



Barry Curtis,
Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film.
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Even a preliminary venture into the field of horror scholarship suggests that filmic manifestations of the haunted house function as much as characters as they do as mere locations or hackneyed plot devices. To claim that haunted houses on film function on a far more conceptual level than just providing a stage for narrative to unfold is far from radical, but the great strength of Barry Curtis' *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* is his insightful critical analysis of just how dynamic and durable this horror icon has been.

While Curtis is interested in this idea of evolution, his approach transcends a pure historical analysis to encompass a more interdisciplinary approach to the material in question. The temporal-spatial configurations of the more famous cinematic haunted houses - such as those in *The Amityville Horror* (USA 1979), *The Haunting* (USA 1963), and the many other examples discussed in this book - are examined as often sophisticated visual metaphors that exceed mere bricks and mortar. The haunted house embodies trauma, guilt, and even memory itself, and this leads Curtis logically into the realm of the Gothic. Working not wholly outside a growing body of work that employs hauntological notions of spectrality to contemporary media forms (spawned primarily from Jacques Derrida's "Spectres of Marx" (1993) and applied to screen studies in articles such as Wendy Haslem's "Traces of Spectrality in New Media Art"^[1]), Curtis considers the always-evolving technologies of the Gothic as vital to its enigmatic force. The prevalence of trap doors and hidden corridors intersect crucially in Curtis' analysis with technologies ranging from magic lanterns to cyberspace. He expands his analysis of technology, cinema, spectrality and space convincingly throughout the book to argue just how completely the cinematic manifestation of the Gothic in haunted house movies can defamiliarize (for want of a better word) traditionally comforting or 'safe' spaces. It is in his treatment of these concepts that the book's primary arguments are their most persuasive.

The first chapter in particular is notable for not just establishing the iconographic functions of the haunted house in the cinema, but for containing one of the book's most critical statements: "All houses are haunted – by memories, by the histories of their sites, by their owners' fantasies and projections or by the significance they acquire for agents or strangers" (34). But while few could debate either the poetry or precision of this observation, in terms of the sheer unglamorous nuts-and-bolts mechanics of text selection, Curtis finds himself backed into a corner to some degree by his own cleverness. On one hand, one of the most immediate strengths of *Dark Places* is Curtis' holistic approach to horror, embracing more famous and accessible instances such as *The Shining* (UK/USA 1980) and *Psycho* (USA 1960) with equal democratic verve as almost-forgotten paracinematic gems as *House* (USA 1986) and *The Bogeyman* (USA 1980), as well as an impressive range of non-Western examples. But if "all houses are haunted", then in practice, this means that there are examples in this book as divergent as *The Net* (USA 1995), *The Servant* (UK 1963), *Minority Report* (USA 2002) and *Night at the Museum* (USA/UK 2006). While the inclusion of films such as these are not unjustified and do well to illustrate certain points, for a volume of 240 pages there is still a problem of pure mathematics. Simply, not everything under the "all houses are haunted" banner can physically fit. There is therefore an unaddressed, and often at times random logic that permits a lengthy analysis of *Citizen Kane* (USA 1941), but deletes any reference to *Suspiria* (Italy 1977), which is surely one of the most significant and memorable manifestations of precisely the relationship between architecture and film that Curtis aims to address.

This should be a small, niggling complaint with what is otherwise a robust and deeply incisive volume. But with its generalised title and its travel-sized presentation, this release is clearly aiming for a much broader market than just academics with an eye for critical theory. Curtis' work, however, is not, and as a consequence this non-specific title therefore seems to imply a very slight dumbing-down of the complex and sophisticated arguments that Curtis so rigorously presents. For someone wanting to sit down and read a handy little book on haunted houses, talk of *The Net* and no mention of *Suspiria* might come as an unpleasant surprise. While the very real financial issues influencing academic publishing right now cannot be lost on anyone with even a vague understanding of the current economic climate, a less generalised title for Curtis' book may have served his otherwise excellent project even better.

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Endnotes

[1] Wendy Haslem's "Traces of Spectrality in New Media Art", *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 2005. <http://irishgothic horrorjournal.homestead.com/gothicspec.html> Accessed 20 October 2009.

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