HORROR AND GOTHIC MEDIA CULTURES

Edited by Jessica Gildersleeve and Kate Cantrell

# Screening the Gothic in Australia and New Zealand

## Contemporary Antipodean Film and Television

Amsterdam University Press

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# Horror and Gothic Media Cultures

The *Horror and Gothic Media Cultures* series focuses on the influence of technological, industrial, and socio-historical contexts on the style, form, and aesthetics of horror and Gothic genres across different modalities and media. Interested in visual, sonic, and other sensory dimensions, the series publishes theoretically engaged, transhistorical, and transcultural analyses of the shifting terrain of horror and the Gothic across media including, but not limited to, films, television, videogames, music, photography, virtual and augmented reality, and online storytelling.

To foster this focus, the series aims to publish monographs and edited collections that feature deep considerations of horror and the Gothic from the perspectives of audio/visual cultures and art and media history, as well as screen and cultural studies. In addition, the series encourages approaches that consider the intersections between the Gothic and horror, rather than separating these two closely intertwined generic modes.



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For our many students of the Gothic over the years, with gratitude for your conversations and recommendations.

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# Introduction: Please Check the Signal: Screening the Gothic in the Upside Down

*Jessica Gildersleeve and Kate Cantrell*

**Abstract**

How do Antipodean films and television programmes represent their own sense of the Gothic? What does the contemporary Gothic look like on the large and small screen in productions from Australia and New Zealand? New ways of watching film and television via popular streaming services have seen a reinvigoration of this 'most domestic of media'. What does this look like 'Down Under' in the twenty-first century? This introduction to the collection traces representations of the Gothic in film and television in Australia and New Zealand in the twenty-first century. It attends to the development and mutation of the Gothic in these post- or neo-colonial contexts, concentrating on the generic innovations of this temporal and geographical focus.

**Keywords:** contemporary Gothic; Australia; New Zealand; screen studies

The popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016–) partly derives its terror from its construction of a parallel universe termed the 'Upside Down'. This alternate dimension is a site of chaos, destruction, and invasion, a space constructed in opposition to the civilization and familiarity of the small North American town inhabited by the series' teenaged protagonists. A similar concept appears in the second season of the American series *Channel Zero* (2016–2018) in which an uncanny alternate universe is accessed via the 'No-End House'; in this subverted world, people and things look the same as they do in the 'real world', but behave, horrifically, very differently. We borrow the term 'Upside Down' because the Otherness it evokes mimics the

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construction of Australasia as the 'Antipodes', a space not only geographically opposite to the northern hemisphere but, in the lingering relics of colonial discourse, culturally and philosophically opposite too. In Australia and New Zealand, such an orientalist or carnivalesque construction supposes, everything is 'upside down', topsy-turvy, out of place. As the travel writer Jan Morris famously wrote of the Land Down Under, 'the water goes down the plug-hole the other way in Australia, and it really is possible to imagine, if you are a fancifully minded visitor from the other hemisphere, that this metropolis is clinging upside-down to the bottom of the earth' (470).

During the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, this sense of reversal was coded through a colonial perspective as Gothic. The foreignness of the Antipodes, with its unfamiliar landscapes and Indigenous peoples, was cast as something to be feared, as in Marcus Clarke's famous description of the Australian bush (1876):

> The Australian mountain forests are funereal, secret, stern. Their solitude is desolation. They seem to stifle, in their black gorges, a story of sullen despair [...]. In the Australian forests no leaves fall. The savage winds shout among the rock clefts. From the melancholy gums, strips of white bark hang and rustle. The very animal life of these frowning hills is either grotesque or ghostly. Great grey kangaroos hop noiselessly over the coarse grass. Flights of white cockatoos stream out, shrieking like evil souls. The sun suddenly sinks, and the mopokes burst out into horrible peals of semi-human laughter. The natives aver that, when night comes, from out the bottomless depth of some lagoon the Bunyip rises, and, in form like a monstrous sea-calf, drags his loathsome length from out the ooze. From a corner of the silent forest rises a dismal chant, and around a fire dance natives painted like skeletons. All is fear-inspiring and gloomy. No bright fancies are linked with the memories of the mountains. Hopeless explorers have named them out of their sufferings – Mount Misery, Mount Dreadful, Mount Despair. (qtd in Gelder and Weaver 3–4)

