

Phantasmagoria: Ken Russell's *Gothic* (1986) as Neo-Victorian Meta-Heritage Film

Christophe Van Eecke
(Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands)

Abstract:

Ken Russell's film *Gothic* (1986) dramatises one of the key foundational myths of nineteenth-century British literature: the night at the Villa Diodati when Mary Shelley allegedly had the initial idea for her novel *Frankenstein* (1818). While the film can be enjoyed as a costumed horror film, this article argues that it is in fact an intricate response to the heritage film genre and to heritage tourism within the cultural and political context of Britain in the 1980s. Russell's film subverts heritage film conventions and mobilises early film techniques and forms of entertainment from the late Victorian era to comment upon the recuperation of Victorian culture in the heritage industry of the 1980s. To make clear how the film achieves this, four key aspects are analysed: the parallels between the film's structure and a funhouse ride; the film's use of the *tableau vivant*; the film's engagement with nineteenth-century celebrity cults; and the film's representation of heritage tourism. Taken together, these elements introduce a complex reflexivity in the film that allows the attentive viewer to enjoy it on several levels at once, both as a heritage horror film and as a neo-Victorian critique of the cultural forces that seek to revive the Victorian in a contemporary context.

Keywords: cinema of attractions, cult of celebrity, funhouse aesthetics, Gothic, heritage film, heritage tourism, Ken Russell, Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, *tableau vivant*.

Ken Russell's film *Gothic* (1986) dramatises one of the most famous foundational myths of British Romanticism: the night in the summer of 1816 when Mary Shelley invented the story of *Frankenstein* (1818).¹ The film is an adaptation of the Introduction that Shelley wrote for the third edition of *Frankenstein*, published in 1831, in which she recounts the events of the summer of 1816, when she and Percy Shelley were living near Lake Lemman (they had fled England because of their extramarital affair) and were joined there by Lord Byron, who was on the run from rumours of incest with his half-sister and sodomy with sundry lads. Byron rented the Villa

Neo-Victorian Studies

12:1 (2019)

pp. 135-156

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3471308>



Diodati for the summer, where he stayed in the company of his physician, Dr Polidori. During that unusually cold and gloomy summer, the literary company spent much time together, went on several expeditions, and entertained each other by inventing ghost stories (Holmes 2005: 319-334; MacCarthy 2003: 290-306). In *Gothic*, the events of that summer are telescoped into one night. At the beginning of the film, Percy (Julian Sands) and Mary Shelley (Natasha Richardson), along with Mary's half-sister Claire Clairmont (Myriam Cyr), who is pregnant with Byron's baby, arrive at the Villa Diodati by rowing boat. They are welcomed by Lord Byron (Gabriel Byrne) and Dr Polidori (Timothy Spall). From the moment they arrive, the guests are treated to laudanum, an opiate with powerful hallucinogenic properties that they consume in liberal quantities. As the evening progresses, a storm gathers over the lake and the company indulge in party games, tell each other ghost stories (which are visualised in the film), and decide to hold a séance to try and wake the dead or bring their fantasies and desires to life. As supernatural occurrences multiply, suspicion arises that the séance has really brought their darkest fantasies to life and the Romantic company descend into a maelstrom of nightmarish hallucinations.

On the surface, *Gothic* is a costume horror film played at hysterical pitch: the performances are overwrought, the camera is all over the place, the music is loud, and narrative development takes a backseat to a swirling stream of imagery that visualises the fantasies, nightmares, and hallucinations of the assembled literati. In this article, however, I will argue that Russell has used the film as a vehicle for a reflection on both Victorian and contemporary attitudes towards celebrity, cultural heritage, and heritage tourism. To make this point, I will approach *Gothic* as what I will call a 'neo-Victorian film-heritage film'. This very thick concept needs some preliminary unpacking, especially because my approach combines elements from neo-Victorianism, the study of heritage films, and the study of contemporary revaluations, not just of Victorian culture, but of the culture of the nineteenth century in general. *Gothic* is a film that presents events from the lives of Romantic poets that precede the Victorian era: this means that its subject is not strictly Victorian. Arguably, however, the way in which Russell presents these events is very much neo-Victorian and has considerable significance for understanding the film as a response to 1980s attitudes towards Victorian culture. Specifically, *Gothic* offers a neo-Victorian way of looking at contemporary appropriations of nineteenth-

century culture in the heritage industry and the heritage film. The film is situated on the intersection of these concerns, which were very much alive in British culture of the 1980s, and this makes it a privileged text for understanding their interconnections.

Gothic is a *heritage film*. A heritage film is a costume drama that is either adapted from a classic novel from the long nineteenth century or a historical drama set in that period. The genre was first defined in the 1980s, and the term initially had a pejorative connotation, because left-wing critics connected it to the reactionary politics of Margaret Thatcher, which promoted a return to the conservative social and sexual values of Victorian culture (see, e.g., Wollen 1991). Since then, revisionist critics have highlighted the progressive elements in heritage films' attitudes to female and queer identities and have even argued that many heritage films take a critical view of the Victorian or Edwardian eras (for useful surveys of this debate, see Hill 1999: 73-98; Monk 2002; Higson 2003: 46-85; Sadoff 2010: 197-243; Vidal 2012: 91-120). In the new millennium, all manner of critical, subversive and parodic off-shoots of the heritage film have been produced, and the heritage film label can now include such diverse films as *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1985), considered as one of the foundational films of the genre (to the extent that 'Merchant/Ivory'-style costume drama has become virtually synonymous with the heritage film aesthetic); Michael Winterbottom's meta-heritage film *A Cock and Bull Story* (2005); and such preposterous neo-Victorian fare as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Burr Steers, 2016), based on Seth Grahame-Smith's 2009 mash-up novel, or *Austenland* (Jerusha Hess, 2013), which cleverly satirises heritage tourism. The term "post-heritage film" was coined by Claire Monk to discuss these more self-reflexive and critical endeavours in costume drama (see Monk 2002). It is in this tradition of subversive heritage films that I want to situate *Gothic*. As I have previously argued in a discussion of Russell's film *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988), which was adapted from the 1911 Bram Stoker novel, Russell tended to take a camp approach to the heritage film genre (see Van Eecke 2017), and *Gothic* is no exception. Part of the brief of this article is therefore to show how Russell plays with heritage film conventions in a way that is profitably understood as neo-Victorian.

