

## The Aesthetics of the Tangible: Haptic Motifs and Sensory Contagion in Gothic Terror Films

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*I want to hold you in my arms. My hands will glide over your hair and I will feel your body trembling beneath my hands.*  
—from *The Hands of Orlac* (dir. by Robert Wiene, 1924)

The cinematic gothic experience is intricately cross-modal and multisensory. With their highly sensorial images, by which I mean images that appeal vividly to the senses, gothic films facilitate and promote experiential engagement in their viewers. Touch, in particular, holds a privileged place in the gothic imagination, with the image of the hand featuring as a recurring iconographic motif. Elizabeth D. Harvey observes that touch ‘occupies a complex, shifting, and sometimes contradictory position in the representation of the five senses in Western culture’.<sup>1</sup> Throughout history, Harvey explains, touch has been depicted in myriad ways, either hailed as the most invaluable sense or, conversely, as the basest.<sup>2</sup> In scholarly criticism on gothic cinema, the sense of touch has so far remained understudied, with priority usually being given to sight and the eye, along with the co-related notions of ‘voyeurism’ and ‘the gaze’. Nonetheless, there is much to learn from the careful exploration of other related sensory modalities, namely the haptic.<sup>3</sup> Luís Rocha Antunes claims that ‘*the medium [of film] is audiovisual, yet our experience is multisensory*’.<sup>4</sup> In agreement with Antunes, I suggest that by switching the focus from sight and hearing to touch, we can better understand how certain films use the senses as a central strategy to create gothic spaces. Specifically, this essay employs Georges Braque’s concept of ‘tactile’ or ‘manual space’, and Fredric Jameson’s understanding of the senses as purveyors of memory as useful lenses through which to

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth D. Harvey, ‘Introduction: The “Sense of All Senses”’, in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth D. Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 1-21 (p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Recent work by Isabella van Elferen, particularly *Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), explores in detail the multi-layered dimensions of the auditory in the gothic imagination, while elsewhere, there has been some discussion of the gothic and Victorian olfactory states. See, for instance, Silvana Colella, ‘Olfactory Ghosts: Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*’, in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*, ed. by R. Arias and P. Pulham (London: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 85-110.

<sup>4</sup> Luís Rocha Antunes, ‘Neural Correlates of the Multisensory Film Experience’, in *Neuroscience and Media: New Understandings and Representations*, ed. by Michael Grabowski (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 46-61 (p. 48, emphasis in original).

understand the space of the haptic in gothic films.<sup>5</sup> ‘Touch’ is understood here in a broad sense, and includes what might be called the ‘hapticity’ of certain filmic sequences — that is, ‘the way vision itself can be tactile’, as Laura Marks defines it.<sup>6</sup> In particular, in this context, this essay asserts that such tactile motifs and spaces have acquired singular contours in the gothic cinematic tradition, where they build on the terrifying and horrifying potential of touch.

Since the 1990s, many scholars have researched the experience of watching film as an embodied act of perception, often in connection to the audience’s visceral responses to horror.<sup>7</sup> The image intensity of body horror, however, moves beyond the kind of evocative cinema that concerns me here. Instead, this essay focuses on mapping the sensorial routes of the characters in gothic spaces, and examining the ways in which touch is used to convey a sense of terror in a number of mid-twentieth-century films that should be categorised specifically as gothic, rather than as horror films. Paul Rodaway employs the expression ‘sensuous geographies’ to convey the idea that the senses constitute a privileged lens through which to address the physical rapport between the human body and its surroundings.<sup>8</sup> The gothic, I argue, can be read in terms of a sensuous geography, whereby the senses guide both the actions of the characters and our experience of the story. Moreover, underlying the gothic’s sensuous geographies, this essay argues, is a resilient process of sensory contagion between bodies, places, and objects. As Mark Paterson reminds us, touch ‘is a sense of communication’.<sup>9</sup> Gothic films often treat this ‘communication’ in frightening terms — as a matter of contamination, of the self being infected by the other via sensory contact — so that to explore the vast sensorium of the gothic is also to engage with questions surrounding the construction of identity in the films examined here.

This article is structured around five case studies, examining three well-known productions — William Wyler’s *Wuthering Heights* (1939), Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) — and two relatively unknown films that have largely eluded critical study — Marcel Carné’s gothic fantasy *Juliette, or Key of Dreams* (1951) and John Harlow’s bizarre possession story, *While I Live* (1947). *Wuthering*

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Danchev, *Georges Braque: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. cxxxiv; and Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xi.

<sup>7</sup> For recent examples, see Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense, and Place* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects, and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 1.