For Clarke, the Australian bush is a gothic netherworld thronged with monstrous animals, anthropomorphized landscapes and climates, and the chaos of horrific sounds – shouting winds, shrieking birds, disembodied voices. While several writers and artists have since made progress in dismantling the idea of the Antipodes as a cultural and geographical anomaly, some residual tensions remain. Contemporary New Zealand, for example, is still subject to such constructions, Jennifer Lawn observes, because the nation's perceived strangeness or mythicism means that it 'transforms itself into fantasy spaces

(Middle-Earth, Narnia, Skull Island) that feed the latest enthusiasms of the global entertainment industry' (11). Indeed, the Land of the Long White Cloud, so often imagined as a pastoral paradise or island sanctuary, is often marketed overseas as a utopian nation, a dream destination 'needing little make-up or CGI to appear beguiling or other-worldly' (Insight Guides).

But how do so-called Antipodean films and television series represent their own sense of the Gothic? What does the contemporary Gothic look like on the large and small screen in productions financed and filmed in Australia and New Zealand? Without doubt, new ways of watching film and television via popular streaming services have seen a reinvigoration of this 'most domestic of media' (Wheatley 25). Adaptations of classic Gothic texts, like *Rebecca* (2020), adapted from Daphne Du Maurier's novel (1938), *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), based on Shirley Jackson's novel of the same name (1959), and its sequel, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), adapted from Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), have found a new audience in the Netflix generation, hungry for horror to 'binge watch' or stream and scream. Indeed, streaming platforms like Netflix have actively participated in what Matt Hills describes as 'the horror boom that can be traced to the rise of "quality" premium cable TV' (127). Streaming services 'normaliz[e] binge-watching' and 'individualiz[e] construction[s] of audience', he observes (125–126), suggesting an intensification of the claustrophobia and invasiveness associated with the domestic or televisual Gothic.

At the same time, new adaptations of the Australian Gothic cinema of the 1970s 'New Wave' have also found a fresh following. Foxtel's serialization of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2018) and the commercial television miniseries *Wake in Fright* (2017), for instance, 'domesticate and democratize the Gothic' for their on-demand streaming audience (Gildersleeve, 'Weird Melancholy'), moving away from the exclusivity of the original arthouse works. This revival and revision of the corpus of the 1970s demonstrates the Gothic's mutative ability and reveals its compulsion to make visible the social and cultural mutations of society as a whole. In this way, the renewal of earlier gothic themes, and the extension of gothic discourses, enacts what we might think of as a reawakening, a troubling provocation of arousal and anxiety. Indeed, as Allison Craven observes, the reappearance of these titles after a period of dormancy has itself 'the aura of a haunting' (46–47).

Given that these particular examples – perhaps the most well-known original instances to which the term 'Australian Gothic cinema' might be most readily applied – are both 'high-art' and more interested in 'issues of Australian national identity over genre classifications' (Balanzategui 22–23), and in light of David Punter's observation that 'the Gothic as an aesthetic,

as a vernacular [...] [is] an essential – perhaps [...] *the* essential – element in nation-building' (23), what does this new 'domesticity' of the Gothic look like in the Upside Down in the twenty-first century? This collection traces representations of the Gothic in film and television in Australia and New Zealand from a twenty-first-century perspective, a vantage point inevitably skewed by the mordant outlook of a contemporary moment in which we may feel as if we are living in a horror film. All of the works discussed in this volume were produced within the last decade, providing a highly recent snapshot of the appearance of the televisual Gothic in this context.

In casting a critical eye to the Antipodean Gothic, the collection also attends to mutations of the Gothic in post- or neo-colonial contexts, concentrating on the generic innovations of this temporal and geographical focus, while simultaneously considering distinctions between appearances of the genre in each nation. New Zealand Gothic, for instance, appears to more readily engage with the Māori experience and legacy of colonization, while Australian Gothic still tends toward a narrative framed by white guilt or shame. While each chapter in this collection, then, explores a particular aspect of the Gothic Down Under, examining texts that seek to exhume or exorcize different national traumas, there are key ideas and themes that cluster around the selected texts. Moral ambiguity, cultural neurosis, and ecological devastation are recurring preoccupations, inextricable as they are, in the Antipodean context, from the illegal occupation of the land. Not surprisingly, the Antipodean inflection also manifests in new reincarnations of historical tensions and concerns: the figure of the lost child and its mythic associations with white vanishing, the spectral presences and projections of the colonial encounter including xenophobic fears of the Other, and the *unheimlich* nature of the unauthorized home built on haunted land. Indeed, the Gothic's interrogative stance lends itself to a genre that is still obsessed with the disturbances and transgressions of colonial history but still ultimately unable to resolve that trauma. If there is a common 'message' that underpins these texts, it is that the ghosts of the past cannot be banished or contained; they can only be momentarily placated or temporarily appeased.

