do, they might open or close to different times and spaces. In a way, then, the anti-home seems to have been built to forever thwart and delay the characters' escape. We could also argue that the buildings' structure therefore actively promotes the self's estrangement from society.

The dis/continuity of the places within the house and the dynamic each of them establishes between the organicity of its interstices and the human body points to the fact that being in Gothic anti-homes is always a geographically and psychologically disjointed experience. The connection of dweller-dwelling space is so intricate that the house can actually be understood as a record of an individual's life. It is not merely a question of the house reflecting the self's *feelings*, that is, of our understanding, for instance, the fall of the House of Usher in Poe's tale (1839) and in Epstein's 1928 film as symbolising the fall of the Usher family tree. My saying that houses can be read as records of a life relates to the argument that memory, the memory of an Other (an Other who, in Gothic narratives, is

most likely dead) is scattered around the house. It relates to the hypothesis that the presence of the self has been embedded into the architectural over a period of time. In this sense, we can argue that memory is physically detectable in the house, and that the house's objects and architecture materially incorporate memory, acting as an extension of the body of the self.

Looked at in this way, memory pertains not solely to the mind but to place as well -- it is displayed and choreographed spatially by the very structure of the anti-home. So much so, that the objects that had once belonged to its inhabitants seem to have since been inherited by the architectural. One of the implications of this pervasiveness of memory is that the anti-home makes the process of forgetting someone or something almost impossible. The cathartic process of mourning is consequently not finalised inside the house. Gothic narratives are built precisely on this complementary union of self, dwelling space and memory.

Other potentially interesting topics to explore are the relationship between the inside and the outside of the house, and the fact that, despite the profusion of windows and doors, the outside world seems almost completely out of reach: deceptively close and tangible, it nonetheless belongs to a different realm where a different spatial structuring applies. Also, matters relating to identity (how is identity affected in and by the house?) and forbidden topographies. Each narrative has one or more spaces that the self cannot transgress. The characters are depicted as trespassers, intruders, and each crossing of doors feels like some invisible, dangerous boundary were about to be crossed.

One last remark is a quote from Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947). At a given point, one of the characters says: 'The way a place is built determines what happens in it', thus attributing to architectural design the role of sole agent responsible for shaping the characters' feelings and actions.