

Book Review

Contemporary Spanish Gothic

By Ann Davies

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Reviewed by Kelly Gardner

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Professor Ann Davies is currently the Chair of Spanish and Latin American Studies at the University of Stirling. Having widely published on contemporary Spanish cinema, Davies extends her extensive knowledge of Spanish narratives to delve into the core of contemporary Spanish Gothic.

In the introduction to *Globalgothic*, Glennis Byron presents the reader with a collection of chapters that intend to delve into the conditions that gave rise to the recent plethora of cultural and location-specific Gothic studies. Long considered the birthplace of Gothic, Great Britain has seen the Gothic gaze expand to consider the growing popularity of research focusing on regional and national gothics. Growing interest in Tropical Gothic, Asian Gothic, African Gothic, Kiwi Gothic, to name a few, led Byron to question the conditions and implications of this proliferation of Gothics. In short, the collection identifies globalisation as the root of proliferation, noting, ‘these developments in the increasingly diverse and problematic genre labelled Gothic were intricately connected to historically specific conditions, to the development of an increasingly integrated global economy.’¹

¹ Glennis Byron, "Introduction." *Globalgothic*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013. 1.

This review, however, is not of *Globalgothic*, but rather of *Contemporary Spanish Gothic* by Ann Davies, a genre labelled Gothic resource that sets out to question Byron's classification of said national Gothic labelling as problematic. In *Globalgothic* we read:

While globalization discourse may call upon familiar gothic tropes, globalization is nevertheless transforming and defamiliarising these tropes as the increased mobility and fluidity of culture leads to the emergence of new gothic forms.²

Written retrospectively, *Contemporary Spanish Gothic* challenges this premise by considering the Gothic that emerges from Spain on its own merits, translating, if you will, the specifics of Spanish Gothic and its contribution to the greater Gothic community.

Davies begins with a thorough introduction of the themes and intentions that unfold in the following chapters. A chapter in its own right, the introduction serves as the foundation upon which Davies builds her argument for acknowledging the uniquely specific characteristics of her Spanish subjects and the contributions they make to the Gothic oeuvre. Here, Davies defends each of the chapters from the totalising concept of Globalgothic, by focusing on intrinsically Spanish aspects that have, themselves, influenced the development of the Gothic genre. Davies mentions Spain's contribution to the macabre conclusion of Don Juan, stating: 'Don Juan dragged to Hell by a statue of a man he murdered – that both predates and prefigures the rise of the Gothic elsewhere.'³ Recognising the improbability of Gothic, as we know it today, having a singular source, namely that of the strand birthed from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

Following this expansive introduction, Davies turns her attention to 'Heritage Gothic: Goya Biopics'. Goya, Davies notes, serves as arguably the 'most notable contributor to a Gothic sensibility'.⁴ In this chapter Davies examines Francisco de Goya as a Gothic classic by considering three biopics of the artist, which are: *Goya en Burdeos* (Goya in Bordeaux, Carlos Saura, 1999), *Volavérunt* (Bigas Luna, 1999) and *Goya's Ghosts* (Miloš Forman, 2006). Themes explored include Gothic spectacle and aesthetic over narrative, Gothic fakery and questionable sexual identity.

Chapter three, 'The Gothic Bestseller: The Circulation of Excess', turns away from film to consider the commercial circulation of the Gothic by looking at the work of Arturo Pérez-Reverte and Carlos Ruiz Zafón, two of Spain's bestselling authors. The main texts examined here are Pérez-Reverte's *El Club Dumas* (The Dumas Club), adapted, though not faithfully, by Roman Polanski into the film *The Ninth Gate* (1999), and Zafón's *La Sombra del Viento* (The Shadow of the Wind). This persuasive chapter returns to the classic Gothic tropes of forgery and authenticity in its consideration of a Spanish imagining of Gothic mimicry. Davies notes: 'The materiality of the manuscript, while unreliable, nonetheless suggests a desire for the tangible artefact that implicitly questions the fear of ephemeral circulation posited by some critics'.⁵ These Spanish examples, while rich in their own heritage, also form a visible connection to the greater theme of forgery and fakery that constantly resurface in the greater Gothic imagination.