To be sure, the Gothic has always been a political and cultural discourse, a site for the examination of and reflection on that which troubles or disturbs us most. Resolution of such problems is often wistful, nostalgic or conservative in older Gothic texts, but in the contemporary Gothic no such comfort is offered. Andrew Smith, for example, has cautioned that the Gothic 'should not be read as a form which passively replicates contemporary cultural debates about politics, philosophy, or gender, but rather reworks, develops, and challenges them' (8). In the horror story of contemporary global culture,

the Gothic not only provokes visceral response, as in the Gothic of old, but responsible cultural action. In fact, the Antipodean Gothic can be seen to provoke a political engagement which precisely depends upon a discourse of upheaval and disruption, a continual uprooting of colonial sensibilities and nostalgic tendencies. This most often manifests in a desire to return to and rework the past, so that while the Gothic 'frequently functions to contest the more optimistic foundational narratives of new worlds [...] [it] often continues to give expression to lingering traumas produced by colonial life, with buried pasts resurfacing in horrific form to disturb the present' (Byron 369). In the postcolonial configurations of the Gothic, this resurfacing can take the form of what Felicity Collins and Therese Davis call 'backtracking', in which the viewer is encouraged to examine historical representation for the purpose of an epiphanic recognition of the traumas of the past (37–38). More than this, we might say that backtracking paradoxically necessitates progressive or forward movement since the narrative strategies employed by Gothic texts make us accountable, both individually and collectively, for social exclusions and invisibilities, for what has been historically silenced, discarded, or denied. When the credits roll and the black mirror of the television screen casts only our reflection, we are forced to confront our own complacency in the horrific events that have just unfolded before our eyes, such that the Gothic works to remind us of our complicity in past abuses and oppressions that still hold power today.

In this way, the Antipodean presentation of the televisual Gothic exploits the quotidian nature of the medium to establish the uncanny as the defining feature of the gothic mode. The television – a staple fixture in most Australian and New Zealand homes – transmits long-standing national traumas into the private sphere, packaging them in serialized form, in endless continuations that may stretch over years, not unlike the experience of trauma itself. The televisual Gothic, then, as a domestic genre, signals a potential threat toward the very space in which it is consumed: in other words, it 'touches upon and skews the ordinary-world dimensions of domesticity, decorative form, and psychological balance; it troubles them with aberration, with something that ought not be there' (Lawn 15). In turn, the television – the ordinary domestic object at the heart of the home – becomes a malevolent portal between human and supernatural worlds, material and immaterial realms, inside and outside zones. As a result, the home is destabilized as the membrane between the real and the spectral is breached; the private space is penetrated by external threats that compromise the safety of both its on-screen and off-screen occupants, subjecting them to abnormal scrutiny and surveillance, and imperiling

them in moments of madness, episodic patterns of chaos and confusion. Watching (and rewatching) this assault is a bodily experience that is marked by anticipation and unease; it is an encounter that requires vigilance, one in which our attention to suffering – and the responsibility that brings – is obligatory rather than optional. The 'gogglebox', in this respect, is not a neutral void or a venture into vacancy; the domestic space is not a space to rest or retreat. The chapters in this collection by Ella Jeffery and Lorna Piatti-Farnell both engage with this uncanniness of the domestic space: while Jeffery considers the paradoxical unhomeliness experienced by contestants on a popular renovation television show beamed nightly into the living rooms of its viewers, Piatti-Farnell observes how this uncanniness can become a humorous construction of the precise locality of the Gothic in satirical Kiwi cinema, so that 'through a good dose of humour', vampires 'are portrayed as part of the cultural fabric of Wellington, and emerge as increasingly "human" in their habits and routines'.