However, *Gothic* is also what I call a '*film-heritage film*'. What sets *Gothic* apart from most other heritage films, including many post-heritage

films that equally take a parodic or critical approach to (modern perceptions of) Victorian culture, is that several techniques used in the making of the film also hark back to Victorian-era film-making. In *Gothic*, Russell employs a number of techniques and aesthetic devices that are typical of early cinema and of the prehistory of cinema in the late nineteenth-century, such as the phantasmagoria and the *tableau vivant*. In this respect, the film literally incorporates its engagement with Victorian visual culture into the way it is put together. In that sense, I want to discuss *Gothic* not just as a heritage film but as a ‘film-heritage film’, and a neo-Victorian film-heritage film at that: it is a costume drama based on a nineteenth-century literary source (which qualifies it as a heritage film), with which it critically and to some extent parodically engages (which provides a neo-Victorian angle), but with the added interest that it also adapts, as part of its own production process, technologies associated with early film production in the Victorian era. Through this latter aspect the film mobilises ‘film heritage’ (namely a heritage of early film techniques) to create a (subversive neo-Victorian) heritage film.

To unpack this tightly knotted construction, I will discuss four interconnected aspects of the film, each of which is connected to what one might call Victorian or neo-Victorian forms of spectacle and spectatorship, because they are all in some way concerned with (neo-)Victorian attitudes towards visual entertainment and ways of looking at things or people. The four aspects are, first, Russell’s modelling of the film’s structure on a funhouse ride filled with cinematic ‘attractions’; second, the film’s use of the theatrical spectacle of the *tableau vivant*, which was a popular Victorian entertainment; third, the way it addresses the cult of celebrity surrounding the Romantic poets; and finally, its engagement of the phenomenon of heritage tourism, which was part of the contemporary re-valuation of Victorian culture in the 1980s to which *Gothic* can be considered a response. When these elements are considered in concert, *Gothic* emerges as a dense and multi-layered neo-Victorian text that challenges 1980s attitudes to the nineteenth century. It is, in fact, the film’s appropriation of late-Victorian early film and proto-film techniques and aesthetics that provides the self-conscious reflexivity, which marks *Gothic* as a distinctly neo-Victorian text.

1. (Neo-)Victorian Spectatorship: Funhouse Aesthetics

To get a sense of the intricacies of *Gothic* as a multi-layered film text, one might start by discussing its title, which is programmatic: it announces its genre as a Gothic text. Furthermore, by telescoping the events into one night in a large villa during a thunderstorm, the film establishes itself within one of the key conventions of the Gothic horror genre, namely that of a group of people gathered or trapped in a haunted house (see Hogle 2002b: 2-3; Newman 2013: 96). As such, *Gothic* presents itself as an homage to the Hammer horror films, which thrived on several franchises derived from Gothic fiction, notably their series of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* films produced between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. In fact, *Gothic*'s scriptwriter Stephen Volk has pointed out that, in *Gothic*, Lord Byron "enters the film in exactly the way the haughty, aristocratic Christopher Lee enters *Dracula* (1958): gliding down a staircase to greet his guests, a deliberate signal that this is a Hammer film, in all but name" (Volk 2013: 62). The announcement of the genre in and as the film's title has further relevance if we consider the opening title sequence, which is presented against what is initially a plain black background. However, at the centre of the frame, lurking behind the credits (which appear in a white font), there is a small dot that grows into the image of a hovering skull that gradually approaches the viewer. By the end of the credits, it fills the centre of the screen and is illuminated by a flash of lightning as Russell's credit as director appears.

This is Russell's first use of an early cinema technique, for it is a reproduction of the visual effect of the phantasmagoria, a popular fairground attraction that was introduced in the late eighteenth century and which became hugely popular in the Victorian era (see Mannoni 1995 and 1996). Phantasmagoria were a species of ghost show: "illusionistic exhibitions and public entertainments in which 'spectres' were produced through the use of a magic lantern" (Castle 1988: 27). Images painted on glass would be projected (like slides) onto a surface in a darkened room. The space around the image was painted black so that light would only penetrate through the translucent colour paint used to create the image. There was a huge range of themes and motifs that were represented in phantasmagoria, from visual gags over pastoral scenes to proto-psychedelic abstract imagery and, inevitably, Gothic motifs (see Mannoni and Campagnoni 2009 for an illustrated overview). Interestingly, phantasmagoria could also include

movement. By placing the projector on rails, it was possible to move it back and forth, causing the projected image to increase or decrease in size, producing the illusion of an object approaching or disappearing. Furthermore, by superimposing several slides it was also possible to make images move. Among the range of Gothic motifs, for example, there were images of winged skulls, where the skull and the wings were painted on superimposed slides with a mechanism attached to move the wings up and down. Combined with the forward movement of the projector on the rails, this could produce the effect of a skull hurtling towards the audience at great speed (see Barber 1989: 76-77; Mannoni 1995: 97-110).² It is to such phantasmagoria of skull imagery that the opening credits of *Gothic* refer, although in this case the skull is wingless and creeps towards the viewer at the leisurely pace that is required to accommodate the opening credits.

