

An Analysis of the Role of Gothic Architecture in *Crimson Peak*

Kaihui Bi¹

¹ University of Southampton, UK

Correspondence: Kaihui Bi, University of Southampton, UK.

doi:10.56397/AS.2023.10.09

Abstracts

Gothic architecture's expression of anxiety about the relationship with the past, about the family, evokes the imagery of ghosts, and thus this type of house as a haunted site. Guillermo del Toro's 2015 *Crimson Peak* provides a good example of the contribution of Gothic architecture to the atmosphere and visualisation of haunted house narratives in modern Gothic cinema, and demonstrates that the untraceable history of the Gothic sets the stage for the relationship between the traumatic memories of the past and the present. In the following part, we will delve into the confrontation between past and present suggested by Gothic architectural features, using *Crimson Peak* as a case study of how Gothic architecture has provided a lasting influence on the genre.

Keywords: Gothic films, haunted house, memory trauma

1. Introduction

Originating in medieval Europe, Gothic architecture was seen as a haunted house that evoked a sense of mystery, fear, and supernatural imagery, thanks to its huge, sharp arches that pierced the sky and its intricate decoration (Figure 1). As Ruskin points out, the elaborate blend of structure and intricate decoration sought to restore the 'living dead' quality of the old buildings, making the Gothic architecture successful in evoking a sense of uncanny regeneration and necrophilia.¹ The uncanny sense of regeneration mentioned by Rogers explains the strong appeal of Gothic architecture to people, especially for the dark, mysterious atmosphere. The presence of ghosts is also due to the careful blend of structure and intricate decoration. Because Gothic architecture is a mixture of Saxon, Roman and Druidic architectural features, the untraceable past gives it a supernatural scale of time. In particular, the function of frozen time combines precisely with that of cinema, revisiting ancient stories and images and dramatizing the interaction of the living and the dead.² This means that cinema connects the past with the present, providing a pathway to the fantasized channeling of spirits so that Gothic architecture becomes the ideal place for ghosts to appear. On the other hand, in contrast to the ancient, grand Roman architecture (Figure 2-3), Gothic architecture's mix of various low ornaments allowed the latter to mix a variety of emotions such as beauty, barbarism, and solemnity. This complex aesthetic has been imagined in literature as chivalry, piety, and other-worldly charm, qualities usually associated with religious buildings, especially cathedrals (Figure 4). Just as... stated, the same mixture of Catholic beliefs and folk beliefs brought about ghosts.³ That is to say, the mysterious atmosphere behind religion provides the conditions for associating the presence of ghosts since the mysterious atmosphere is always associated with hidden darkness. At the same time, the paradoxical relationship between mystery and darkness was developed during the Victorian period, when social norms were strict, and combined with the imagination of the family. As Tamara Wagner emphasizes, for the Victorians, social and cultural anxieties revolved around the family: seemingly orderly and respectable families proved to harbor

¹ John Ruskin, (2004). 'The lamp of memory', *Selected Writings*, ed. Dinah Birch, p. 21, Oxford.

² Barry Curtis, (2009). *Dark places: the haunted house in film*. Reaktion Books.

³ Barry Curtis, (2009). *Dark places: the haunted house in film*. Reaktion Books.

crime, and their exposure eschewed the fundamental ideal of the family as a refuge.¹ That is, Gothic architecture's expression of anxiety about the relationship with the past, about the family, evokes the imagery of ghosts, and thus this type of house as a haunted site.



Figure 1. Hunyad in Transylvania, Credit: Jerzy Kociatkiewicz CC-BY-SA-2.0.



Figure 2. Roman and Gothic architecture compared, Credit: Jack G (CC BY-NC-SA)

¹ Nayder, Lillian, (1999). 'Wilkie Collins Studies: 1983-1999'. *Dickens Studies Annual*, 257-329.



Figure 3. Roman and Gothic architecture compared, Credit: Cernavoda CC-BY-SA-2.0



Figure 4. Cologne Cathedral

In the centuries following its birth, Gothic architecture became closely associated with literature and cinema. This link can be traced back to the genre of Gothic fiction that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, none better known than works such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*¹ and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mystery of Udolpho*². As mentioned above, the imagination evoked by Gothic architecture gave rise to Gothic stories, and the superstitious, mystical world hidden behind it paradoxically suggests sensual indulgence and physical restraint, spiritual ecstasy and physical sobriety. This ambivalence is projected in the spaces of the Gothic architecture and in the exaggerated and distorted proportions of the Gothic are born eerie ghosts and threats to the safety of the protagonists (Figure 5). The combination of cinema and gothic comes from the tradition established by *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*³. The exaggerated sets and angles of German Expressionism reinforce the tension within the Gothic architectural spaces, with stark shadows and highly stylised sets exaggerating these themes and evoking an emotional response from the audience (Figure 6).

