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**INFLECTIONS OF THE GOTHIC IN
NEW ZEALAND FILM**

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1998**

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This thesis examines a number of inflections of the Gothic in New Zealand film by looking at parallels and commonalities New Zealand film has with other artistic forms which incorporate elements of the Gothic style and form. It attempts this task by investigating three particular areas that share links with the dark nature of New Zealand film.

The first of these areas is traditional Gothic literature. I shall, in chapter one, examine stock Gothic features and devices of the literary style in relation to four New Zealand films; *Heart of the Stag*, *Trespases*, *Mr Wrong* and *Jack Be Nimble*. The second area is New Zealand literature. Here I will look at the links between traditional Gothic literature and New Zealand writers Ronald Hugh Morrieson and Janet Frame and exemplify some of their themes in *The Scarecrow* and *Trial Run*. I shall also, within this chapter, apply some literary theory concerning our national literature and apply this to New Zealand films, particularly the films *Pallet on the Floor*, *The Piano* and *Vigil*. I shall then discuss the importance of the landscape in producing the dark images in New Zealand film. The final section of this thesis is dedicated to investigating possible parallels between Hollywood films of the forties and fifties and New Zealand cinema, specifically *The Piano* and *The Returning*.

Now is my chance to thank everyone who helped and supported me while I was writing this thesis, and also to finally write something that will not be scrutinised by my supervisors. Firstly, here's to them, my supervisors, Brian McDonnell and Mary Paul. Mary, yes you were pedantic but I needed it, and Brian thanks for the idea in the first place (or should I be thanking Geoff Mayer?) and continuing to come up with good ideas for my work. Thanks anyway, Geoff, just for getting me interested. I would also like to raise a glass and thank all my friends across the globe and around New Zealand for being there. Not to mention the understanding of all those at Merrill Lynch and for the part-time employment through my years of study. You kept me from being penniless (with a little help from the government) and gave me nights when I could forget things for a while. Finally to those who I could not have done it without, my family. Thanks Auntie Gayleen for your shoulder and most importantly thanks Mum and Dad. I know I was hell to live with in the last few months. I thank you both and Mark and Paul for being there and caring.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
 CHAPTER ONE: New Zealand Film and Links with Traditional Gothic Literature	 4
 CHAPTER TWO: Commonalities Between New Zealand Film and Literature	 28
 CHAPTER THREE: Parallels Between <i>The Piano</i> and <i>The Returning</i> and Films of Hollywood	 56
 APPENDIX	 90
 FILMS CITED	 94
 WORKS CITED	 96

INTRODUCTION

Sam Neill and Judy Rymer in their documentary *Cinema of Unease* (1995) vocalised what many have thought, which is that New Zealand film has a dark side to it. The film's subtitle is a "personal journey" taken by Sam Neill therefore it is obviously his point of view that is put across in the film's narration. In the documentary Neil and Rymer examine the images that they believe make up the "uniquely strange and dark" atmosphere of New Zealand films. Sam Neill states that there are varied feelings making up the dark tone; these are alienation, abandonment, horror, madness, fear and violence. He believes that what essentially encouraged the prevalence of these feelings in our cinematic texts was a growing distance between the colony and the "Motherland" and the gradual focus of New Zealand film on the less "sunny" side of American film that was produced in the fifties and consumed here. The way of depicting these images, he believes, was achieved in the dark and menacing (and sometimes isolated) natural landscape of New Zealand.

I am, in this thesis, suggesting a different explanation from Sam Neill and Judy Rymer's account for this "uniquely strange and dark atmosphere". In fact I think it is not unique but has much in common with an older tradition and style, namely Gothic¹. My suggestion that there is a significantly Gothic character to New Zealand film expands the range of this present study of national film because the amount of information and theory on Gothic is immense. The fluidity of the style has allowed it to cross over into many different genres of literature and film which again extends the range of possible parallels with New Zealand film. For practical reasons of scale, I have chosen just three aspects of the Gothic that I believe New Zealand film exemplifies. I shall begin with traditional Gothic literature and its themes and devices as a possible influence on New Zealand film. I shall then go on to look at other areas where

¹ I will be calling "Gothic" a style or form in this study because I believe that it has qualities that enable it to be adapted to different generic types. My discussion in Chapter Three is an example as elements of the Gothic style have been adapted to film noir and the paranoid woman's film.

the Gothic style is operating: New Zealand literature and its commonalities with the national cinema, and finally examine Hollywood film and explain some of its parallels with our comparatively small industry.

The Gothic literary genre began in 1764 with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* and the popularity of this novel, and other similar novels, encouraged the style to develop and continue through into the nineteenth century and to emerge much later in the twentieth century in the new medium of film.

Because so much has been written on the subject of Gothic it is difficult to decide how to cover it all. Therefore in my first chapter I have chosen to focus on some key examples of what makes up Gothic literature. In particular I will focus on the Gothic "world" as separated into two spheres: the "diurnal" represented by the everyday and familiar, and the "nocturnal" or nightmare, the realm of the unfamiliar, and compare that literary device to four representative New Zealand film texts.

Chapter Two follows on from where traditional Gothic began to show a local development. Here the focus is on New Zealand literature, with particular reference to novelists Ronald Hugh Morrieson and Janet Frame. Both these writers have conveyed, in a highly Gothic manner, the puritanical nature of New Zealand society. They show that violence or madness is an attempt to cope with the overwhelming restrictive forces of New Zealand society. The chapter then goes on to look at different explanations for the inherently violent nature of New Zealand society. First is Patrick Evans' description of the "slaughterhouse" environment' (76). This pastoral economic environment has legitimised death and slaughter in our society. *Pallet on the Floor* is an excellent example for this discussion as the daily movements of the central characters revolve around the freezing works. Then I shall go on to look at the "landscape as more than a backdrop" because it plays an integral

role in the unfolding drama, playing a key role in many films. *The Piano* (1993) and *Vigil* (1984) both depict the landscape in this manner.

The third, and final chapter, refers to New Zealand film in terms of its parallels with Hollywood film of the forties and fifties. This chapter looks at two genres with different, yet similar, narrative styles; the paranoid woman's film, or female Gothic, and film noir, or what I shall be terming noir-romance. Each style conveys a dark and pessimistic atmosphere by focusing on the terror and alienation of the central characters. I shall be explaining why the New Zealand film *The Piano* (1993) is a descendant of this tradition, of which *Rebecca* (1940) and *Gaslight* (1944) are well-known examples. The second section of this third and final chapter is dedicated to the noir-romance genre of which, another Hitchcock classic, *Vertigo* (1958) and *Portrait of Jennie* (1947) are examples. Between them these films illustrate how the environment reflects the deteriorating state of mind of the protagonist as he falls into the downward spiral of madness associated with the femme fatale. *The Returning* (1990) is the New Zealand equivalent to this style.

The different areas these chapters cover with regard to Gothic inflections show that indeed New Zealand has a darker edge to its cinema. They show that it is the Gothic tone and atmosphere that prevails as its flexibility has enabled Gothic to vary and develop itself into many different forms from traditional literature through to the more modern medium of film. A close examination of this aspect of local films can therefore help throw light on important and central features of New Zealand's film history.