Chapters four and five seem to address the most interesting aspect of Davies's argument against that set out by Byron's *Globalgothic*: the question of what makes Gothic specifically Spanish and how Spanish Gothic can then go on to infiltrate the wider Gothic market, more specifically the Hollywood aesthetic, in what Davies considers an 'apparently seamless trajectory'.⁶ While chapter four, 'The Gothic House: Problematising the National Space' looks at the Spanish interpretation of the haunted house, it is Chapter five, 'The Gothic Camera: Javier Aguirresarobe at Home and in Hollywood' and its specific focus on the film work of Aguirresarobe that I feel could potentially attract the most attention of critics. Davies is also obviously aware of this potential, indicated by (what I consider to be) an unnecessary, in-depth justification

2 Glennis Byron, "Introduction." *Globalgothic*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013. 3.

3 Ann Davies, "Introduction." *Contemporary Spanish Gothic*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 2

4 Ann Davies, "Introduction." *Contemporary Spanish Gothic*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 3

5 Ann Davies, "Introduction." *Contemporary Spanish Gothic*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 23

6 Ann Davies, "Introduction." *Contemporary Spanish Gothic*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 23

of questionable primary sources. The first being the inclusion of the English film, though Spanish directed, *The Others* (2001), and then, more specifically, the film adaptation of Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (Chris Weitz, 2009). Here, Davies seems to suggest that Aguirresarobe's Basque background informs the specifically Gothic aesthetic exhibited in his role as Spain's leading director of photography, and his foray into Hollywood has not forced him to relinquish said Gothic aesthetic, but rather allowed it to flourish in a way that, Davies suggests, counters the loss of authority, and thus meaning, so often discussed when considering the globalisation of the Gothic. What we find instead is that Spanish Gothic, more particularly Basque Gothic, pervades the films of other nations, incorporating an intertextuality that defies the watering-down implied by the concept of *Globalgothic*.

While chapter five focuses on the effect and influence of Spanish Gothic on Hollywood, the final chapter, 'Gothic Medicine: Written on the Body', turns its focus inwards, choosing to examine indigenisation in favour of deterritorialisation of the Gothic. Here, Davies notes the theme to be of 'Gothic medicine and its simultaneous recognition and attempted repression of the problematic, diseased, disruptive or dead body'⁷. This chapter considers three examples of Spanish Body Gothic, Pedro Almodóvar's *La piel que habito* (*The Skin I Live In*, 2011), *Los ojos de Julia* (*Julia's Eyes*, Guillem Morales 2010) and *El cuerpo* (*The Body*, Oriol Paulo 2012). With this chapter we see the Spanish manifestation of the mad scientist, the macabre surgeon, and the limits of identity and physical form. It is interesting to note, though, that Davies does not entirely escape the globalization of the Gothic, recognizing herself that *La piel que habito* is the film adaptation of Thierry Jonquet's French novel *Mygale* (1984). However, the specific Spanish nuances are explored in a convincing manner that justifies the significance of Spanish Gothic as unique from its regional cousins.

The strength of this book can be found in the quality of subjects considered. Each chapter presents the reader with examples that pique interest and encourage further research into the richness of Spanish Gothic. The varied chapters offer different approaches to the techniques explored within Spanish Gothic and Davies successfully collates contemporary manifestation of Spanish Gothic that deny being mere imitations. This book would be a valuable addition to any Gothic scholar's library. Davies succeeds in delivering a text that not only acknowledges and celebrates the contributions Spain has made to the Gothic on a national level, but how this has fed into and influenced Gothic on a Global scale.

7 Ann Davies, "Introduction." *Contemporary Spanish Gothic*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 24