¹ Horace Walpole, (1996). *The Castle of Otranto*. Project Gutenberg.

² Ann Radcliffe, (1998). *The Mystery of Udolpho*. Oxford University Press.

³ Robert Wiene, (1920). *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Decla-Film.

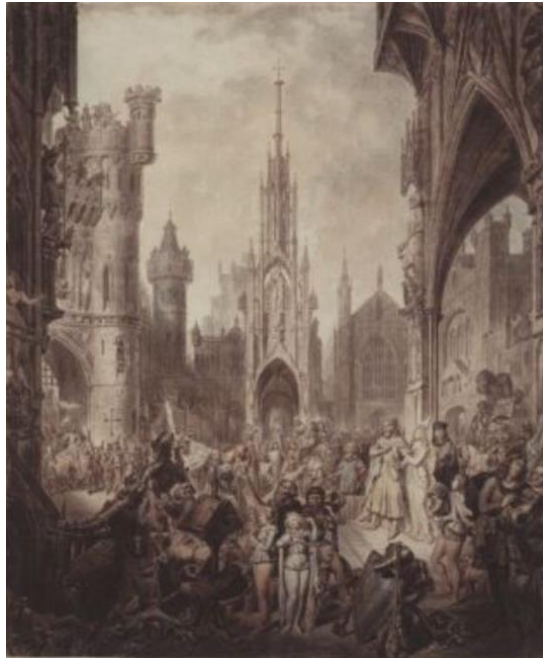


Figure 5. The Castle of Otranto from an illustration in the original book. Rather larger than Strawberry Hill



Figure 6. Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari

Guillermo del Toro's 2015 *Crimson Peak*¹ provides a good example of the contribution of Gothic architecture to the atmosphere and visualisation of haunted house narratives in modern Gothic cinema, and demonstrates that the untraceable history of the Gothic sets the stage for the relationship between the traumatic memories of the past and the present. In the following part, we will delve into the confrontation between past and present suggested by Gothic architectural features, using *Crimson Peak* as a case study of how Gothic architecture has provided a lasting influence on the genre.

As is customary in horror films, the conspicuous appearance of a haunted house can easily be perceived as a trouble spot. Its isolated location, aging exterior, and melancholic aura raise a sense of unease and foreboding in the viewer's mind (Figure 7). The huge Gothic pointed arches and intricate decorations are integral to the shaping of this atmosphere. But it is an inescapable fact that it is not the appearance of Gothic architecture that satisfies the conventions of the horror genre; On the contrary, it is the imagery of horror that Gothic architecture engenders. Gothic grandeur evokes, first and foremost, a sense of historic grandeur. The original purpose of these styles can be traced back to religious buildings, such as cathedrals and monasteries. The great spires in

¹ Guillermo del Toro, (2015). *Crimson Peak*. Legendary Pictures.

particular were seen by medieval worshippers as a place where they could approach God and represent the link between man and the divine.¹ In this context, Gothic architecture symbolizes the enduring power of the faith and spiritual realm, providing a link between the material world and eternity. On the other hand, the grand scale and elaborate workmanship of Gothic architecture also helped to demonstrate the wealth and power of the institutions responsible for their construction, reinforcing the social hierarchies and values of the time. These features give Gothic architecture a sublime appeal, as in the pre-eighteenth-century historiographical accounts it represents a vision of a glorious past world.² But the spire also brought to the Gothic a vitality of disorder and irregularity that was reinforced by the intricate decoration of the Gothic, which thus placed intuition, impulse, and imagination above rule, obedience, and reason.³ This dynamism, however, was combined in contemporary culture with the culture of modernity and turned into a disturbing symbol of a monstrous future. Thus, the Gothic gradually evolved in literature as an ideal site for the expression of the tension between past and present, creating the conditions for the emergence of ghosts, since, as Gina Nordini points out, their essence is linked to memory and is in fact an examination of the relationship between a person and the past.⁴ The macabre imagery evoked by the Gothic is also linked to the Victorian home. As mentioned several times above, the Victorian era, which took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was confronted precisely by anxieties about modernity, the result of new technologies, rampant industrialization — and a new awareness of mental illness, crime, and the anonymity of an expanding urban space.⁵ This anxiety drove people to long for the shelter of their families. However, the clash between strict Victorian social norms and new ideas of modernity also contributed to the absence of this family refuge, and it was in this context that gothic tales became popular. The significance that Gothic tales brought at this time was to establish the family as a source of suffering and to reinvent the idea of the family by interpreting its dysfunction as a social critique and ultimately in the process of resolving the horror. Gothic architecture thus not only provided a stage for the apparition of ghosts as a site of conflict between the past and the present but also reshaped the fundamental ideal of familial refuge in the process of resolving the ghost problem.