*Heights*, *Rebecca*, and *While I Live* are more straightforwardly gothic in their use of specific tropes and subject matter; *Juliette, or Key of Dreams* and *La Belle et la Bête* mix gothic themes and motifs with dark fairy-tale storylines. My chosen works echo each other in their treatment of tactility as an element that is essential both to our experience of the filmic material and to the way the characters experience narrative events. In each case, the viewer navigates the space of the films through the onscreen depiction of haptic imagery and sensory landscapes. My investigation begins by proposing an analysis of haptic motifs and tactile spaces in their relation to memory and identity, before moving on to examine the perils surrounding the sensory contagion of memories. The essay combines well-known and little-known black-and-white films that rely most markedly on terror (rather than horror), in order more fully to understand the terrifying aesthetics of touch in gothic film. The focus on works shot in monochrome that lack the shock value of many contemporary horror films helps demonstrate how effectively we can connect with the sensorial field even in the absence of gore or a powerful colour palette, which would normally appeal more immediately to the eye. These choices have limited the discussion that follows to a specific time period; importantly, however, the arguments outlined below can usefully also be applied to classic, modern, and postmodern reinterpretations of the gothic mode.

### **Tactile Spaces and the Duality of Gothic Hands**

In gothic cinema, the characters are often seen manipulating objects. Their hands (usually shot in close-up) open coffins, autopsy bodies, turn door handles, and hold weapons. From the frightening long nails of Nosferatu in F. W. Murnau's 1922 film, through the helpless tragic hero of Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), to more recent examples, such as the creepy shadow of the creature's claws in Jennifer Kent's *Babadook* (2014), gothic films are replete with imagery of hands, and position tactile space as central to their gothic effects. In cinematic narratives, the role of hands has been pivotal from the earliest examples of the horror genre, such as George Méliès' *Le Manoir du diable* (1896), where the plot unravels to the rhythm of the protagonist's hand gestures. One reason that hands abound in silent films is 'because they speak', as Jean-Louis Leutrat claims, pointing to the proximity that the onscreen depiction of hands establishes between the perceptual body of the viewer and the moving images.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most extreme use of hand imagery in early film is accomplished in Robert Wiene's *The Hands of Orlac* (1924), a gothic horror story in which a

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Louis Leutrat, *Vie des fantômes: le fantastique au cinéma* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile/Cahiers du Cinéma, 1995), p. 85.

famous pianist loses both hands in a train crash, and his doctor replaces them with those of a recently executed robber and murderer. As the plot develops, the pianist gradually starts to lose control over his mind and body, sure that those damned, transplanted hands will, eventually, kill again. The skin, blood, and viscera become the site of contagion through which the protagonist is contaminated with the identity of the murderer. In this process, the hand of the artist, the pianist, is at first gruesomely opposed to the hand of the convicted criminal, until the two become one at the cost of the former's identity. In doing so, the film posits a fundamental duality within the image of gothic hands more generally, one that reveals the unstable borders of identity. In Wiene's film, the disintegration of the protagonist's mind comes about as a result of his physical disintegration (the loss of both hands). Furthermore, the disconcerting strangeness of experiencing touch via sensory receptors that are not wholly his own delineates an existential dilemma (raising the question, 'am I still myself when I am also partly Other?') and foregrounds the not-uncommon idea of the hand as autonomous — as an entity independent from the body to which it is physically attached. Rose Marie San Juan has written, *à propos* wax models of hands, that they 'appear not only as three-dimensional entities in space, but also as part of a body elsewhere'.<sup>11</sup> In most cases, she argues, there is an implicit but unavoidable presumption that the hand is always represented as part of the body to which it belongs, which in turn implies that one cannot exist without the Other. Consequently, and conversely, the fragmented experience of the body appears to empty the hand of humanity, by presenting it as independently capable of agency. San Juan explains the uncanny ambiguity of the hand as follows:

When a hand moves, there is always something of the stranger in it. Perhaps it is because the hand rarely seems to be in sync with the rest of the body, [...] always casting doubt on the unifying power of consciousness. The hand has a tendency to stray, one moment disregarding the resolve of the body to which it is connected, the next directing it as if it knows better.<sup>12</sup>

The Otherness that San Juan detects in the hand suits the gothic worldview, in that it stresses the idea of uncanniness or defamiliarisation — that is, the transformation of a habitual perception (of body parts, in this case) into something strange or foreign. The hand creates a terrifying threshold space that exposes the presence of the unfamiliar — the Other — within the self. Barry Sonnenfeld transposes this notion of the hand's 'tendency to stray' literally to

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<sup>11</sup> Rose Marie San Juan, 'The Horror of Touch: Anna Morandi's Wax Models of Hands', *Oxford Art Journal*, 34 (2011), 433-47 (p. 435).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

the screen in the figure of ‘Thing’, the disembodied wandering (and often inappropriate) hand of *The Addams Family* (1991), and in fact, the use of severed hands runs through multiple subsets of the gothic mode, from horror to comedy.