The phantasmagoria of the opening titles connects *Gothic* to the context of Victorian popular entertainment. In fact, I want to argue that the film is structured as a ride through the booby-trapped funhouse of the Villa Diodati. Just like a dark ride in a modern theme park, where spectators move from one view to the next, so too the spectacular geography of the Villa Diodati is that of a series of rooms furnished with attractions that await us. The camera, propelled by the minimal narrative of Romantics running amok, pulls us from one attraction to the next. This structure is made explicit in the final sequence, where we share Mary's hallucinations. In an establishing shot that symbolises that we have entered her subconscious, the camera takes a bird's-eye perspective of Mary trapped in a narrow black space where she is surrounded by six doors. As she frantically throws herself against these doors, trying to escape, each one opens to an elaborate view of a scene from her life, including scenes that refer to future events, such as Percy Shelley's death by drowning and the burning of his body on the beach at Viareggio, which is evoked in a *tableau vivant* style (about which more will be said below) that is obviously modelled on Louis Edouard Fournier's painting *The Funeral of Shelley* (1889).³ Just like the spectator of a dark ride is jerked around in a trolley, so the viewer of Russell's film is propelled back and forth between these visions, which are presented as elaborate vignettes in the same way that animatronics bring to life famous views in a fairground ride presenting an Oriental fantasy, a historical event, or, in what must now be the world's most famous dark ride,

the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride at Disneyworld, which has itself spawned a series of films that bring the animatronics to life.

This funhouse-based structure is significant for understanding the film's connection to early cinema on two counts. First, the funhouse was a popular feature of the amusement parks that became wildly popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, both in the United Kingdom and in the United States, where the amusement parks on Coney Island became the template for future developments (see Lukas 2008: 37). A second aspect is directly connected to late-Victorian early film history. Tom Gunning has discussed early film as a "cinema of attractions" (see Gunning 2006), a term by which he refers to those aesthetic characteristics of early cinema that indicate its origins in magic shows, music-hall, and fairground attractions. Gunning argues that early cinema is often "an exhibitionist cinema" (Gunning 2006: 382), because many actions in early films are performed for the camera, thereby acknowledging the camera in the same way that, for instance, a magician or music-hall performer would interact with the audience. An obvious example is "the recurring look at the camera by actors. [...] From comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of conjurers in magic films, this is a cinema that displays its visibility" (Gunning 2006: 382). Many early films, including a considerable number of those by Georges Méliès, were very short subjects (often with a running time of barely a minute) that showed magic tricks or visual gags. They would often be made with a static camera, duplicating the effect of watching a magic show or music-hall revue on a proscenium stage in a theatre. Short films of this kind were often shown on fairgrounds or as part of vaudeville or magic shows; in fact, Méliès himself would sometimes show his films as one of the "acts" or as an intermission in his own magic shows (see Solomon 2010: 45-47).

Among the most remarkable 'attractions' in Russell's funhouse are a number of humanoid automatons that pop up throughout the film. During a game of hide-and-seek, Percy Shelley stumbles into a boudoir-like bedroom where an automaton in the shape of an Oriental belly-dancer performs a mechanical striptease. In another room, Byron keeps an automaton of a woman who plays the harpsichord when a handle in her back is cranked, which we see Dr Polidori do in one scene.⁴ These automatons are not a frivolous invention of Russell's. In the eighteenth century, automatons had become an international sensation. Among the most well-known examples

were a mechanical flute-player (1738) and a mechanical duck (1739) created by Jacques de Vaucanson (see Foulkes 2018: 173-184)⁵ and Wolfgang von Kempelen's famous chess-playing Turk (1789), which was actually operated by a person hiding inside the contraption (see Foulkes 2018: 228-233; also Faber 1983).⁶ Byron's mechanical lady playing the harpsichord is a clear reference to popular automatons such as the so-called "*Joueuse de Tympanon*" (1784), a small figure of a young lady playing the harpsichord that became the sensation of Marie-Antoinette's court in 1785 (Foulkes 2018: 197-204), and the Musical Lady created by the father and son team of Pierre and Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz, which had been presented playing the harpsichord in London in 1776.⁷ While this latter figure played its tunes, "her eyes would move cooly from side to side, and her bosom would heave slightly, as if she were breathing" (Wood 2002: xiv).

The automatons in Russell's film are quite obviously modelled on these historical examples. They also help to establish Byron's household as a funhouse-like cabinet of curiosities that has specific historical resonance. In his book, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (2003), Jay Clayton has mapped several of the ways in which postmodern culture is indebted to nineteenth-century culture. He suggests that the interdisciplinary tendency of the postmodern, with its blurring of distinctions between the sciences, but also between high and low culture, generates a culture of convergence, in a sense, heralding a return to the culture of the early nineteenth century, which he calls "a relatively undisciplined culture" (Clayton 2003: 82), because the disciplinary boundaries that would later exist between the different sciences, but also between the sciences and the arts, had not yet been fully formed, allowing for a lot of mix-and-mingle convergence between these various areas. It was not uncommon for men of letters of the time to be polymaths, and it was not unusual, for example, for a poet to have a vivid interest in physics, the natural sciences, and economics. This undisciplined culture expressed itself, among other things, in

a vibrant underworld of popular exhibits, assembly rooms, cabinets of curiosities, circus acts, and menageries. Scientific displays and lectures took their place [...] alongside art and sculpture, theatrical performances, natural wonders from distant lands, and outright tricks and cons. (Clayton 2003: 101)

One could add that similarly diverse attractions and “cons” would later rub shoulders in the fairgrounds with their funhouse rides, magic shows, Siamese twins, and bearded ladies.