Figure 7. *Halloween*: the haunted house in an isolated location

However, the clash between strict Victorian social norms and new ideas of modernity also contributed to the absence of this family refuge, and it was in this context that gothic tales became popular. The significance that Gothic tales brought at this time was to establish the family as a source of suffering and to reinvent the idea of the family by interpreting its dysfunction as a social critique and ultimately in the process of resolving the horror. Gothic architecture thus not only provided a stage for the apparition of ghosts as a site of conflict between the past and the present, but also reshaped the fundamental ideal of familial sanctuary in the process of resolving the ghost problem.

The extremely stylized setting of Allerdale Hall, one of the film's main locations, plays a decisive role in creating the atmosphere of the haunted house (Figure 8). First, the use of gothic architecture as a motif for haunted houses has become a convention in the cinema, evoking a sense of uneasiness and fear in the audience. As highlighted by Xavier Aldana Reyes, it uses recognizable gothic settings to convey disturbing emotions,

¹ Horace Walpole, (2023). *Anecdotes of painting in England*. BoD—Books on Demand.

² Glennis Byron, Townshend Dale, eds, (2014). *The Gothic World*. London: Routledge.

³ Nicole Reynolds, (2013). 'Gothic and the Architectural Imagination, 1740–1840', *The Gothic World*, 85-97. Routledge.

⁴ Gina Nordini, (2016). 'Haunted by History: Interpreting Traumatic Memory Through Ghosts in Film and Literature'.

⁵ Tamara Wagner, (2013). 'Gothic and the Victorian home', *The gothic world*, 110-120. Routledge.

aiming to create the unease or instability commonly attributed to the experience of reading gothic fiction.¹ Allerdale Hall continues the Gothic novel's consistent set of images of haunted houses, such as the isolated location, the vine-encircled facade, and its eerie appearance (Figure 9). Indeed, *Crimson Peak* echoes several Victorian Gothic classics, such as the crumbling mansion in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*² (Figure 10). The setting evokes feelings that audiences have felt for gothic works since Victorian times, leading them to believe that ghosts must be present on the estate. Some critics have claimed that this is an overuse of the Victorian era,³ but in reality, Dan del Toro does not merely imitate these settings, but rearranges them to create an atmosphere more in keeping with his themes. A clear example of this is the modern machines scattered throughout the film (Figure 11). As the plot progresses, machines that Baron Sharp has been working on appear on the estate. As representations of the process of modernization, these mechanical devices draw the viewer's attention to the era, and the viewer's familiarity with the sense of modernity draws them closer to reality. The past, symbolized by the Victorian era, and the process of modernisation magically meet at Allerdale Hall, a paradoxical mood nicely summed up by Xavier Aldana Reyes, who argues that the Gothic establishes additional meaning — and aesthetics — through its links with previous films and novels: its clash of the mystical and the modern both distances events and brings them closer to the audience.⁴



Figure 8.



Figure 9.

¹ Reyes Xavier Aldana, *Body Gothic: Corporeal transgression in contemporary literature and horror film*, (University of Wales Press, 2014).

² *The Fall of the House of Usher*, author. by Edgar Allan Poe (Prabhat Prakashan, 1973).

³ Anthony O Scott, 'Crimson Peak', a Guillermo del Toro Gothic Romance in High Bloody Style', *New York Times* 15, 2015.

⁴ Xavier Aldana Reyes, 'Contemporary Gothic Horror Cinema: The Imagined Pasts and Traumatic Ghosts of *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *The Woman in Black* (2012)', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 33.2, 2022, 82-101.