The continuous display of dismembered corporeal imagery throughout Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête*, for instance, is almost violent in its bluntness, and stresses the importance given to tactile and multisensory perception. In particular, the slow-motion sequence in which Belle enters the Beast’s castle directly links the body of the character with the uncanny haptic. In a darkened, half-lit corridor, an orderly row of what appear to be human hands, each holding a candelabra, adorns the otherwise empty walls. As Belle rushes through, the hands turn steadily in her direction, one by one, as if vigilantly following her every step while also pointing the way forward. Hands, in this film, are not just about touch — they continually perform sensory functions, surveying the heroine and sensing her body; they therefore function as a form of spatial mapping and guide Belle’s movements. The pervasive feeling of gothic eeriness derives, in part, from the ambiguity of these bodiless hands, which are simultaneously welcoming and repulsive. While in *The Hands of Orlac*, hands convey horror because the Other has become an integral part of the self’s body (the Other in/as me), eventually leading to madness due to loss of identity, in *La Belle et la Bête*, they accentuate disintegration and instil awe because they are separate from, yet gesture dangerously towards, Belle’s body. Both examples diagnose a tendency towards bodily corruption and identity breakdown by introducing from the outset a binary opposition between self and Other.

This effect is heightened after Belle leaves the strange corridor and moves towards a long staircase, her cape sweeping the floor as she goes. In the foreground, we notice a table laid for a meal and an empty chair. When she reaches the top, she stops before an imposing passageway, guarded by two disembodied hands firmly wielding swords that cross and touch — tactile space thus becomes more menacing as Belle continues her journey. Moreover, contrary to what would be expected, after the hands lift up the swords and allow Belle to pass, the camera does not immediately follow her — it stands still just long enough to show us both hands resuming their initial position, effectively enclosing the heroine in the unknown place she has just entered, so that she is momentarily out of our sight. This conveys a sense of imprisonment, a trope recurrently analysed in connection to gothic houses.<sup>13</sup> Hands therefore appear as guardians of the castle, offering a sense of security, but also as obstacles

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Manuel Aguirre, *The Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); and Eugenia C. DeLaMotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

that might make it difficult for the heroine to escape, should she want to. The Beast's castle, in particular, and gothic architectural structures more generally, such as Blaze Creek in Fritz Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948), Hill House in Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963), or the Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), are thus constructed as seductive and perilous entities that effectively entrap the bodies and minds of the characters.

The sense of enclosure that the descending movement of hands imparts to the as-yet-invisible place that lies beyond them is quickly contrasted with the startling openness of the corridor that the camera cuts to next. This contributes to a sense of the gothic nature of the house, where the secret, the fantastic, and the unexpected meet, and sensory exchange takes place. On one side of the corridor, there is a series of doors, each paired with a window on the opposite side, fully demarcating the limits between the interior of the house (beyond the doors) and the exterior (beyond the windows). There is a very ethereal look to this sequence, achieved by having the actress placed in a trolley with castors as the wind blows full-length white curtains against her. Belle appears almost ghost-like — intangible and immaterial — while gently gliding by. The sensorial field reaches a more complex level at this point by layering different sensory registers: tactile properties are attributed to inanimate objects (the curtains that touch her), and the sense of sight is sharpened when the intermittent strokes of light and shadow from the world outside bring the unlit bare walls to life, creating a singularly haptic space for the viewers. Adding to the hapticity of this scene is the spellbinding soundtrack that fills the sonic space. The use of a trolley provides aesthetic continuity with the previous slow-motion shots, and further accentuates the idea that the heroine has stepped into a magical realm where she is being led to a specific pre-determined place inside the house.

Animism (along with anthropomorphism, one of its subspecies) figures widely in the gothic and here, it is employed in order to stress the idea of the house as a breathing organism, with the many hands, candelabra, and swords that emerge from its interstices, again invoking the borderless communion of building and body.<sup>14</sup> There is a strong sensorial co-dependency between the castle and the percipient self, whereby the hands and walls that shelter Belle also desire to keep her within their confines. An edifice, arguably, becomes gothic because of its dwellers, as a result of the symbiotic relationship between its spaces and

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<sup>14</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron identify animism as a subset of the uncanny in *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 284-85. In gothic cinema, inanimate things, such as portraits, puppets, and houses, often become (or appear to become) active, alive, or human-like. This is the case of the ventriloquist's dummy in *Dead of Night* (dir. by Alberto Cavalcanti et al., 1945), the harpsichord in *Dragonwyck* (dir. by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946), the portrait in *Whirlpool* (dir. by Otto Preminger, 1949), and, more recently, the doll in *Annabelle* (dir. by John R. Leonetti, 2014).

