Gothic London:
Recreating the Ancient City on Screen

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What do we understand by 'Gothic' today? Many things, depending on the kind of inquiry or interest we are pursuing. Gothic in architecture, in literature – even in popular music and fashion, has come to cover a range of styles that have in common – I would suggest – some deviation from the norms of modernity; some sense of looking back, and of evoking the ancient, and often the eerie. This would apply to the field of Gothic studies in literature; and I'm going to borrow some perspectives from this in sketching a view of cinema that portrays a Gothic London. Or rather: different versions of Gothic London, which contrast with the everyday or modern city that I'll be looking at in next year's lectures.

So where does this alternative view of the city begin? Certainly long before cinema itself, in a literary tradition that stretches back to the dawn of Romanticism. But whereas much Gothic literature was set in lonely rural places, I would suggest that the 'urban Gothic' owes most to one writer: Charles Dickens. Not only in his great London novels, from *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* through to *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but also in his own nocturnal walks, Dickens constantly conjured disturbing visions of the city. And when filmmakers started to tell stories on screen, they naturally turned to Dickens. One of the earliest of all narrative films is Robert Paul's *Scrooge* (1901), based on *A Christmas Carol*, and subtitled 'Marley's Ghost'. Just as the *Christmas Carol* was already Dickens' most widely adapted story, on stage, and in earlier new media such as the Magic Lantern and stereographs, it would become a primal text for Gothic cinema.

By 1912, Dickens had become an important asset in the struggle against imported films with an historical setting, primarily the ancient world as lavishly portrayed in Italian epics. Cecil Hepworth's company produced three Dickens adaptations in rapid succession, all directed by Thomas Bentley, a former actor who had specialised in Dickens on stage. After *Oliver Twist* (1912), Bentley moved on to *David Copperfield* (1913) and finished this group with *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1914). All were popular, but the last, according to Low, 'received such praise as had hitherto been reserved for foreign epics'.[1] We can no longer judge from any surviving material, nor can we appreciate what was regarded as the first great design achievement in British cinema, Hepworth's *Barnaby Rudge* (1915). One account spoke of the settings for this unusual historical novel by Dickens, set during the Gordon riots of the 1780s, as impressively realistic, but including 'Behind the streets… a magnificent reconstruction of Newgate Prison – an immensely lofty structure, grey, drab, and forbidding, with a sinister gallows before its outer wall'.

Newgate prison, in fact, had replaced Tyburn as London's place of public execution, and so become a key point of reference in Gothic tales of crime. But before we pursue the long history of Dickens adaptation, I should introduce the other key source for Gothic London cinema. This is not fictional, although it would soon be fictionalised, but was a series of gruesome killings in East London that became known as the 'Whitechapel murders', and their perpetrator as 'Jack the Ripper'. By a curious coincidence, Robert Louis Stevenson had published one of his most successful works on a similar theme just two years earlier. In the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a respectable doctor has a sinister alter ego, who injures and kills on his nocturnal rampages. Not

only was Stevenson's novella an instant publishing success on both sides of the Atlantic, but was immediately adapted for the popular stage - and first filmed as early as 1912.

Although Stevenson's psychological thriller has no precise location, except the nocturnal city streets that Hyde stalks, I think we can see how it became linked with the gruesome associations left by the violence against women in East London. And the lack of any proven murderer, together with wild theories and suspicions about his identity, only contributed to a sense of sexual menace hanging over the district. Two films made near the end of the 'silent' period, in the late 1920s, both built upon these associations to create very different versions of a gothic atmosphere. One was Alfred Hitchcock's third feature, *The Lodger*, subtitled *A Story of the London Fog*, and largely responsible for launching his career as a specialist in tantalising suspense.