Figure 10. Film *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1968)



Figure 11. The machine in Allerdale Hall

On the other hand, while depicting the atmosphere of horror, the Gothic architecture of Allerdale Hall reminds the viewer of the past glories of the Sharpe family. It was also the machinery that led to the Sharpe family's economic decline; They literally symbolise the Sharpe family's failed attempts to enter modernity. In this case, the Sharp siblings, dominated by their desire to enter modernity, kill wealthy women whose spirits, after death, become ghosts because of the crumbling mansion, which represents the glory of the past, and seek revenge on the Sharp siblings by revealing their deeds. Del Toro thus uses traditional and modern symbols of Victorian Gothic fiction to establish the relationship between the past and the present at Allerdale Hall.

Secondly, ruins are another feature of the Allerdale Hall. Allerdale Hall appears in a low-angle follow-up shot, and by doing so shows it in its entirety (Figure 12). In fact, it could not be called a manor house at all, but rather a ruin. The image is reinforced by crumbling facades, withered trees, and untouched roads. In subsequent scenes, the crumbling interior of the Gothic building reminds us of its decay as much as it speaks of its glorious past (Figure 13). Ruin has always been an important attribute of Gothic melodrama, a sign of loss of vitality and a place of contemplation.¹ Indeed, before Allerdale Hall became a ruin, it was a symbol of the glorious history of the Sharpe family, and as such, the image of the ruin evokes nostalgia for the greatness and sublimity of the past;

¹ Barry Curtis, (2009). *Dark places: the haunted house in film*. Reaktion Books.

Inspiring reverence. But on the other hand, the ruin of Allerdale Manor, which bears witness to the loss of the Sharpe family fortune, also suggests the crimes committed by the Sharpe siblings as they are dominated by their desire to regain their economic position, evoking sadness and fear in the viewer.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

This effect is similarly heightened by the precariousness of the space, as Baron Sharp points out the sinking state of the house as Edith enters the house and introduces her to it with pride (Figure 14), the oozing blood-red mud not only being the source of the Sharp family fortune but also evidence of the Sharp siblings' murder of his ex-wives, a scene that reminds us of the dark history of the Sharp family hidden underneath the glorious past and the importance of the past. Ultimately, the image of ruin and spatial instability together reinforce the overall gothic feel, a metaphor for the dark desires and sins of its inhabitants and the loss of social and economic privilege.



Figure 14.

Another important aspect of the Gothic architecture of Allerdale Hall is its intricate decoration. These same ornaments were there for all to see when Edith first crossed into the haunted building, when she looked up at it for the first time, and they represented the glories of the past (Figure 15). These ornaments played an important part in shaping the Gothic charm. They represent a forbidding past and a seal on history. Writing about the continuing investment in English country houses, Benjamin noted the insidiousness of this great house in that it attracted resources that were clearly lacking elsewhere.¹ The result of these decorations combined with the Gothic house is to link the familiarity of the locals with the strangeness of a distant place, which in turn shapes an uncanny space. Indeed, these plundered resources also symbolize the aggressive and brutal nature of feudal power, hinting at a plot to plunder the property to be carried out by the Sharpe siblings. These features not only enhance the mansion's appeal but also symbolically represent the characters' entanglements with their troubled pasts. Allerdale Manor, the central setting of *Crimson Peak*, is a prime example of the influence of Gothic architecture on the haunted house narrative. The mansion is characterized by its grand scale, intricate decoration, and gloomy interior, which together create an atmosphere of fear and suspense. The building's design and layout also contribute to the film's visual storytelling and thematic exploration, with its labyrinthine corridors, hidden rooms, and crumbling facade serving as a tangible representation of the Sharp family's dark history and past.

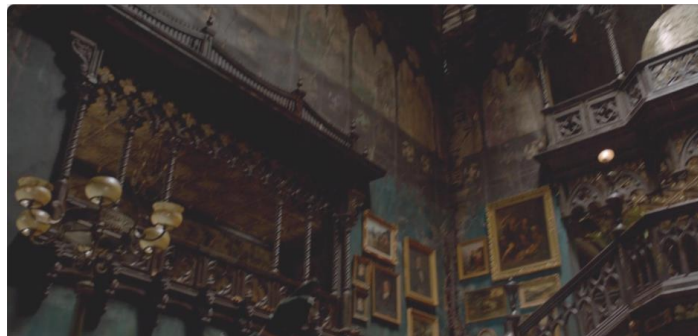


Figure 15.