Byron’s household at the Villa Diodati in *Gothic* is obviously modelled on such an undisciplined culture. Besides the automatons, the villa houses a life-sized human anatomical model, an extensive art collection, several skulls, and a medieval harness. There is even a menagerie on the premises. Much of this reflects on or plays with historical fact. At his several abodes in Italy (including his residences at Venice, Pisa, and Ravenna; see MacCarthy 2003: 337, 399, and 437), Byron travelled and lived with a menagerie that included monkeys, dogs, rabbits, and birds, which were given free run of the house much in the way that animals pop up all over the Villa Diodati in the film. (When Mary climbs the stairs upon her arrival, for instance, she finds herself face to face with a goat, and peacocks are kept in the garden.) As for the skull used during the séance, it cannot but make one think of the human skull Byron had mounted in silver as a drinking cup (see MacCarthy 2003: 79). I do not know whether Byron owned any automata, but we know that Méliès did, and that he used them in his shows (see Solomon 2010: 47 and 142). While the automatons, animals, and other paraphernalia in the Villa Diodati helpfully contribute to the general chaos that Russell evokes in the film, they also underline the carnivalesque postmodernism *avant la lettre* of the undisciplined early-nineteenth-century culture to which the Romantics of *Gothic* belonged. These combined elements also allow Russell to explore the ways in which the funhouse can be used as a cultural metaphor that connects the postmodern present to the nineteenth-century past – a point to which I will return below. Furthermore, these many connections suggest that Russell is not merely piling on the madness for its own sake; rather, every detail in his phantasmatic evocation of the night at the Villa Diodati contributes to a dense intertextual fabric that is deeply rooted in historical fact and in a sophisticated view of how past and present interconnect.

2. (Neo-)Victorian Spectatorship: Tableaux Vivants

At the heart of *Gothic*’s funhouse ride are the protagonists’ extended hallucinations, and those of Mary Shelley in particular. To visualise the moment when Mary’s descent into the swirl of hallucinations begins, Russell draws upon Henry Fuseli’s painting *The Nightmare* (1780), a copy

of which hangs in her bedroom. As Mary goes to bed, she stares at the painting with visible apprehension. The camera then takes her point of view and slowly creeps up to the painting until its subject comes alive: the image of an imp sitting on a woman's chest in the painting is briefly seen as a real figure sitting on Mary's chest. Mary wakes up in a fright to find Claire lying across her chest. This suggests that the weight of her half-sister's body on hers while she was sleeping was subconsciously associated with the weight of the imp from the painting, causing her to dream that the image had come to life. This brief moment in the film is significant for several reasons. First of all, it is a reference to the *tableau vivant*, a popular Victorian entertainment. The *tableau vivant* is a form of theatre: a group of people dress up and pose, often in an elaborate décor, in a composition that is modelled on a well-known painting, although the subject could also be drawn from history, mythology, or from other popular motifs. Interestingly, this practice was widely used in early films (Wiegand 2018: 31-34). Jean-Léon Gérôme's hugely popular painting *Duel after the Masquerade* (ca. 1857-59), for example, was turned into a short film by elaborating what happened just before and just after the actual scene shown in the painting (Robert 2018: 17-20).

Russell does something similar with *The Nightmare*. He brings Fuseli's painting to life by reproducing its composition with real people: Mary Shelley is lying on her bed in the pose of the woman in the painting while an actor impersonating an imp is sitting on her chest. Like the phantasmagoria with which the film opens, this is not merely an allusion to, but an active and creative use of a technique associated with Victorian theatricality. This visual stratagem of posing actors in a fashion that recalls well-known formulae from the visual arts has also been deployed in other heritage films. For example, in Oliver Parker's 1999 film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895), there is a scene in a Turkish bath in which male characters "are relaxing in recumbent positions and look like persons posing in a *tableau vivant*", with the scene also incorporating "many classical allusions" (Schaff 2004: 131). While probably not modelled on a specific painting, the scene suggests a generic composition based on Orientalist paintings of the late-Victorian era, such as those by Lawrence Alma-Tadema. There are many conceivable reasons why film-makers might introduce such a visual reference to an art-historical source in their films, including an attempt to gratify the upper-middle-class viewer's sense of

cultural literacy (the pleasure of identifying the intertext) or an attempt to add cultural cachet to a potentially banal image (in erotic photography, for example, high-art references are often used in this way as a cultural *cache-sexe* for titillation). In *Gothic*'s use of Fuseli's painting, however, since the original painting is actually shown in conjunction with the *tableau vivant*, the reference is so blatant that the purpose is clearly functional: the *tableau vivant* is mobilised as a Victorian form of popular spectacle that contributes to the film's formal structure as a sequence of (Victorian-based) attractions. Like one of the surprise views in a haunted house ride, the sudden appearance of the 'real' imp is a visual trick that goes 'boo!' in the film.

Just as significantly, Russell achieves his recreation of *The Nightmare* through the use of associative montage, an early cinema technique whose theoretical elaboration is primarily associated with the work of Sergei Eisenstein. In associative montage, two or more images are edited together to suggest a thematic or intellectual connection between them (see Bordwell 2005: 43-50). In *Gothic*, Fuseli's painting is brought to life in a very quick succession of five brief shots showing (1) a close-up of the imp in the painting, from which Russell cuts to (2) a close-up and then (3) a medium long shot of a real imp sitting on Mary's chest, followed by (4) a close-up of Mary screaming as the imp claws at her throat and (5) a medium long shot of Mary waking up with Claire lying across her chest. Visually, Russell connects the painted imp with the real imp and with Claire lying across Mary's chest to make clear that Mary is having a nightmare in which the weight of Claire's body causes her to dream that the imp has come alive and is assaulting her. Using associative montage, Russell accomplishes this through purely visual means. However, as the imp in the painting actually represents a nightmare (see Powell 1973 and Frayling 2006), this sequence also suggests that, just like the imp has come alive in Mary's nightmare, so, too, the Romantic company's nightmares have come alive through the séance. Just like Russell's use of the phantasmagoria in the opening titles was not just a gimmick but an intervention that is crucial to our understanding of the film, his use of the *tableau vivant* to bring to life *The Nightmare* is not just an obvious visual effect but an intervention that has significance for our understanding of the film's narrative structure: it is the moment when the gates of Mary's subconscious are opened and Mary's descent into hallucination begins.