the perceptual human body. The destruction of the house in several gothic films, namely Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (1934), is indicative of the close bond between dweller and dwelling space. In Cocteau's film, the ubiquitous hands, which are external to Belle but internal to the house, establish a connection between two different planes of sensorial interaction: that of the edifice, which acquires agency and interacts with the self through its extensions (candelabra, curtains, and so on), and that of the self, who willingly engages in a sensory dialogue with the house. One outcome of this interdependence is the fact that, through her physical contact with the body of the house, Belle appears as the creator of an almost endless succession of spaces. In other words, Belle's forward motion deeper into the house gives the illusion that the area in front of the camera's recording field derives from the self's multisensory exploration of space. Both are linked on a number of levels and develop a web-like relationship over the course of which Belle alternately appropriates and is appropriated by her material surroundings. Objects seem to awake when they 'sense' her presence, from the candelabra-holding and sword-wielding hands to the waving curtains, which, like disembodied hands, caress Belle's skin. Significantly, Belle does not try to avoid contact with the curtains that touch her, but rather touches them back. This interaction visually replicates Belle's earlier caressing of the house with her billowing cape: the house is getting to know her, just as she is getting to know the house. By reciprocating each other's actions, the house and the self engage in a sensuous game where fear of and fascination for the forbidden and the unknown mesh and blend.

The unexpected, but harmonious, reciprocity of such a process also prevents the film from becoming truly terrifying. We, as viewers familiar with the language of the gothic, are conditioned to expect that Belle will be fearful, so her unforeseen response is disconcerting. In the confined, yet seemingly endless, space of the castle, where there should be apathy and inertia, we find liveliness and movement; where there should be distance and silence, we find proximity and sensorial interchange; and where gory imagery of amputated limbs should dissuade the character from exploring the unknown, she instead chooses to coalesce with it. Gothic houses and castles are made uncanny 'in that the fantastic, the magical and the unheard-of insinuate themselves into everyday reality', so that 'the familiar becomes strange and the strange familiar. Things here are not what they seem', as Rosemarie Buikema and Elisabeth Wesseling write.<sup>15</sup> The fairy-tale overtones in Cocteau's film heighten this sense of

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<sup>15</sup> Rosemarie Buikema and Elisabeth Wesseling, 'Gothic Engineerings in Childrearing Manuals and Feminist Novels: Benjamin Spock Meets Renate Dorrestein', in *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the*

enthraling unease and diminish the gothic monstrosity of the mutilated hands (and, later on, of the Beast's physiognomy), effectively containing and taming the gothic potential which threatens to irrupt from the images. From this perspective, it is the complementary union of self, dwelling space, and the senses that both creates and constrains the gothic in *La Belle et la Bête*.

Moreover, the gothic experience in this film is synesthetic at its core. We are not dealing here with a simple (con)fusion of the senses; rather, each disembodied limb invokes, as San Juan suggests, something that is conspicuously missing (the rest of the body).<sup>16</sup> The ambiguous status of the hands highlights a crucial aspect of the sequence: the idea of unexpected absence. For the duration of the film, none of the hands is shown as belonging to a corresponding body. They belong to no one, and, moreover, we are not sure if they ever did. Observed closely, the sequence seems to be characterised by an absence where one would expect a presence: the absence of a servant opening the massive doors of the castle, the absence of a host greeting the incoming guest, the absence of eyes in the hands that nonetheless somehow seem to spy on Belle, the absence of fingers in the curtains that touch her, and the absence of a person sitting at the table laid for a meal that Belle runs past. In effect, amidst all these absences, the house becomes itself 'a way of looking, a surveillance device monitoring the possessions that occupy it', including its inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> Mark Wigley equates this kind of generalised surveillance within the house with the patriarchal gaze, ceaselessly controlling the female guest-prisoner. The fact that this gaze belongs to the inanimate objects and body parts that actively survey the heroine adds an even more uncanny atmosphere to a film where the female character seems to be literally manipulated by the house-(as)-master. Here we have a space thoroughly contaminated by the Beast's presence/gaze, so that Belle first becomes acquainted with him through sensory contact with his house and its belongings. The fantastic space of the castle has become an integral part of the Beast's identity, further supporting a reading of the house as an extension of its owner.

More generally, the feeling of absence imbues the castle with a distinct sensate quality that consistently frustrates our sensorial expectations of seeing, touching, and being touched. In the space of the castle, the world is experienced in a complex matrix of sensations where one sense immediately calls up another; as outlined above, seeing and touching are all but

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*Eighteenth Century until the Present Day*, ed. by Isabella van Elferen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), pp. 152-67 (p. 156).