On the other hand, in addition to the desire to restore ancient honor, the childhood trauma of the Sharpe siblings was a major factor in motivating them to commit these acts. In the film, as a result of childhood abuse at the hands of their parents, the Sharpe siblings murder their mother and, as they grow up, embark on the murder of Baron Sharpe's bride. The ghosts thus effectively represent the scars of the Sharp siblings' past, and the ghosts, naturally, suffer the consequences of their childhood traumas. As the return of the dead, the purpose of these ghosts is not, as Freud asserts, the return of the dead as enemies of the living; Their object was to condemn the latter to the same dark fate.² The sole purpose of these ghosts, who are symbols of the past, is to help Edith escape from the house. The only explanation for these ghosts acting in such a perverse manner is that they, as symbols of the past, provide Edith with some measure of comfort for her childhood trauma by helping her uncover the evil deeds of Sharpe's siblings. Significantly, the ghosts are all female, and just as Edith used ghost

¹ Benjamin Walter, (1999). *The arcades project*. Harvard University Press.

² Sigmund Freud, (2017). 'The uncanny', *Romantic Writings*, 318-325. Routledge.

stories to make up for her mother's absence during her childhood, it becomes understandable that these ghosts are in the business of protecting Edith. And by making up for those traumas, the director has created a story that can be embossed. Just as Kohke and Gutleben argue, neo-Victorian fiction allows the audience to establish an empathetic connection with historical figures so that we can "see ourselves in (not instead of) the victims of suffering and reciprocally encounter the self as an alternative and the other as self by acknowledging our own vulnerability to trauma".¹ A clear example of this is the audio tapes found by Edith. One of the ghostly brides conveys the truth to Edith via a tape, asking her to expose the evil nature of the Sharpe siblings (Figure 16). Their pain reaches Edith through the tape, and the viewer continues to suffer from it through Edith's perspective. Ultimately, this suffering alleviates contemporary anxieties, as the female characters represented by Edith, including the ghost, are in fact sufferers of patriarchy, and by addressing the perpetrator of patriarchy, Lucille, the film indirectly allows the audience to empathize with these victims of gender violence. Thus, by helping Edith escape the house and kill Lucille, the ghost, as a representative of the past, the trauma of the past is healed and catharsis is given to the audience as a means of alleviating contemporary anxieties. Gothic architecture plays a crucial role in this process, as it not only serves as a backdrop but also provides a narrative dynamic that not only conditions the apparition but also acts as a scene of patriarchal violence and leads to the destruction of that violence.



Figure 16.

The film's Gothic architecture, in addition to representing the tensions between past and present, represents an imagined and reconstructed take on the refuge of family, which offers a unique perspective on exploring relationships, delving into family dynamics and the complex web of love, loyalty and deceit that binds the characters together. As Emilia Musap highlights, del Toro is concerned with Lucille's desire to have a home and Edith's struggle for the security of her family.² Throughout the film, Lucille kills her mother and has an incestuous relationship with her brother as a result of her mother's childhood abuse. Edith, on the other hand, is filled with fantasies of a full family because of her mother's violent death in childhood and defies her friends to marry Baron Sharp in pursuit of her ideal fantasy of a home. The difference is that del Toro takes the opposite approach to the portrayal of a perfect family as a refuge, portraying the Gothic family as a place of sin that appears beautiful but is actually corrupt. This strategy is in fact in the tradition of the Gothic novel from the nineteenth century onwards. These novels expose the atrocities and evils behind the rights of the family, and their exposure exposes the abandonment of the fundamental ideal of the family as a refuge. By deconstructing the complexities of family relationships, it exposes the various dysfunctional families, attacks the divorce and custody laws of the time, and treats the offending characters with a vague sympathy.³ Del Toro is seen as an exact heir to this trait. For example, Lucille, the victim of her childhood mother's violence, takes control of the family by murdering her mother and, with Baron Sharp, cheats and kills the wealthy brides, in the process of establishing a wickedly incestuous relationship with her brother. This relationship is in fact a twisted imagining of the family, and as she herself emphasizes, every time he does something small wrong, I protect him from his mother's stick... The only love Thomas and I ever felt came from each other. It was also due to her monstrous fantasies that she eventually died in this house and became one with it (Figure 17). Unlike other dissipated souls,

¹ Marie-Luise Kohlke, and Gutleben Christian, eds. (2012). *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, 3, Rodopi.