3. (Neo-)Victorian Spectatorship: The Cult of Celebrity

Gothic the events at the Villa Diodati in a framing narrative that is particularly important for an understanding of the film as a comment on (neo-)Victorian spectatorship. The film opens on the shores of Lake Lemano, where a guide is explaining to a group of British tourists that Lord Byron is living in exile in the villa across the lake. He then helpfully directs a female tourist's telescope to a bedroom window where she can see Dr Polidori staring out over the lake. This takes place on the site of the Hôtel d'Angleterre, which was "the regular stopping point for all well-to-do English travellers passing by the Lake" (Holmes 2005: 323) and where Percy and Mary Shelley had initially also taken lodgings. It was in fact Mr Dejean, the proprietor of the hotel, who rented out telescopes to guests who wanted to ogle the scandalous Englishman across the lake. In one of his letters, in a clear reference to the scandalmongering of the English tourists spying on him, Byron complained about the fact that, throughout his stay, "I was watched by glasses on the opposite side of the lake, and by glasses too that must have had very distorted optics" (Byron qtd. in MacCarthy 2003: 295). In the film, Byron explicitly tells his guests over dinner that they should try to blind the peeping tourists with their wickedness to keep up their reputation for scandal and outrage, which also suggests something about the ways in which Byron cultivated his public image. The poet had a knack for self-dramatisation and often wrote very *risqué* letters to his publisher, John Murray, because he knew that these would be read out loud in select company and that their contents would do the rounds of the upper-class London gossip circuit. Byron's letters "in effect were public bulletins" (MacCarthy 2003: 341), and the poet Leigh Hunt later observed that Byron "had an incontinence, I believe unique, in talking of his affairs, and showing you other people's letters. He would even make you presents of them; and I have accepted one or two that they might go no further" (Hunt qtd. in MacCarthy 2003: 400).

At the end of the film, Russell returns to this framing narrative and shows us another group of tourists visiting the Villa Diodati, except that we have now jumped a century and a half ahead in time and are seeing contemporary tourists in 1986. As they tramp over the site, a guide's voice explains over a broadcast system what became of the protagonists of that fateful night in 1816. Russell here makes a connection between the 1816 English tourists looking for sensation during a stop on their Grand Tour of

the Continent and modern tourists visiting significant sites from the lives of great literary figures. He also suggests that our interest in such sites is not always prompted merely by a high-minded fascination with history, but that it is also informed by the dubious desire for sensational titbits of information about the lives of the rich and famous or, as in this case, glamorous young Romantic poets. By opening his film with a set of tourists peeping at Byron, Russell makes a statement about the history of the cult of celebrity. Romantic poets, and Byron and Shelley especially, were among the first to become literary superstars, idolised by women and under constant scrutiny from the press. Similar cults sprang up around composers. For example, Franz Liszt became so popular that Heinrich Heine coined the term ‘Lisztomania’ to refer to the phenomenon of ladies who screamed hysterically and fainted in his presence (Tibbetts 2005: 195).

In this respect, it is significant that Russell had earlier made a very camp and overwrought biopic about Liszt, which is actually called *Lisztomania* (1975) and presents Liszt as “the first superstar composer” (Phillips 1979: 168). Russell himself observed that “Franz Liszt was the first pop star of them all – idolised by the fans and chased all over Europe by mobs of aristocratic groupies” (Russell 2008: 143), much in the way that hysterical fans would later go into hysterics over The Beatles or boy bands such as Take That. Tellingly, the role of Liszt in Russell’s film was played by Roger Daltrey, singer of the rock band The Who and also the star of Russell’s previous film, the rock opera *Tommy* (1975), which likewise entailed a critique of celebrity (Tibbetts 2005: 194-199; Saffle 2007: 60-62). In fact, the cultural politics of fame are a constant theme in Russell’s several biopics of nineteenth-century composers, and nowhere more so than in *The Music Lovers* (1970), his wildly Romantic evocation of Tchaikovsky’s self-destruction in pursuit of fame. The full title of the film runs *Ken Russell’s Film on Tchaikovsky and the Music Lovers*, with the ‘music lovers’ referring to a group of people (including the composer’s brother-cum-impresario, his mother-in-law, his nymphomaniac wife, and his aristocratic benefactress) who all claim to simply love Tchaikovsky’s music while actually seeking to share in his fame and success. They all want something from him and are ‘music lovers’ merely in an opportunistic sense. In one of the film’s most famous sequences, a terrified Tchaikovsky is chased through the streets of Moscow by the mob of these supposedly well-meaning

admirers and friends, who claw at him with the greedy fervour of hysterical upper-class groupies (see Van Eecke 2015: 245-247).