Granted, anxiety pervades the gothic home, as it always has, but more than this, in its recent Antipodean manifestation, domestic anxiety is a commentary on the impossibility of a productive future. Indeed, if there is a future for the family and by extension the nation, it is one that is monstrous. In this sense, New World colonial history, as has been popular in North American literature, television, and film, can be read as a gothic history, but so too is the future configured in gothic terms. In both local and global political terms, the Antipodean Gothic reads the future as a trauma waiting to happen, dreading the days and nights to come. In the televisual Gothic, this feeling of uncanny dread is heightened not only by the disruption of realist texts but by the genre's self-conscious manoeuvres, by the literal and metaphorical border crossings that global television allows. The television programmes examined in this collection reveal that the Australian Gothic, like its New Zealand counterpart, is a hybridized and increasingly transnational genre, one that reflects national interests and concerns while at the same time aligning with international markets and viewing trends in order to secure its transnational currency. The marketing of *The Kettering Incident* (2018), for example, as 'a cross between the American cult series *The X-Files*, with a little bit of *Twin Peaks*' (Turnbull and McCutcheon 197), or the promotion of *The Cry* (2018) as a 'Scaussie-Noir', a Scottish-Australian hybrid, reflects the myriad ways in which both series deliberately combine the familiar tropes of crime drama with local aesthetics, influences, and media traditions, thereby grounding both stories in popular Gothic settings, as Billy Stevenson, Kate Cantrell, Jennifer Lawn, and Liz Shek-Noble make clear in chapters addressing the specificity of Antipodean Gothic locations:

the Tasmanian hinterland and the Antarctic topos in *Kettering*, the rural backroads of country Victoria in *The Cry*, the New Zealand farmstead in *The Bad Seed*, the famous tourist location of Bondi Beach in *Top of the Lake* (2013; 2017). In this way, the Gothic not only evolves through transmutations from script to screen, and screen to stage, but through both its spatial and temporal displacement of domestic anxieties to remote locations, and its reconfiguration of gothic motifs for both a local and global audience. In this regard, Lawn's assertion that 'perhaps the best way to describe the gothic's location […] is to say that it *could be* anywhere' (Lawn 14) speaks to the treatment of the Gothic as a mode rather than a genre, 'as a way of doing and seeing, adaptable across dislocations of culture, time, and space, rather than a substantive category' (14–15).

Indeed, the distinctive mode of the Antipodean Gothic is its attitude to the past and its unwelcome legacies. In fact, the Gothic, in general, can be read as a 'narrative of trauma', as Steven Bruhm has observed, adding that 'it is finally through trauma that we can best understand the contemporary Gothic and why we crave it' (268). Jerrold E. Hogle, too, asserts that 'Gothic fiction has always begun with trauma' (72), while Glennis Byron, in her meditation on the Global Gothic, suggests that in the case of Australia and New Zealand (and Canada), the Gothic frequently takes, as its setting, 'a modern urban development built over a site of past trauma' (375). Ken Gelder, too, agrees that the Antipodes are often depicted as places of 'abandoned homesteads' and 'obscure burial sites' (383), improvised graveyards that represent 'not a triumph of nation-building […] but the loss of faith and reason' (381) and, we might add, the loss of stories that might have been told. To be sure, the commemoration or memorialization of 'disputed or contested pasts', as Maria Beville notes, 'frequently relies on gothic frames' (55). For Beville, the Gothic 'serves both as a part of our way of looking back and also a part of the way in which we carry the past forward into the future' (55). This is particularly true for the Gothic as it appears in the Antipodes, since its readiness for dealing with historical complexity and the haunting legacy of colonial violence means that the genre is 'particularly suited as a structural representation of trauma and oppression in Australia's fraught historical and social context' (Gildersleeve, 'Contemporary Australian Trauma' 92). Indeed, contemporary Gothic literature, film, and television in both Australia and New Zealand finds its most powerful function as 'a site for political resistance and for social and cultural disruption' (91). Such disruptions are perhaps clearest in the gothic bodies of the screen depictions discussed in this book: the sleepwalking bodies in Cantrell's chapter, symptomatic of psychological trauma; the abused and violated bodies to which Shek-Noble

attends; the stereotyped bodies discussed by Corrine E. Hinton; the angry, vengeful, and violent bodies assessed by Jessica Gildersleeve, Nike Sulway, and Amanda Howell. Thus, revenge, trauma, and grief emerge as key themes in this collection, as gothic bodies, both alive and dead, yearn for attention, for recognition of their wounds and scars. The melancholy ghosts of the Antipodean Gothic rightfully recognize their troublesome histories as the troublesome present, demonstrating how 'gothic memory comes to be first constructed, and then remediated in social and cultural terms' (Beville 66).

