



Fairytales and Gothic Horror: Uncanny Transformations in Film, Laura Hubner (2018)

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**FAIRY TALE AND GOTHIC HORROR: UNCANNY TRANSFORMATIONS
 IN FILM, LAURA HUBNER (2018)**

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Reviewed by Máiréad Casey, National University of Ireland Galway

Laura Hubner makes a persuasive argument for a particularly feminine subjectivity that is informed and nourished by fairy tales but involuntarily returns to scenarios that are rendered more authentically in the realm of gothic horror. The synthesis of feminism and psychoanalysis as a methodology for fairy tales, the gothic and horror studies has proven to be a popular and useful tool for unpacking texts that relate to fears, fantasies, nightmares and anxieties, particularly as a means for scholars to articulate and map how these sensations can very often be gendered experiences. The founding feminist horror studies texts, such as Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) and Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), remain endlessly influential and their insights remain persistently relevant. It is in this academic tradition that *Fairy Tale and Gothic Horror: Uncanny Transformations in Film* positions itself. The monograph looks at 'fairy tale' and 'gothic' as independent concepts and as each concept acts adjectivally with 'horror' and explore the convergences and deviations between fairy tale and gothic horror as they are demonstrated in film. The cultural and political function of fairy tales and gothic horror are investigated, and Hubner aims to understand how both are used as social pedagogies to encourage social conformity or alternatively to destabilize and politicize. Imagination, fantasy, and where these both merge with nightmare and reality is an organizing theme as the selected films are based on a unifying, recurring narrative device of a female protagonist whose dreaming is suggestive of an alternative journey that transgresses boundaries of the 'real' (Hubner 2018: 6).

The monograph discusses a wide breadth of texts across a number of time frames from the oral-storytelling origins of fairy tales such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' and their didactic appropriation by bourgeois French author Charles Perrault in the 1600s, to 'paranoid women' films of the 1940s to early twenty-first-century European horror. In the first literature review chapter 'Fairy tale roots and transformations', Hubner delivers a thorough and conscientious examination of 40 years of folk tale and fairy tale criticism from Vladimir Propp and Bruno Bettelheim to contemporary critics such as Maria Tatar and Jack Zipes. She also cites and consciously builds on work that has similarly investigated fairy tales in horror, such as *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage* (Short 2006).

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1. 'Gothic transgression, horror and film' works as a complementary literature review to the previous chapter and explores the gothic as expressed in film. Hubner argues that the 'Gothic is often propelled by a perpetual cycle of repression, triggering a return of the repressed, followed by repression's return' (45) and this use of the gothic informs her central thesis on how the gothic and fairy tale work in horror film to both mould, destabilize, and again contain feminine sexuality, ambition and agency. Her exploration of the gothic in film innovatively uses pioneering French film critic André Bazin who argued that film's true potential lay in realism. Reading his seminal article 'The ontology of the photographic image' against the grain, she uses its description of the 'embalming' power of the photograph as a way of 'mummifying time' as testament to the inherently gothic nature of film as medium. This chapter successfully answers the question prompted in the previous literature review: what about fairy tales, the gothic and/or their combination with horror makes the unspeakable become expressible and emotionally digestible? It seems that fairy tales, by means of allegory and abstraction, universalize specific personal experiences like trauma. The gothicization of these familiar tropes from tales associated with childhood creates an uncanny encounter between innocence and the threat of violence.

20. The first of the in-depth textual analysis chapters 'Rebecca returns: Death and renewal beyond the door' examines the use of both fairy tale and gothic tropes in 1940s Hollywood 'Bluebeard' or 'persecuted wife' cycle of films. As a sort of 'female gothic' answer to the male paranoia of film noir, Hubner convincingly argues that the fairy tale allows women to negotiate their present through familiar tropes from their collective past. This chapter explores how fairy tale elements when gothicized in a film like *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940), cue a doubting of reality and a questioning of identity. There are 'false' step-mothers, 'true' husbands, beast bridegrooms and transformative helpers. This tradition continues in psychological and supernatural thriller films today with Mickey Keating's *Darling* (2015) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) similarly utilizing 'Bluebeard's rooms' to physicalize their protagonist's denial and repression.

33. 'Encountering the werewolf – confronting the self: On and off the path to *The Company of Wolves*' engages with the werewolf myth, Little Red Riding Hood and the ways in which these sometimes-opposing folkloric influences operate in gothic narratives. Hubner cites R. L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* ([1886] 2008) as a prototypical text that influenced the way werewolves work in later horror narratives, 'Hyde is conceived as the "other" within thrust outwards by repressed libidinal drives, concealed by the acceptable (public) face of the doctor' (118). The case studies are confined to werewolf films set in Britain up to 1984 with Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*. Hubner posits that werewolf films prior to *The Company of Wolves* had fixed boundaries between civilization and nature, masculine and feminine, sexuality and innocence, and holiness and cursed. Boundaries which *The Company of Wolves* plays with and dismantles through the teenage heroine's coming-of-age narrative and subjective dreamscape.

47. 'The horror in *Pan's Labyrinth*: Beneath the rhetoric of hope and fear' is the final textual analysis chapter and describes how fairy tale and horror can be used in a 'magical realist' mode to represent the previously unrepresentable such as historical atrocity. Hubner describes *Pan's Labyrinth* as a 'bold

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and challenging film, at least as far as it faces head-on the horrors of human brutality and terror, positioning them within a specific historical context' (161). The analysis is rooted in this historical context and looks at the fairy tale mode as a malleable form to make historical atrocity legible to contemporary and international audiences. As she says of *Pan's Labyrinth*, the characters of the pre-adolescent girl Ofelia's reality, set in 1944 of the Spanish Civil War, are more rigidly drawn than the ambiguous beings that populate her fantasy. Given the contemporary political climate where we are witness to a rise in small nation nationalist and fascist movements, the potential for narrative to humanize and dehumanize cultural and political others is worth dwelling on further. For future explorations into the topic, *Fairy Tale and Gothic Horror* provides an excellent base.


However, the abundance of secondary sources that relate to the selected texts suggests that this is a well-trodden terrain and the book could have benefitted from straying more from the beaten path. Some of the book's most insightful and energetic analyses are on films that have received less scholarly attention than the central organizing texts such as *The Curse of the Werewolf* (Fisher, 1961). Considering the recent mainstream audience interest in horror that is subtle, genre-bending and literary-influenced in the 2010s, the reader does pause to wonder why the selected texts goes as far as 2008 with Alfredson's vampire film *Let the Right One In* but does not refer to more contemporary iterations of the subgenre. Although two of the main texts for analysis are adaptations of gothic literary texts authored by Daphne du Maurier and Angela Carter, there also seems to be a notable absence of female auteurship within the corpus. It would be interesting to see how the books central themes of repression, release and return of repression are transmuted when these subgenre films are directed by people who identify as women and to pursue the transmutations of different experiences of gender as they intersect with race, sexual identity and socio-economic circumstances in the creation of material that translates personal fears and fantasies into universally legible narratives.

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