Clearly, then, Russell's sardonic representation of the tourists at the beginning and end of *Gothic* is far from incidental, instead forming part of a theme that runs throughout his work. As was already pointed out before, Jay Clayton has argued that many aspects of postmodern culture have their roots in Victorian culture, including, for example, the notion of the postmodern world as a society of the spectacle or the centrality of consumerism to our way of life. While he is certainly not alone in making this point, Clayton has applied the principle specifically to neo-Victorian texts to show how they use "multiple perspectives, temporal layering, and intertextuality" to "register the diverse ways in which the past resonates in the present" (Clayton 2003: 19). *Gothic*'s engagement with the nineteenth-century cult of celebrity, enhanced by Russell's use of the cinema of attractions and assorted visual tropes from Victorian entertainment culture, enacts a similar grafting of the present onto nineteenth-century origins. Russell teases out resonances that not only enrich the film text by highlighting "the way in which earlier cultural formations are sedimented in today's latest fashion" (Clayton 2003: 17), but also illustrate, as Dianne F. Sadoff has pointed out, that Russell is "smarter about history and literary periodisation than his detractors admit" (Sadoff 2010: xi). From its opening scene through to its closing moments, *Gothic* makes clear that the cult of celebrity and the culture of the spectacle that typify the post-modern late twentieth century are deeply rooted in nineteenth-century cultural practices.

4. (Neo-)Victorian Spectatorship: Heritage Tourism

Russell's cleverness in seeing continuity in cultural practices repays further scrutiny. If his two sets of tourists gawking at the Villa Diodati, albeit separated by 150 years of (post)modern history, reveal something about the way we cultivate fame and engage with celebrity, they also suggest something about how we value our cultural heritage. There are significant ties binding the English tourists spying on Lord Byron to the modern tourists ticking off the Villa Diodati from their Euro-holiday must-see list. To make these ties explicit, a small detour through the history of heritage tourism will prove illuminating. By the mid-nineteenth century, the affluent English classes had begun to develop a taste for heritage tourism, visiting historical sites for purposes of pleasure and personal education. Several

factors contributed to this new fashion, including the expansion of the railway network, which facilitated travel, the increase in museum building, and a sense of patriotism, which sponsored an interest in national history and its monuments, but also the phenomenal popular success of historical novels, notably the work of Sir Walter Scott. The latter “marked a turning point [...] in the way that people experienced the past” to the extent that several “locations in which Scott’s novels were set quickly became places of pilgrimage” (Thurley 2015: 7). By the end of the nineteenth century, heritage tourism was firmly established, and historical sites and museums drew large crowds of visitors. Heritage tourism next ballooned to completely new dimensions in the decades following the Second World War, and especially in the 1960s, when there was a vivid sense that heritage was at risk. This was a response to the large-scale destruction of historic buildings during the War, but also to the post-war rebuilding programmes, which tended to privilege a Brutalist style of building that relied heavily on the use of concrete (see Sandbrook 2007: 620-640). There was a growing concern that architectural heritage, but also rural heritage in the form of traditional landscapes, was falling victim to an excessive eagerness to tear down the old and build the new. This both raised awareness about the need for conservation and made people aware of heritage sites as interesting tourist destinations (see Thurley 2015: 196-215; Harrison 2013: 42-94; Samuel 2012: 153-156).

In the 1980s, concern with heritage took on a political edge when it became associated with Margaret Thatcher’s conservative politics, which advocated both a neo-liberal capitalist approach to the economy and a return to ‘Victorian’ social and moral values (see Corner and Harvey 1991b). This entailed a revaluing of national history, and especially the Victorian era of Empire, as part of nationalist ideology. This resulted in the creation of what critics have called the “heritage industry: a potent marketing of the past as part of the new enterprise culture, a commodification of museum culture” (Higson 2003: 1). However, this was not matched by sufficient government funding: in the spirit of neo-liberal laissez-faire, museums, heritage sites and other cultural enterprises were expected to generate sufficient revenue to become financially self-sufficient, which imposed upon them an imperative to market their assets in a way that appealed to the broader public (see Hewison 1991: 164-167). In this respect, heritage tourism became part of the so-called ‘experience economy’, which markets experiences as

purchasable commodities, the origins of which are often dated from the opening of Disneyland in 1955 (Pine and Gilmore 2011: 3-4). The quintessential example of the experience economy in the heritage sector is the living museum, where one is greeted by staff dressed in period costume, can bake one's own bread, handle old tools, take a class in folk-dancing, experience a recreation of a historic event, or take a guided tour through a private home, a country house, or an industrial site (see Samuel 2012: 169-202; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 189-200).

Dressed in cheap raincoats and carrying cameras and rucksacks, Russell's 1986 tourists, who arrive at the Villa Diodati by sightseeing boat, represent just this kind of packaged-for-purchase approach to literary and cultural heritage as an experience. And clearly the film's narrative structure, too, takes a deliberate experience-like approach to cultural heritage, turning literary history into a funhouse ride. Russell's film gives us what we would expect from a report on the lives of the Romantics from the hands of a scribe for a Rupert Murdoch outlet: a sensational account filled with references to extramarital affairs, drug-taking, orgies, incest, homosexuality (as per Byron and Percy Shelley's passionate kiss), séances, and general hysteria. This account is presented as a series of 'attractions' that engulf the viewer in a cinematic update of popular Victorian entertainments, achieved by using elements of early cinema techniques and aesthetics. Russell further frames this account with two sets of (neo-)Victorian spectators, both early nineteenth-century and late-twentieth-century, whose gaze at the goings-on invites us, as viewers of the film, to look again and consider the politics of spectatorship at play, both in the Victorian era and in our own. In that sense, *Gothic* can be read as a commentary on the cheapening of heritage in a culture that treats it as a marketable commodity and a purchasable experience. Russell's film revels in everything that the 'good taste' promoted by conservative Thatcherism and exemplified (at least according to its initial critics) by the genteel heritage film in the Merchant/Ivory mode would sniff at: flashy editing, hyper-active cinematography, loud music, and generous dollops of nudity. By mobilising the aesthetics of late-Victorian early film, *Gothic* gleefully offers us the full 'heritage experience' with a vengeance, tongue firmly in cheek.