Thus, this profound intertwining of contemporary Antipodean film and television with the Gothic may seem unusual, given what Jane Stadler terms the incongruity of the Australian landscape with the tropes of the genre as it appears in Europe (336). Indeed, such an observation was also made long ago by Frederick Sinnett, who lamented the impossibility of the Gothic in a country dispossessed of castles, embattled inheritance, and ancient relics:

> It must be granted, then, that we are quite debarred from all the interest to be extracted from any kind of archaeological accessories. No storied windows, richly dight, cast a dim, religious light over any Australian premises. There are no ruins for that rare old plant, the ivy green, to creep over and make his dainty meal of. No Australian author can hope to extricate his hero or heroine, however pressing the emergency may be, by means of a spring panel and a subterranean passage, or such like relics of feudal barons, and refuges of modern novelists, and the offspring of their imagination. There may be plenty of dilapidated buildings, but not one, the dilapidation of which is sufficiently venerable by age, to tempt the wandering footsteps of the most arrant parvenu of a ghost that ever walked by night. It must be admitted that Mrs Radcliffe's genius would be quite thrown away here; and we must reconcile ourselves to the conviction that the foundations of a second 'Castle of Otranto' can hardly be laid in Australia during our time. (98)

Yet, as the texts examined in this collection demonstrate, Australia and New Zealand have forged their own gothic landscapes. In the Upside Down, the coastal haven and the rural idyll are inverted, so that the sun-kissed beach, the tropical rainforest, and the sedate desert are all made horrific, as in *Wake in Fright* and *Wolf Creek* (2005). Moreover, sublime landscapes often reject or absorb the figure of the stranger or the foreigner, as in *Strangerland* (2015) (see Stadler), *Tidelands* (2018), and *Top of the Lake*. The carefully maintained suburban home conceals dark secrets, monstrous creatures, and supernatural forces as in *The Loved Ones* (2009), *The Babadook* (2013), *What We Do in the*

*Shadows* (2014), and *The Bad Seed* (2019). Antipodean land is also scarred by 'reminders of the tremendous primal forces' that have 'shaped' it – in New Zealand's case, the 'visible volcanic cones and craters [that] [prompt] the question of what lies beneath' (Conrich 394). These tropes figure the 'gothic migrations and mutations' (Lawn 11) of the genre as it makes itself at home in the Global South, adopting and adapting their origins in the European Gothic to forms more appropriate for Antipodean stories and histories. Thus, although Byron argues that 'what is identified as Gothic today is something increasingly detached from any specific historical, social, and cultural "origins"' (371), this collection posits that the Australian and New Zealand Gothic still insists upon a cultural and historical specificity. Jessica Balanzategui's chapter on the global and local intersections of the Antipodean Gothic on screen provides a comprehensive overview of the genre's global influences and connections, as well as its unique and particular characteristics as a localized practice. Patrick West and Luke C. Jackson take this a step further, considering how global ecological concerns are made manifest as Gothic in recent Australian film.

As Jonathan Rayner has it, even 'if certain generic features of horror and fantasy are common across texts divided by their geography, their history and the medium in which they are produced, an identification of the potential national specificity of Australasian Gothicism also assumes a new, particular, and cultural importance' (91). Indeed, the growing critical understanding of the nuances of the Gothic as it engages with the spiritual and cultural practices of Māori and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story is just one such site of distinction from a more general 'Global Gothic' (see, for instance, Conrich; Borwein; Lawn), since it is a 'colonial imposition' to simply read such narratives as Gothic (Byron 370). In this collection, Emma Doolan's chapter on *Tidelands* considers the uses of cultural hybridity and its intersections with monstrosity in the Australian Gothic, while Emily Holland argues, via attention to uncanny space in Kiwi film, for recognizing the importance of a 'Māori Gothic'.

*Contemporary Antipodean Gothic on Screen* was written prior to and during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has meant that the collection has not yet been able to attend to the specific impacts of this highly gothic virus – global, contagious, mutating – on contemporary Antipodean film and television. There is no doubt, however, that such work will arise, giving new meaning to old characterizations of the screen as a form of image addiction or image virus. Indeed, the viral influences of the pandemic on the particular social and cultural representation of the Gothic in Australia and New Zealand will be critical to trace as transmission, in its different forms, continues.

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