

[Video Essay](#)

Heightened Genre and Women's Filmmaking in Hollywood: *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) as Teen Gothic

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ABSTRACT

In this video essay I explore intertextuality in *Twilight* as a marker of cinephilic female authorship. I aim to show that the film relies for much of its gripping effect on overtly re-engaging overdetermined structures of feeling established by earlier texts, in other words by invoking genre memory. Considering the key genres with which the film engages – notably Gothic horror and romance as well as the teen film – I demonstrate how *Twilight* repeatedly appeals to cultural knowledge at not only an intellectual but also an emotional level. I suggest that apostrophising the mind and the body simultaneously and in a way that cannot be parsed demands to be read as a feminist gesture, since the mode of address adopted by what I call heightened genre films such as this one forecloses the viability of Cartesian dualistic understandings of human experience on which patriarchal exclusions of women and other groups have often rested.

Keywords: affect, genre, women's filmmaking, intertextual pastiche, popular cinephilia

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/726107982/2da9a83b06>

ACCOMPANYING COMMENTARY

Deriving from my book on *Heightened Genre and Women's Filmmaking in Hollywood* (Harrod, 2021), this essay is planned as the first in a series staging its key claim: that a significant group of female filmmakers in Hollywood have since around 1990 been making films that are at once highly self-conscious yet highly emotionally affecting.¹ Since the argument rests on the felt impact of generic echoes, the video essay format provides the ideal means to demonstrate claims about the power of clichéd audio-visual situations to move the viewer even as we are aware of their well-worn history in representation² – or, in the words of filmmaker Agnieszka Piotrowska paraphrasing Catherine Grant, to 'explor[e] what visual intertextuality can produce in terms of new knowledge' (Piotrowska, 2020: 1).

The essay opens with a prologue adumbrating the stakes of embracing the heightened genre framework, as symptomatic of a refusal to separate thought and feeling, for feminist film studies and feminism as such. This is achieved audio-visually partly through an excerpt from another exemplary film: Greta Gerwig's 2019 *Little Women*. This film intradiegetically references the deployment of discourses of rationalism to side-line women, when protagonist Jo March (Saoirse Ronan) describes her desire for intellectual as well as romantic fulfilment. I link this

¹ Relevant filmmakers in addition to Hardwicke and Greta Gerwig, both discussed in this video essay, include Kathryn Bigelow, Amy Heckerling, Sofia Coppola, Nora Ephron and Nancy Meyers (who have received some limited critical attention) as well as Kimberly Peirce (who has received almost none). For a fuller discussion of *Twilight*, including extended analysis of the heightened generic power of a single shot and reflections on how the film's status as adaptation, serial narrative and object of fan cultures consolidate and expand claims about it, see pp. 117-134.

² See also Dyer, 2007.

recognition to more recent iterations of the condescending tendency to relegate women to the status of over-emotional fools, reproducing the example of UK Prime Minister David Cameron's 2011 gendered jibe to a female colleague in Parliament, 'Calm down, dear', as an emblematic case among myriad manifestations of the nefarious effects of such tenacious discourses on cultural attitudes in even the most public of fora. Indeed, Cameron's comment is succeeded by a gallery of drawn and photographic records of the inhuman treatment to which 'hysterical' women have been subjected in the name of science – a point whose larger significance becomes evident when we recall the etymology of *hysteria* in the Greek term for the uterus, such that the pathologised over-emotional woman stood for woman *par excellence* in classical Western patriarchal cultures. I further show that *Little Women* formally exemplifies heightened genericity by incorporating an intellectual tease into its potentially most rousing emotional scene: a romantic kiss between Jo and a French professor. It interrupts the swelling score and deadline structure, which has Jo chase her departing suitor to the train station and beg him not to move away, in order to reveal the scene to have been added to her own novelisation of her life, in a Russian doll figuration that reaches out to the extratextual female author. However, the romance moment is still played out for effect (rather than spoofed by foregrounding parodic elements) and comprises the film's climactic high in terms of affective trajectory.

The main body of the essay then analyses *Twilight* as a more subtle but also more thoroughgoing example of heightened genre. Considering the key genres in which Hardwicke's film can be situated, with a view to probing its knowing yet participatory relationship with these, the Gothic emerges as a master category in its defining referentiality to past forms (Spooner, 2006: 9-10). Further, just as the Gothic is given to 'revealing while shrouding' (Branch, 2010: 64), *Twilight* epitomises heightened genre because it underscores the artificiality of generic elements while fully inviting the viewer's willing multi-sensory 'seduction' (Wilson, 2011; 2014: xii) by these, in a manner that simultaneously resonates with Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley's (2010: 87) description of teen horror in terms of 'an enduring stress on 'heightened subjective experience and psychological perception, appealing to *emotional* rather than objective realism' (original emphasis).