5. Conclusion: The Boobytrapping(s) of Heritage

In my discussion of *Gothic*, I have used Russell's deployment of early- and proto-cinematic techniques as a key to unlock the neo-Victorian cultural politics of his film in relation to significant aspects of (neo-)Victorian spectatorship concerning the cult of literary celebrity and heritage tourism. I have argued that several of the techniques he used (phantasmagoria, associative montage, *tableau vivant*, the narrative as funhouse ride) are directly connected to the cultural politics of the film, which are announced right from the start through his use of the phantasmagoria during the opening credits. In this respect, it seems remarkable that the film has received very little, if any, sustained critical attention within the fields of either heritage film studies or neo-Victorian studies. In an important revisionist study of film adaptations of Victorian novels, Diane F. Sadoff has called *Gothic* a "cheeky film" and a "*faux* British heritage film" that "packages Englishness for middle-class consumers in search of a high-cultural sexual thrill" (Sadoff 2010: ix-x). While Sadoff also makes the point that the modern-day "Diodati tourist-visitor stands in for [Russell's] film's film spectator, who metaphorically visits a heritage site" (Sadoff 2010: x), she does not elaborate on these points, nor does she dig deeper into the way the film subverts the cultural politics of both the heritage industry and heritage tourism. Yet it is striking how Russell has made the medium fit the message in this film, mobilising the heritage of early film technique to create an overwrought heritage film that satirises the heritage industry, and heritage tourism in particular. Put differently, the film uses heritage against itself. To adapt Peter Widdowson's felicitous term of "writing back" (Widdowson 2006), *Gothic* constitutes an exercise in neo-Victorian 'filming back', providing a fine example of how a film can use 'film heritage' (namely early film techniques) to perform a critique of contemporary appropriations of nineteenth-century cultural heritage.

Interestingly, in a key discussion of the aesthetics of the heritage film, Andrew Higson has suggested that the style of heritage films is actually akin to the cinema of attractions. He argues that in many heritage films, "the decoupage and the camerawork tend towards the languid", while

camera movement often seems dictated less by a desire to follow the movement of characters than by a desire to offer the spectator a more aesthetic angle on the period setting and

the objects which fill it. [...] Thus, [...] historical narrative is transformed into spectacle; heritage becomes excess, not functional *mise-en-scène* [...] but something to be admired. (Higson 2003: 38-39)

In that sense, “heritage films display their self-conscious artistry, their landscapes, their properties, their actors” in what he calls a “cinema of heritage attractions” (Higson 2003:39). While this analogy holds up to a point, however, it also threatens to dilute the argument, for on the same count one could argue that every major Hollywood blockbuster seduces us with the attractions of its special effects, which are also often in excess of what is narratively required. Furthermore, the very languid nature of heritage film spectacle goes against the grain of the cinema of attractions in the historical sense, which was vivid, active and deliberately self-conscious, with performers winking, gesturing, and bowing at the camera. The early cinema of attractions aimed to stun or amaze the audience with visual exclamation marks that were often the very point of the film. This vivacity is, by definition, missing from the pastoral scenery and well-draped interiors that are gently caressed by the conventional heritage film camera. Conversely, this vivacious drive is exactly what *Gothic* does provide, in exact counterpoint to the heritage film aesthetic as defined by Higson, an aesthetic that Russell self-consciously highlights by appropriating elements of the visual repertoire of the cinema of attractions.

It is this self-consciousness about its own intermediality, combined with its cultural politics of sending up both Victorian and neo-Victorian heritage tourism, that marks *Gothic* as not just an unruly heritage film or an early example of what have been called post-heritage films but as a neo-Victorian fiction that appropriates a nineteenth-century event from literary history to make a statement about the afterlife of nineteenth-century attitudes to celebrity, to heritage tourism, and to national culture in the 1980s. The film writes back both to the past and to our appropriation of that past in the present, turning one of the most significant sites of origin in modern English literature into a funhouse boobytrapped with (neo-) Victorian attractions that can be decoded as mirrors of our own complex and complicated obsession with a particular version of that past. This suggests that Russell’s work, which has usually received but short shrift from serious film scholarship, may turn out to be key for illuminating the complex

dynamics of cultural appropriation, visual culture, and neo-Victorian re-visioning that materialised in the 1980s.

Notes:

1. Because it has proved impossible to obtain copyright clearance, no screenshots from the film have been included in this article.
2. A contemporary image of such a phantasmagoria performance including skull imagery can be viewed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phantasmagoria_-_media/File:Fantasmagorie_de_Robertson.tif.
3. The painting can be viewed online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percy_Bysshe_Shelley#/media/File:Louis_Edouard_Fournier_-_The_Funeral_of_Shelley_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.
4. An image of Polidori fumbling with the automaton can be viewed at <http://shebloggedbynight.com/2011/the-torture-in-store-ken-russells-gothic-1986-2/>.
5. An image of Vaucanson's automata can be viewed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Vaucanson_Automata.jpg.
6. A contemporary illustration of Wolfgang von Kempelen's chess-playing Turk can be seen at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_von_Kempelen_-_media/File:Racknitz_-_The_Turk_3.jpg.
7. An image of the Jaquet-Droz lady playing the harpsichord can be viewed at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Automates-Jaquet-Droz-p1030490.jpg>.