<sup>16</sup> After the slow-motion sequence ends, the film depicts another uncanny sensory experience concerning the use of acousmatic voices, which I will not explore here.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', in *Sexuality & Space*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 327-89 (p. 341).



inextricable here. All of those scattered hands, for instance, which watch Belle's progress through the house, are hands that do not, and cannot, touch — no more than Burton's boy with scissors for hands can touch his beloved Kim. The impossibility of touch is metaphorically emphasised by their holding candelabra with lit candles: fire will burn the hand that tries to touch them. This creates proximity and distance simultaneously — proximity between Belle and the place she is in, for the light from the candle allows her to inspect her surroundings, and distance between her and that same place, because the fire creates a barrier that prevents her from ever coming too close. The presence of fire therefore stresses the inability of the hand to perform its primary function: to engage in tactile contact. We realise at this point that the classic five senses alone cannot account for our perception of all these sensory elements. Antunes notes that, in watching a film, our perception 'overlaps with other senses, modalities and functions'.<sup>18</sup> Our experience of those strange hands that keep Belle in equal parts mesmerised and mortified encompasses two of the senses that the author discusses, thermoception and nociception, broadly understood as the ability of organisms to perceive temperature and to detect potentially harmful stimuli, respectively. The impending threat that the candle flames and swords pose entail an understanding (from texts such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) or Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820)) of gothic spaces as built around an intricate network of stimuli where the fear of pain — of sudden attacks to bodily integrity — prevails.

Similarly, the opening sequences of Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* also trade in multisensory images, counterposing interior and outside spaces. At the beginning of the film, a man seeking shelter from a raging blizzard walks into Heathcliff's eponymous estate. When he opens the door, the outside world suddenly invades the interior space of the house, as wind and snow enter the fire-lit room. The light emanating from the fireplace contrasts sharply with the darkness outside and the freezing night air. Both fire and the violent snowstorm, in this context, signal danger and immediately oppose Heathcliff and his guest. These natural elements (fire, water, and air) potentially elicit specific sensory reactions in the viewers with their distinctly pleasant and unpleasant connotations. Much like the duality associated with hands, other sensorial imagery also vacillates between diametrically opposed effects; in this case, the comfort of fire, the coolness of the breeze, or the sublime beauty of snow become gothic through the depiction of their inherently disruptive (and destructive) power. The viewer's abrupt encounter with the natural elements, along with the menacing sound of a

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<sup>18</sup> Antunes, p. 48.

barking dog and the sight of the sad, sunken faces of the house's inhabitants, heightens the affective power of these sensory images, and introduces a mournful feeling from the very beginning of the narrative.

The multisensory experience turns synesthetic in a subsequent sequence. 'You see, I had a dream', recounts Mr Lockwood, the unannounced guest. 'I thought I heard a voice calling. I reached out to close the shutter and something touched me. Something cold and clingy like an icy hand. And then I saw her, a woman.'<sup>19</sup> The man is describing an incident that we as viewers have witnessed only moments earlier, shortly after Lockwood's arrival. Disturbed by the noise of the shutter beating against the window (hearing) and the bitterly cold air (thermoception), Lockwood rises from his bed. As he attempts to close the shutter, he is surprised by the faint sound of a voice calling (hearing) and feels a gelid hand grasping his (thermoception, touch, and nociception). Looking out of the window, he distinguishes the shape of a woman (sight). As he narrates these events, Lockwood concludes, significantly, 'my senses must have been disordered because the falling snow shaped itself into what looked like a phantom'.<sup>20</sup> What we are presented with, then, is an unusual instance of a character remarking upon his synesthetic experience of an uncanny event. Touch stands out as the more powerful and terrifying sense here, for an apparition — a ghost — should not be able to cross that ultimate dividing line between the dead and the living; it should never be able to touch. Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015) provides viewers with another rare example of tactile contact between human and ghost, when the black hands of a female spectre touch the heroine's shoulder at the beginning of the film. Nevertheless, the tangibility of ghosts is challenged in a scene towards the end of the film, in which the protagonist tries to touch her dead husband's cheek only to find her hand going through his face. If a ghostly formation eludes intangibility, it becomes too human; in other words, it becomes susceptible to the reciprocal nature of touch, whereby that which can touch can also be touched. Lafcadio Hearn writes that 'the imagined Supernatural is dreaded mainly because of its imagined power to touch'.<sup>21</sup> Borderline horror lies in the idea that to bridge this fundamental gap between human and supernatural, or self and Other, is to endow the dead with inalienable properties of living beings.

In *Wuthering Heights*, then, the touch of a hand threatens to dissolve the boundary between life and death. Wyler's film opens this door, but has Lockwood blame imagination

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<sup>19</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, dir. by William Wyler (The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1939) [on DVD].

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, 'Nightmare Touch', in *Shadowings* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), pp. 235-47 (p. 237).

(‘I had a dream’, ‘I thought I heard’) and synaesthesia, or faulty stimuli (‘my senses must have been disordered’), for his supposed auditory, tactile, thermal, and visual perceptions. The guest’s rationalisation of events, which establishes the feeling of indecisiveness as to what is real or imagined (Todorov’s ‘hesitation’), constrains the more horrific possibilities of the narrative.<sup>22</sup> Lockwood’s incredulity — his unwillingness to believe that a ghost might have touched him — does not allow horror to erupt and firmly positions the film in the realm of suspenseful gothic terror. Synaesthesia furthermore adds to the eeriness while reducing any sense of physical disgust: it is impossible to determine whether there was really a ghost and whether it touched Lockwood’s hand.