The novel on which Hitchcock's film was based, by Marie Belloc Lowndes, was explicitly based on the Whitechapel murders in 1913, but the film takes its distance from such specifics. A killer with a grudge against women is causing terror, when a mysterious man seeks lodging in the house where most of the action takes place. Both the landlady and her daughter's fiancé increasingly suspect that this fastidious, and enigmatic figure might be the killer. However, since he was played by the matinee idol Ivor Novello, we can be sure that this is unlikely to prove true; although Novello's persona had been developed to exude a sense of danger, as well as glamour, in films such as *The Rat*. What Hitchcock succeeded is creating, with minimal resources, was a 'modernised' sense of menace – as he would continue to do in his first sound film two years later, *Blackmail*.

The other film that exploited East London's lingering association with sexual violence was Georg Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, based on the fin de siècle *Lulu* plays by Frank Wedekind. Here, the amoral heroine, who has cut a swathe of seduction and betrayal through German bourgeois society, meets her end at the hands of a distinctly romanticised Jack the Ripper in an equally romantic East End London. Similar in some ways to the exotic London underworld of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, this setting avoids any sense of the truly sordid or the gruesome violence of the original murders. It's an underworld of the imagination, and Lulu's death seems almost operatic – as it would become, literally, in Alban Berg's opera based on the same plays, eight years later.

All of these works - literary, filmic and indeed operatic - were also drawing on a tradition that had its roots in the exoticism of London's docklands, with its ethnic diversity. Thomas Burke's stories, collected as *Limehouse Nights* in 1916, provided a fictional spine for this set of themes and motifs, crucially involving the Chinese population of Limehouse. The best-known of these is 'The Chink and the Child', filmed by D. W Griffith as *Broken Blossoms* in 1919. In this, the waif-like girl is killed, although not by a Chinese villain, but by her brutal father, a bare-knuckle boxer. Her death is avenged by a gentle Chinese man, who had come to England as a Buddhist missionary, and now kills both the boxer and finally himself. As a footnote to this story, we might also mention the 1929 film *Piccadilly*, written by Arnold Bennett, although made by a largely German crew, which reversed the ethnicity of its protagonists in the same Limehouse setting. Here, it is a Chinese man who kills a Chinese woman, jealous of her affair with an English impresario.

At this point, you may well wonder: in what way are these varied hybrid tales 'gothic'? We are often told by critics that the gothic is not to be confused with the genres of horror or crime fiction, although of course it will often include elements of these, as well as much else. We're not dealing with a genre as such, but rather with a number of qualities or associations which may be found in diverse genres. And, I'm suggesting, the fabric and history of London is also an important arena for staging the modern gothic – precisely because of the associations that stretch back due to historic events and texts. Gothic, in this sense, is *associative* and *evocative*, rather than in any way *defining*.

Let me briefly set out several more examples of this 'galloping gothic' tendency. One that has attracted critical attention in recent years is the 'urban gothic' of London under bombardment during World War. Sara Wasson, for instance, discusses a range of writers who explored gothic modes during the war period: Henry Green, Graham Greene, Anna Kavan, Elizabeth Bowen and Mervyn Peake. What these have in common, she believes, is they
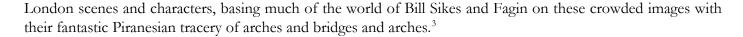
challenge the dominant wartime narrative of consensus, dealing instead with outsiders, with narratives set in the shadows. Wasson also includes in her account of 'dark London' the work of war artists such as John Piper and Graham Sutherland. Now I think this wartime Gothic is also strongly present the cinema of the period. Consider, for instance two films that seems at first utterly different: Humphrey Jennings' drama-documentary *Fires Were Started* (1943), about the work of firemen fighting the effects of the Blitz; and the film of Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1944), made in Hollywood by German émigré Fritz Lang.

Jennings may have become the maker of some of the most inspiring of wartime films celebrating team spirit and unity. But he was also a pre-war Surrealist, and even in *Fires Were Started*, amid the display of heroism by firefighters, there are flashes of a kind of wild exultation in the spectacle of fire and destruction – recalling Lindsay Anderson's tribute to him as 'the only true poet' in British cinema. And in the case of Lang's *Ministry of Fear*, perhaps because it was made far from wartime London, there is a real sense of just how eerie and deceptive wartime society could be, as experienced by the hero, just released from a mental hospital. Neale's realisation that he has stumbled upon a secret Nazi spy ring makes him an outsider, and takes a distinctly subversive view of the home front.