To instantiate the film's reliance on Gothic conventions in the video essay, I first juxtapose images of Gothic architecture and art with shots from *Twilight*, before reading from classic Gothic poem 'Goblin Market' alongside moments from the film with which it bears not only narrative but also remarkably strong visual, aural and altogether sensory comparison. *Twilight*'s similarity to historical vampire films specifically is then drawn out, emphasising such texts' status as already situated at the interface of intellectual appeal – cult fan cultures that catalogue references – and an emotive address in which implied violence engages an erotic register. This apprehension tallies with the way in which not only have vampires become associated with an urgent drive to signify discursively in general (Williamson, 2005: 2), but Anne Morey's examination of *Jane Eyre*'s influence on *Twilight* illuminates their specific aptness as signifiers of romance, as an ideology based on extreme gender difference. Accordingly, the essay moves next to considering *Twilight*'s debt to nineteenth-century Romantic-Gothic literature, notably as adapted for cinema, with excerpts drawn from versions of *Lady Chatterley* and *Wuthering Heights* as well as *Jane Eyre*. The resulting medley of dialoguing scenes articulates the fact that a female concern with the natural world, theorised as purely haptic in relation to art cinema, also addresses representational memories.³ It thus evokes the way in which, just as the Gothic takes in both surface and depth, *Twilight* works the interrelated seams of sensory-emotive evocation and cognitively produced signification together, to suggest that there is no meaningful way to separate these scenes' sensuous qualities from their history of connoting (female-accented) sensuality: our sensory-emotive 'insides' are acted on and shaped by outside forces unavoidably embedded in culture and the discursive.

Noting the overlap between romantic desire and the death drive in such textual situations, not to mention the variety of historical representations of vampires, a related, secondary discursive thread of this section of the essay focuses on *Twilight*'s thorough scrambling of gendered conceptions of genre itself, given the historical associations of horror with masculinity and romance with femininity. In this way, Hardwicke's movie is revealed to preclude binaristic understandings at all levels: just as for Christine Gledhill (2017: x) analysis of genre storytelling can expose 'the genericity of social gender', here, likewise, probing the aporias of social gender tags goes hand in hand with exploding the myth of total generic coherence.

After illustrating the intermittent degree of explicitness in *Twilight* about its own fantastical status, the third part of the essay then looks at how the film achieves its blurring of categories in relation to the teenpic. Part of the objective here is to demonstrate the way in which participation in various genres can be one means to throw the codes pertaining to each into relief. Cross-cutting between clips from Hardwicke's film and other teen or related movies shows how choices of setting and dialogue in particular, as well as specific stylistic features such as the use of slow-motion, wink knowingly at overdetermined teen (and sometimes other, more generalised, narrative) cinematic conventions – and very often their gendered nature, especially in teen horror (Driscoll, 2012; Clover, 1992) – while still situating the viewer in the affectively saturated world of adolescents and tapping into our own

³ For a famous and influential example of haptic criticism on Jane Campion's *The Piano*, see Sobchack (2004: 61-66).

(cultural) memories of highly charged teen experiences. ⁴ Importantly, it is here that the essay gestures implicitly back to the place of the film director in heightened genre filmmaking and analysis, indicating through a comparison between *Twilight* and quintessential auteur Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965) that extremely overt, metafictional knowingness can be equated to direct to-audience address usually (though not exclusively) associated with auteur and art cinemas:

A text that thematizes its own self-conscious awareness of the process of its own construction unavoidably thematizes the importance of its creator (Worthington, 2001: 118).

Further, drawing on Torben Grodal's claim that moments of self-consciousness in cinema are 'more emotional than cognitive, as [they] provide[s] a "feeling" in the viewer' (Grodal, 1999: 216), the essay points to a relation of felt complicity between the viewer and the filmmaker, which has important implications for orienting us positively towards the cinephilic mainstream film director. Such a championing of Hardwicke as a skilled artist – including noting some of her original contributions to adapting *Twilight* from its book form in terms of costume and styling – is important given her widespread denigration in criticism disavowing the movie's spectacular success, which included attaining the record for the highest-grossing opening for any film directed by a woman (Kapurch, 2012: 183).

The final moments of the video essay acknowledge *Twilight*'s relation to a recent trend for representing young women on screen as agentic if not violent, especially in female-authored films. However, I choose to frame the work with a quotation from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1998: 186):

To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern, that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion, a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge.

The inclusion of this detail here takes the final emphasis away from representational politics to recentre questions of aesthetics choice in film practice. Specifically, it foregrounds the way in which many female authors' work exemplifies what Jane Gaines (2012: 18) has described as women filmmakers' 'highly developed social expertise in the ways and means of feeling'. It is the central claim of this first instalment of the present series of video essays that recent heightened genre filmmaking by Hardwicke in *Twilight*, like other women working in contemporary Hollywood, manifests particularly clearly how such expertise leads to 'the codification of emotional knowledge in genre' (Gaines, 2012: 18). Such a recognition elevates the status of the typically decried female director of contemporary mainstream cinema, resituating her as a powerful author of collective subjectivities.

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⁴ The essay also illustrates how Hardwicke's film engages yet stakes out its distance from the commodified, 'shiny' aesthetics of girl teen films specifically. On this topic, see also Colling (2017: 68), building on the work of Mary Celeste Kearney and Marina Warner.

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