The threat of the tactile (the untouchable hand of the ghost) is here closely attached to memory — to Heathcliff’s memories of Cathy and to Cathy herself as a present-absent memory (a ghost). In fact, Heathcliff’s memories become so powerful that they escape the boundaries of his own psyche and invade Lockwood’s, again disturbing the self/Other boundary. Heathcliff’s refusal to let go of Cathy’s memory gradually develops into bitterness, frustration, and forlornness, which will eventually lead to his death. The contagion of memories thus taints the narrative and represents a source of misery and death for the protagonists.

### **Haptic Journeys, Dangerous Memories**

As this suggests, gothic films often construct memory as an oppressive, suffocating force. In Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, for instance, the tactile space of the film is filled with Rebecca’s memories and with the second Mrs de Winter’s persistence in physically taking possession of Rebecca’s things. At each step of her journey while resident in Manderley mansion, the new Mrs de Winter is repeatedly depicted as touching — with her eyes and hands — all that had once belonged to her husband’s first wife, Rebecca, as if by doing so she could be brought closer to unravelling the buried secrets of the past. Essentially, it is through the senses, specifically touch, that the gothic situation is set up here, as in the other films I have been discussing. Specifically, the contagious quality of memory becomes increasingly obvious as the narrative develops. As Helen Hanson explains, ‘there is a play around the revealing and

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<sup>22</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 24-25.

concealing of the woman in the past — Rebecca — that is perpetuated through a tantalising trail of visual clues'.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Rebecca is, visually, everywhere in the house: from the hand-sewn monograms on the handkerchiefs at the dining table to the faithful dog whose presence disturbs the heroine. While Wigley's argument about the house's devices of surveillance is relevant here, I argue that, rather than representing the watchful eye of the husband, in this film, they stand for Rebecca's eyes, an alteration which shifts the power dynamics of the film away from the conventional Bluebeard-type narrative discussed by Wigley.<sup>24</sup> In a space contaminated with Rebecca's memories, the camera positions the heroine as an outsider from the start: when she first steps into the monumental entrance hall, just as she is meeting the servants, a close-up frames her hands clumsily dropping her gloves on the floor. Over the course of the film, Mrs de Winter behaves as a frightened spectator of Rebecca's life, a poor surrogate for her husband's dead wife. The way that she keeps touching and staring at Rebecca's things highlights her outsider status, so that she always appears to be out of place, never knowing where to go or how to behave within the walls of the house. Surrounded by Rebecca's absent-presence, she feels and acts like a trespasser who has no business being in Manderley.

Her hands therefore remain both clumsy and curious throughout, as depicted in the 'morning room' sequence. Still trying to learn how to be the proper mistress of the house, Mrs de Winter enters the room where Rebecca used to write her correspondence. As she does, the dog that had been resting in front of the fireplace senses the presence of an intruder and leaves the room. The camera focuses on the animal leaving, cutting next to a shot of Mrs de Winter's face, visibly troubled by the creature's hostility. Here, as in the other films, the importance of the senses is highlighted by sensory experience being attributed, not just to the heroine, but to other elements within the diegetic frame. Rebecca's things and her dog are, in this sense, functionally similar to the castle and the hands in *La Belle et la Bête*, or the estate and Cathy's ghost in *Wuthering Heights*. As Mrs de Winter walks towards the desk near the window, a short subjective shot reveals the layout of the objects on top of it. She approaches the objects, first with her eyes, then with her hands, and picks up an address book marked with a capital 'R'. The slow camera movements and the close-ups invite the viewers to

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<sup>23</sup> Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> On the positioning of patriarchy in the text, see, for example, Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

explore the room meticulously, providing an example of the haptic visuality that Marks theorises. There is a certain fearful reverence in the way she explores Rebecca's belongings. While Belle effectively creates the space in front of her as she explores, the second Mrs de Winter seems to have no power at all, and can only fumble at things that clearly still belong to someone else.