But cinema of the Second World War period didn't only deal with overt wartime issues, such as bombing and spies. It also saw the emergence of a radically different genre: the 'gaslight melodrama', as exemplified by the film *Gaslight* itself (made and rapidly remade in Hollywood), and *Fanny by Gaslight* (1944). These, and others in similar vein, were among the most popular of the period. So what drew audiences to tales of murder and seduction set in Victorian and Edwardian England, and often in the pre-electric London of gas lighting? A glib answer might be that British audiences at least were actually living in reduced illumination of the Blackout, so were already attuned to this shadowy world. More commonly, it's suggested that the escapism of period drama provided relief from the harsh realities of the war. Both of these may be true to some extent, but if we look at the actual narratives of 'gaslight melodrama', we find that these are dealing in truly gothic themes. Manipulative men seek to impose their will on women (*Gaslight*), to hide their illicit desires beneath a veneer of respectability – as in *Fanny by Gaslight*, where the schoolgirl heroine sees her father killed, then discovers that her family has been running a secret brothel, and that her real father is a leading politician…

What we seem to have in the typical gaslight melodrama of wartime cinema is a kind of eruption of the irrational – in psychoanalytic terms, a 'return of the repressed' – on a large scale. If we think of the 'psychic economy' of the war years, this kind of lurid, often highly emotional cinema seems to be providing a kind of palliative for a population undergoing stress and trauma. And gothic is very much its idiom. Then, on cue at the end of the war, comes the return of another repressed – or at least something that has been in abeyance during the interwar years: Charles Dickens. David Lean produced two Dickens adaptations in rapid succession, *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948), which have become almost standard reference works in the Dickens canon.

Importantly, there is a connection between these films and Fanny by Gaslight, which were all designed by John Bryan, one of the most highly-regarded production designers in British cinema in the view of his peers. And the contract between the two Dickens films is also instructive, and symptomatic. *Great Expectations* became both a celebration of victorious 'Englishness' in the immediate aftermath of the war, and also chimed well with the climate of neo-romanticism then prevalent in English visual art.[2] Then, after the immense success of *Great Expectations*, for which Bryan won the Academy Award, Lean wanted to change direction, but found himself obsessed by Dickens' other, much darker account of childhood, *Oliver Twist*, and so many of the same production team found themselves plunged into creating the Victorian underworld. Lean encouraged Bryan to continue using the forced perspective he had developed for *Great Expectations* (especially its memorable opening scene), in order to refresh scenes which were already visual clichés, such as Oliver asking for more in the workhouse. Overall *Oliver Twist* is literally darker, much of it taking place in squalid settings that had little natural or artificial light. Chiaroscuro effects, with light seeping through dirty windows, gave the film an atmosphere that has since established a new benchmark for picturing the Victorian city, a classic in its own terms, and one that fitted well with the prevailing vogue for *film noir* on both sides of the Atlantic. Bryan also made use of Gustave Doré's famous etchings of

London scenes and characters, basing much of the world of Bill Sikes and Fagin on these crowded images with their fantastic Piranesian tracery of arches and bridges and arches.[3]

There isn't time here to follow the course of Dickens screen adaptation, which I suggest also provides a continuing record of refashioning Gothic London – from *Oliver!* in 1968, designed by Bryan's admirer John Box, and tackling the challenge of Dickens in colour for the first time, through Polanski's *Oliver Twist* (2005), made at the Barrandov studio in Prague, through to the recent television series *Dickensian*, which created a truly phantasmagoric London, weaving together the strands of many Dickens novels.[4] Instead, I want to end by pointing to several 'deviant' films that develop very different aspects of London Gothic. Let me consider these in chronological order. First, the obscure and rather disreputable Death Line (1972), which we might place in the tradition of Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* series – based on the premise of horror erupting in familiar locations. In the case of *Death Line*, it's between Russell Square and Aldwych Tube stations, where people start to disappear form the platforms, abducted by an underground tribe of mutants who prey on human flesh. You may recall that the extra-terrestrials in *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967) appear during excavation of a new Tube line. Obviously, the underground is an everyday fact of life in London, which also has its roots in the Victorian era (and rather too much of its fabric!), and so the idea that its tunnels may harbour something sinister or even supernatural is potentially unsettling. This, I suggest, is an example of the very specifically London Gothic, disturbing what we take for granted on a daily basis.