² Emilia Musap, (2017). 'Monstrous Domesticity — Home as a Site of Oppression in *Crimson Peak*', *Sic: časopis za književnost, kulturu i književno prevođenje*, 8(1), 0-0.

³ Tamara Wagner, (2013). 'Gothic and the Victorian home'. *The gothic world*, 110-120, Routledge.

Lucille's union with the house relegates her to dehumanisation, a perpetual warning to those who come after her. Edith's encounter is quite different from Lucille's, although she too is a fantasist who longs for the shelter of her family. As mentioned above, Edith tackles Lucille, the abuser on behalf of the patriarchy, which allows her to be rewarded by the patriarchy and eventually leave the building alive. The love the Doctor and Sharpe have for her proves the same. No one can forget that she declares herself an unmarriageable woman at the beginning, but as the plot progresses she soon marries Baron Sharp, her first compromise. The reward for this compromise is that Baron Sharp eventually returns to love when his sister is about to kill her. On the other hand, Edith's last major helper in her escape was the doctor who had been pursuing her and who would have been dead if he had not intruded. Thus, Edith is finally granted the familial refuge she desires, and del Toro, by deconstructing the notion of domesticity, reimagines the refuge of the family and resolves the tension between past and present by reaffirming the fundamental ideal of the family.



Figure 17.

As we have always stressed, the Gothic building in the film coalesces the tension between past and present and addresses the viewer's contemporary anxieties as the destruction of a dark and decaying family. In this one long process, del Toro first evokes the Gothic genre by making the Gothic building a visually highly stylised site, evoking the audience's sense of mystery through the character of the Gothic building itself as a ruined past. The building, which is condensed in time, then heals Lucille's childhood trauma through the presentation of ghosts, and ultimately evokes the viewer's fundamental ideal of familial refuge by shaping the house as a symbol of the family's dark past.

References

- Aldana Reyes Xavier, (2014). *Body Gothic: Corporeal transgression in contemporary literature and horror film*. University of Wales Press.
- Byron Glennis, Townshend Dale, eds, (2014). *The Gothic World*. London: Routledge.
- Curtis Barry, (2009). *Dark places: the haunted house in film*. Reaktion Books.
- Freud Sigmund, (2017). 'The uncanny'. *Romantic Writings*, 318-325. Routledge.
- Kohlke Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben, eds. (2012). *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, 3, Rodopi.
- Lillian Nayder, (1999). 'Wilkie Collins Studies: 1983-1999'. *Dickens Studies Annual*, 257-329.
- Musap Emilia, (2017). 'Monstrous Domesticity — Home as a Site of Oppression in *Crimson Peak*', *Sic: časopis za književnost, kulturu i književno prevođenje*, 8(1), 0-0.
- Nordini Gina, (2016). 'Haunted by History: Interpreting Traumatic Memory Through Ghosts in Film and Literature'.
- Reyes Xavier Aldana, (2022). 'Contemporary Gothic Horror Cinema: The Imagined Pasts and Traumatic Ghosts of *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *The Woman in Black* (2012)'. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 33(2), 82-101.
- Reynolds Nicole, (2013). 'Gothic and the Architectural Imagination, 1740-1840'. *The Gothic World*, 85-97.
- Ruskin John, (2004). 'The lamp of memory'. *Selected Writings*, ed. Dinah Birch, p. 21, Oxford.
- Scott Anthony O, (2015). 'Crimson Peak', a Guillermo del Toro Gothic Romance in High Bloody Style'. *New*

York Times, 15.

Wagner Tamara, (2013). 'Gothic and the Victorian home'. *The gothic world*, 110-120, Routledge.

Walpole Horace, (2023). *Anecdotes of painting in England*. BoD-Books on Demand.

Walter Benjamin, (1999). *The arcades project*. Harvard University Press.

Film and Book

Ann Radcliffe, (1998). *The Mystery of Udolpho*. Oxford University Press.

Edgar Allan Poe, (1973). *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Prabhat Prakashan.

Guillermo del Toro, (2015). *Crimson Peak*. Legendary Pictures.

Horace Walpole, (1996). *The Castle of Otranto*. Project Gutenberg.

Robert Wiene, (1920). *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Decla-Film.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).