The situation that follows, in which she fails to recognise herself as 'Mrs de Winter' when answering the phone, is again indicative of her inadequacy in her new role. Moments later, a particular notebook catches her eye. When she reaches for it with both hands, however, she inadvertently knocks down a small white porcelain figurine that breaks and shatters as soon as it hits the floor. The camera focuses on her hands as she hastily tries to hide the broken pieces. This episode once again evokes the idea of the contrasting facets of gothic hands: the same questing hands that are trying to seize Rebecca's memory are also destroying its indexical traces. The overpowering omnipresence of Rebecca's memories poses a threat to the psychological integrity of the heroine, and it is as though her (clumsy) hands are in a way trying to salvage her from being completely infected by a hostile Other. Memory (and the lack thereof) is also portrayed in negative terms in Carné's *Juliette, or Key of Dreams*, in which the inhabitants of a dream world called the Land of Oblivion must learn to cope with collective amnesia. In the film, a young man, Michel, steals some money from his employer to be able to take Juliette, the colleague with whom he has fallen in love, on a romantic weekend. However, things do not go according to plan: he is caught and subsequently arrested. While in prison, he dreams of a strange village, whose no-less-strange inhabitants have all lost their memories. Each day, they awake with no recollection of who they are or of their life up to that moment. Pointlessly, Michel asks passers-by about Juliette. When he eventually finds her, the peculiar dream quickly turns into a nightmare, for Juliette does not remember him and he has to compete with another man for her love. Only Michel remains immune to the contagious outbreak of memory loss, yet it is his ability to remember that prevents him from fully partaking in Juliette's life in the Land of Oblivion. This foreshadows the tragic events that occur back in narrative 'reality' after Michel's release from prison, as, towards the end of the film, his inability to forget leads to his and Juliette's untimely deaths.

The characters in the film do not know who they are because they have lost their declarative (or explicit) memory; that is, they are unable to inspect memories of past events

consciously or to express them verbally.<sup>25</sup> A damaged declarative memory means that the characters cannot remember any autobiographical details, episodes, people, or places: they have no sense of identity. This is illustrated in an early scene where an old man travelling around the village with a packed cart keeps asking, ‘Who wants souvenirs? Who wants memory?’ These memories are postcards, photographs, and a series of other objects. Juliette finds a photo album and a shawl particularly appealing and, through visual and tactile engagement with the objects (flipping through the pages of the album and caressing the shawl), she imagines her never-lived life with Michel. The interrelationship between memories and the senses introduces the recurring gothic thematic of mistaken, secret, double, or lost identities, familiar from texts such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), or Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). This thematic acquires singular contours in the Land of Oblivion where the absence of identity is unintentional, generalised, and irreversible. As she peruses the photo album, Juliette naively makes up stories about her and Michel’s non-existent life together, using one photograph after another as inspiration. Speaking softly, she recounts everything she ‘remembers’: the places they have been to, the vacations they took, the hotels where they stayed, the parks where they walked, the museums they visited. Michel, who at first indulges in Juliette’s fantasies, becomes increasingly disturbed by the amount of information she adds to her reverie and by the sheer joy she seems to be experiencing from it. He has finally realised that this is no game, that Juliette wholeheartedly believes her own delusional words. There is one serious implication here: admitting that anyone can take possession of what are, in fact, someone else’s memories — memories that one can see and touch — means that memory can be pursued beyond the limits of the individual mind. The understanding of memory as transmissible and susceptible to re-appropriation by an Other via objects also makes it possible to speak of a contagion of memory from the original host to a secondary one. This contagion is propagated through the senses, and specifically through the exploration of tangible objects, as Juliette does with the old man’s wares.

Temporarily assimilating second-hand memories into one’s consciousness, however, does not repair one’s sense of identity; although Juliette (re)creates memories for herself, she still has no idea who she is. Jameson argues that ‘memories are first and foremost memories

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<sup>25</sup> On declarative memory, see N. J. Cohen and L. R. Squire, ‘Preserved Learning and Retention of Pattern Analyzing Skill in Amnesia: Dissociation of Knowing How and Knowing That’, *Science*, 210 (1980), 207-10; and Larry R. Squire, ‘Declarative and Nondeclarative Memory: Multiple Brain Systems Supporting Learning and Memory’, *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 4 (1992), 232-43.

of the senses, and that it is the senses that remember, not the “person” or personal identity’.<sup>26</sup> Following on from this idea, we can argue that the senses might be able to remember even when the person cannot consciously do so — or, in other words, that (via the senses) memories might be accessible even to people who have lost their identity. In fact, although (or perhaps because) declarative memory, memory of which characters are consciously aware, is impaired and inaccessible, there are instances of remembering in the film when the retrieval of memory depends solely on the senses. A strange accordion player in the Land of Oblivion tells Michel that, for him, unlike for everyone else in the village, all has not been forgotten or lost; memories come to him naturally when he plays. Perception through touch and hearing provokes recollection here. As Craig H. Bailey and Eric R. Kandel outline, procedural (or implicit) memory is a type of long-term memory (like declarative memory) that relies upon ‘motor skills [...] and is expressed through performance, without conscious recall of past experience’.<sup>27</sup> These sensory memories recollect movements of the body that have been previously acquired through repetition and practice, such as the playing of a musical instrument. The character’s physical contact with the object, the accordion, is so powerful that it establishes a bridge between the self in the present and the self in the past, making the (re)collection of his own memories possible. This means that, when memory fails, it can be triggered by the senses in order to be (at least partially) recovered. It is possible to go even further and claim that his memory becomes the accordion itself, so that tactile, audible, and visual perception may already be, in certain cases, an act of recollection, of remembering and, thus, of reclaiming a sense of identity. Approaching sensation in connection to memory makes it possible to claim that memory can exist without identity, or that memory might prevail even in the eventuality of a loss of other components of identity, as with the accordionist.