A similar theme, and modus operandi, is the basis of *Reign of Fire* (2002), also usually classified as an apocalyptic horror movie, although one that features those increasingly fashionable dragons. Where do the dragons that rule the earth come from? An underground excavation in London, of course, from which the first emerges to kill the hero's mother in a flashback that sets the scene. Again, although in rather lurid style, we have the idea of the familiar fabric of London being rent asunder, first by a dragon emerging from beneath the city; and eventually leading to a full-scale war in the air between fire-spitting dragons above the familiar Houses of Parliament skyline. It's great fun, if you enjoy this kind of pulp imagery, but it also carries an echo of the founding myth of London, the mythical giants Gog and Magog – still carried in procession before the Lord Mayor.[5]

And so, in a way, I come full circle, to one of the fairly recent iterations of the Whitechapel murders, in the Hughes brothers' *From Hell* (2001), based on Alan Moore's graphic novel, designed by Martin Child, and filmed at the Barrandov studios. The original comic book series, in a magazine called Taboo, offered a new take on the crowded field of Ripper speculation, following the old idea of a secret royal connection and massive establishment cover-up. But it also included a metaphysical dimension, reflecting on the nature of time, and allusion of drug-induced hallucinations, linking the Victorian era to our own. At the most basic level, *From Hell* reconnects us to that rich seam of London Gothic that stems from the Whitechapel murders (the title comes from the opening of one of the original Ripper letters). Its graphic novel origins provide a powerful style of visualisation which is both 'retro' and ultra-modern. And, I would argue, it exemplifies what the Gothic scholar Roger Luckhurst has called 'a Gothicised apprehension of London'. A defining characteristic of 'modern gothic' has been its anti-modernist stance, rejecting the rupture that Modernism celebrated and embraced, and instead 'reasserting order after mayhem', as another Gothic scholar, Heather Nunn, puts it. It is, I think, fundamentally a conservative and nostalgic mode of dealing with the travails of modernity; and one that is closely, if not intrinsically, linked to London and its history and culture, even if we sometimes speak of 'other' gothics. Gothic studies are very much alive within literary and cultural studies. What I've tried to do here is to track the gothic mode through British film history – and my claim would be that this often spectral and fantastic city is London's gift to cinema.

Further reading:

Ian Christie, '"All That Life Can Afford"? Perspectives on the Screening of Historic Literary London', in Rumiko Handa and James Potter, eds., *Conjuring the Real: The Role of Architecture in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, University of Nebraska Press, 2011.

Roger Luckhurst, 'The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the "Spectral Turn"', *Textual Practice,* 16:3, 2002: 526-545.

- The Mummy's Curse: The True Story of a Dark Fantasy, Oxford University Press, 2012

Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

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[1] Low, *History of the British Film*, vol 2, p. 190.

[2] Among the Neo-romantics, especially the painters Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Cecil Collins, together with poets, musicians and filmmakers. See David Mellor, ed., *Paradise Lost: the Neo-romantic Imagination in Britain*, 1935-1955, London: Lund Humphries, 1987.

[3] Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage*, London: Grant and Co., 1872.

[4] On Bryan and Box, see Christie, *The Art of Film: John Box and Production Design*, Wallflower/Columbia University Press, 2008. Also, on *Dickensian*, see Luke McKernan, 'The Lives of the Characters in *Dickensian*', in Christie and Oever, eds, *Stories: Screen Narrative in the Digital Era*, Amsterdam University Press, 2018

[5] On Gog and Magog, see Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth century *Historia Regum Brittaniae*, a fanciful history that connects Celtic royalty to the heroic world of the Greek myth by way of the old Welsh legend of King Arthur.
https://lordmayorsshow.london/history/gog-and-magog.html