Bibliography

- Barber, X. Theodore. 1989. 'Phantasmagorical Wonders: The Magic Lantern Ghost Show in Nineteenth-Century America', *Film History* 3:2, 73-86.
- Bell, James (ed.). 2003. *Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film*. London: BFI.
- Bordwell, David. 2005. *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, second edition. New York & London: Routledge.
- Castle, Terry. 1988. 'Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie', *Critical Inquiry* 15:1, 26-61.
- Clayton, Jay. 2003. *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

-
- Corner, John and Sylvia Harvey (eds.). 1991a. *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*. London & New York: Routledge.
- . 1991b. 'Introduction: Great Britain Limited'. In Corner and Harvey (1991a): 1-20.
- Curtis, Scott, Philippe Gauthier, Tom Gunning, and Joshua Yumibe (eds.). 2018. *The Image in Early Cinema: Form and Material*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Faber, Marion. 1983. *Der Schachautomat des Baron von Kempelen*. Dortmund: Harenberg.
- Foulkes, Nicholas. 2018. *Automata: A Brief History of the Automata from Ancient Times to the Fée Ondine*, Paris: Editions Xavier Barral.
- Frayling, Christopher. 2006. 'Fuseli's *The Nightmare*: Somewhere between the Sublime and the Ridiculous', in Myrone, Martin (ed.), *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*. London: Tate, 9-20.
- Gunning, Tom. 2006. 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in Strauven, Wanda (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 381-388.
- Harrison, Rodney. 2013. *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Hewison, Robert. 1991. 'Commerce and Culture'. In Corner and Harvey (1991): 162-177.
- Higson, Andrew. 2003. *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hill, John. 1999. *British Cinema in the 1990s*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. (ed.). 2002a. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2002b. 'Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture'. In Hogle (2002a): 1-20.
- Holmes, Richard. 2005. *Shelley: The Pursuit* [1974]. London: Harper Perennial.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1998. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lukas, Scott A. 2008. *Theme Park*. London: Reaktion Books.
- MacCarthy, Fiona. 2003. *Byron: Life and Legend*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Mannoni, Laurent. 1995. *Trois siècles de cinéma de la lanterne magique au Cinématographe: Collections de la Cinémathèque française*. Paris: Editions de la Réunion.
- . 1996. 'The Phantasmagoria', *Film History* 8:4, 390-415.

-
- Mannoni, Laurent and Donata Pesenti Campagnoni. 2009. *Lanterne magique et film peint: 400 ans de cinema*. Paris: Editions de la Martinière/La Cinémathèque française.
- Monk, Claire. 2002. 'The British Heritage-Film Debate Revisited'. In Monk and Sargeant (2002): 176-198.
- Monk, Claire and Amy Sargeant (eds.). 2002. *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Newman, Kim. 2013. 'The Old Dark House'. In Bell (2013): 96-102.
- Phillips, Gene. 1979. *Ken Russell*. Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne.
- Pine II, B. Joseph and James H. Gilmore. (2011). *The Experience Economy*, [1999]. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Powell, Nicolas. 1973. *Fuseli: The Nightmare*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin.
- Robert, Valentine. 2018. 'La part picturale du *tableau-style*'. In Curtis et al. (2018): 15-25.
- Russell, Ken (dir.). 2005. *Gothic* [1986]. Perf. Natasha Richardson, Julian Sands, Gabriel Byrne, MGM Home Entertainment. [DVD]
- . 2008. *A British Picture: An Autobiography* [1989]. London: Southbank.
- Sadoff, Diane F. 2010. *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen*. Minneapolis, Minnesota & London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Saffle, Michael. 2007. 'Liszt in the Movies: *Liszt's Rhapsody* as Composer Biopic', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 35:2, 58-65.
- Samuel, Raphael. 2012. *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* [1994]. London & New York: Verso.
- Sandbrook, Dominic. 2007. *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*. London: Abacus.
- Sargeant, Amy. 2002. 'The content and the form: evoking "pastness" in three recent retro films'. In Monk and Sargeant (2002): 199-216.
- Schaff, Barbara. 2004. 'Still Lives – *Tableaux Vivants*: Art in British Heritage Films', in Voigts-Virchow, Eckart (ed.), *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 125-134.
- Shelley, Mary. 1992. *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* [1818] (ed. Maurice Hindle). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Solomon, Matthew. 2010. *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century*. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Thurley, Simon. 2013. *Men From the Ministry: How Britain Saved Its Heritage*. New Haven, Connecticut & London: Yale University Press.

- Tibbetts, John C. 2005. *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography*. New Haven, Connecticut & London: Yale University Press.
- Van Eecke, Christophe. 2015. *Pandaemonium: Ken Russell's Artist Biographies as Baroque Performance*. Maastricht: Universitaire Pers Maastricht [also online as open access pdf].
- . 2017. 'Camp Heritage: Ken Russell's *The Lair of the White Worm* as Neo-Victorian Spectacle', in Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Christian Gutleben (eds.), *Neo-Victorian Humour: Comic Subversions and Unlaughter in Contemporary Historical Revisions*. Leiden & Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 277-295.
- Vidal, Belén. 2012. *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation*. London & New York: Wallflower/Columbia University Press.
- Volk, Stephen. 2013. 'Villa Diodati'. In Bell (2013): 63.
- Widdowson, Peter. 2006. "'Writing back": Contemporary Re-Visionary Fiction', *Textual Practice* 20:3, 491-507.
- Wiegand, Daniel. 2018. 'The Unsettling of Vision: Tableaux Vivants, Early Cinema, and Optical Illusions'. In Curtis et al. (2018): 26-35.
- Wollen, Tana. 1991. 'Over our shoulders: nostalgic screen fictions for the 1980s'. In Corner and Harvey (1991a): 178-193.
- Wood, Gaby. 2002. *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life*. New York: Knopf.