Harlow’s *While I Live* also uses a musical instrument as a catalyst for memory and provides another example of the endurance of procedural memory over declarative memory. The film tells the story of two sisters, the oldest of whom, Julia, exerts a dominating control over the other, a young pianist called Olwen. Julia is envious of her younger sibling’s musical talent and systematically pushes her to finish a piano piece that Olwen is composing. Nevertheless, much to Julia’s dismay, her sister cannot seem to get the ending right. That

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<sup>26</sup> Jameson, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Craig H. Bailey and Eric R. Kandel, ‘Synaptic Growth and the Persistence of Long-Term Memory: A Molecular Perspective’, in *The Cognitive Neurosciences*, ed. by Michael S. Gazzaniga (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 647-64 (p. 647). For more on amnesia and implicit memory, see Alan J. Parkin, *Memory: Phenomena, Experiment, and Theory* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1999), p. 48-55.

night, a sleepwalking Olwen jumps off a cliff, to her death. Twenty-five years later, Julia sits by the radio, anxiously waiting to hear Olwen's piece, which some composer has taken up and finished in the meantime. In the room with her are her nephew, Peter, and his wife. Suddenly, through the garden door, we see a spectral female figure emerge quietly from the mist and advance towards the house. When the broadcast begins, a frantic knocking on the door unsettles everyone in the room. Peter answers the inopportune knocking and lets the woman in. Without a word, the young (and, we soon learn, amnesiac) woman enters the living room in a trance and runs towards the piano. Realising that it is locked, she tries to force it open as if her life depended on it. As she hurriedly sits down, her fingers somehow find their way across the keys and start playing Olwen's piece.

This sequence is highly evocative of the power of the sensorial, namely touch and hearing. On the one hand, the auditory (listening to the music on the radio) appears to have summoned this woman and, on the other, it is through the playing of music (touch and hearing) that she is able to express herself. The way she plays leads Julia and her trusty manservant, Nehemiah, to believe that she is the reincarnation of Olwen, even though she does not resemble her physically. In a form of gothic possession, the memory of the dead (Olwen) takes complete control over the body of this other, living woman, who is, it transpires, a reporter who has been investigating the young pianist's life. Mnemonic contagion is rather violent here, for the memory of Olwen fully contaminates and replaces the memory of the reporter. Unable to remember her own, original identity, the woman has become an Other to herself, and her body a mere recipient of someone else's identity. This is therefore an extreme example of a film where the identity of the Other annihilates the self. Touch and sound (the piano keys and the music they produce) become the vehicle for recapturing the memory of the dead, acting as the gateway to the past and the identity of the Other. Terror, in this film, stems from the representation of the senses as a dangerous way for the dead to invade and possess the spaces and, more frighteningly, the bodies and personal identities of the living.

This article has investigated the pervasiveness of the sense of touch in selected gothic productions where haptic motifs problematise notions of memory and identity. As we have seen, touch and a whole wealth of sensorial imagery underpin the gothic imagination and articulate pivotal gothic themes: lost identities and nightmarish dreams (*Juliette, or Key of Dreams*); trespassing and displacement (*Rebecca*); possession (*While I Live*); monstrosity and dismemberment (*La Belle et la Bête*); and hauntings (*Wuthering Heights*). Although this essay is limited in terms of the number of films and time period it covers, the vast world of



cinematic gothic is rich in its inventive use of complex spaces where the senses meet, and where to see is often to touch, and to touch often implicates sight, pain, and hearing.

The films I have discussed indicate a framing of gothic spaces as singularly haptic. Just looking or listening is not enough in mid-twentieth-century gothic cinema: there is a need for the audience and the characters to engage their whole body in the process of spatial discovery. In these gothic tactile spaces, myriad hands perform different functions and channel alterity, as is depicted in the severed limbs of *La Belle et la Bête*, the ghostly hand of *Wuthering Heights*, and in *While I Live*, where the Other possesses the hand of the self. The act of dwelling in gothic places, from ancient ruined castles to deserted Yorkshire moors, is, I argue, a process of (re)collection, whereby the characters seize and are seized by the memories that have contaminated their surroundings. These memories can be their own, as with the accordionist from *Juliette, or Key of Dreams*, or an Other's, as with *Rebecca's* Mrs de Winter. Gothic films from this era beg for sensorial awareness and engagement; they invite the viewers to participate actively in a multisensory cinematic experience — to feel the films by focusing on a wide range of imagery that directly engages the sensorial field, such as the musical instruments, photographs, gloves, fire, snow, and other elements that come into contact with the skin of the onscreen bodies. The gothic in these films emerges in the exploration of these sensuous geographies — that is, the ways in which the characters and the viewers perceive places, people, nature, and objects as intimately connected to their sensate bodies.