

A Study on Gothic Cultural Expression and Visual Narrative in the TV Series Gotham

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Abstract. As a significant tradition in Western art and literature, Gothic style has undergone continuous revival and evolution within contemporary film and television media. However, against the backdrop of growing homogenization in superhero genre films, its aesthetic critical function is often compromised by spectacularized narratives. This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the visual expression and narrative function of Gothic style in the American television series Gotham, adapted from DC Comics. Employing plot text analysis and visual research methodologies, it focuses on examining the signifying mechanisms and cultural metaphors of core Gothic elements within the series, including architectural styles, costume design, and the use of light and shadow. Findings indicate that Gotham successfully integrates Gothic and modern urban aesthetics to construct a distinctive “neo-Gothic” visual system. Its narrative structure profoundly deepens themes of human nature—specifically sin, corruption, and redemption—through spatial symbolism and highly stylized characterization.

Keywords: Gothic Style, Visual Narrative, TV Series Gotham, Urban Space, Aesthetics of Darkness

1. Introduction

Gothic style represents a significant aesthetic tradition within Western culture, exerting a lasting influence on literary and artistic creation since its emergence in the 18th century. In contemporary film and television, Gothic elements are widely used to create mysterious atmospheres and explore themes related to human nature. Among these, the American television series Gotham stands out for its distinctive visual style. By reconstructing traditional Gothic aesthetics, the show injects fresh artistic expression into the superhero genre. Existing research on cinematic gothic aesthetics has primarily focused on Tim Burton's Batman film series, with relatively scarce systematic studies on the television series Gotham [1]. A few related studies, such as Lee's, have explored the show's film noir characteristics but have not delved deeply into the cultural implications of its gothic elements [2]. This study adopts textual analysis and visual research methods, examining the cultural expression and visual narrative functions of the Gothic style in Gotham through plot analysis and detailed inspection of visual elements. Research data is sourced from episodes of the American television series Gotham, encompassing visual elements such as architectural styles, costume design, and lighting techniques. Through these methodologies, this study systematically analyzes

how Gotham employs visual elements and narrative techniques to depict themes of urban decadence and redemption in a modern metropolis. This research not only enriches the theoretical framework of cinematic Gothic aesthetics but also provides new perspectives for understanding contemporary superhero narratives.

2. Gothic architecture: visual metaphors of power and control

The visual construction of Wayne Tower can be interpreted as a spatial metaphor for Michel Foucault's theory of Panopticism [3]. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon model, Foucault argued that the core mechanism of modern power is a "visible but unverifiable" gaze, leading the surveilled to internalize disciplinary power [4]. Wayne Tower functions as Gotham's "central watchtower," its physical height achieving the unobstructed overlooking described by Foucault, symbolizing a transcendent surveillance perspective. However, the series' innovation lies in its use of the glass curtain wall, a modern material, to deepen Foucault's paradox. The wall's transparency ostensibly promises "openness" (the charitable face of Wayne Enterprises), yet its reflectivity creates a one-way asymmetry of visibility — citizens see only their own diminished reflections, unable to glimpse the power operations within the tower. This resonates with Wilson's observation that power in the postmodern city has shifted from stony solidity to glass-like refraction, being both transparent and alienating [5]. Consequently, the Wayne family need not be physically present; the architecture itself perpetually produces an invisible disciplinary pressure, aestheticizing capitalist power as a natural order. This one-way asymmetry of visibility—Wayne can “see” the entire city, while the city cannot ‘see’ Wayne—perpetually generates an invisible pressure of authority. Thus, the Wayne family need not actively assert itself; its very existence, through the architectural space, proclaims its symbolic status as the “God of Gotham.” Like unseen overseers in a panopticon, their gaze is internalized through the architectural space into a collective consciousness, the collective. The collective consciousness of citizens—the ultimate arbiter and guardian of social order, be it legal or capitalist—is perpetually “present”. This spiritual discipline achieved through architectural space proves far more profound and enduring than the violent apparatus of the Gotham City Police Department (GCPD). It reveals the capitalist power embodied by the Wayne family—both the engine that built this city and the creator of its inescapable, ultimate prison. In stark contrast, the decaying streets of high-crime districts present a desolate landscape: leaning walls, peeling facades, and dim, cramped alleys collectively construct the quintessential “fallen Gothic” spatial imagery. These dilapidated streets symbolize the powerlessness and abandonment of society's underclass, creating a stark counterpoint to the power center embodied by Wayne Tower.

The architectural design of Arkham Asylum, the primary gathering place for the series' most formidable antagonists, is particularly noteworthy. Its iron railings feature an electrocardiogram waveform pattern; as characters approach, the shadows cast by the railings project onto their faces, creating a visually compelling metaphor. This design technique transforms the architecture itself into a narrative participant, transcending conventional spatial representations in television dramas [4]. While Arkham Asylum's iron bars remain a classic symbol of Foucault's “disciplinary society,” the electrocardiogram waveform pattern embedded in their design hints at a more sophisticated form of power—a metaphor for the “society of control” proposed by Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze observes that power has evolved from Foucault's “disciplinary” model—which confined individuals within closed environments like factories, homes, or prisons for regulation—to a mode of control through fluid, continuous, and ubiquitous modulation [6]. While the disciplinary society is defined by separation, the control society is characterized by coding. The ECG fence is the perfect visual embodiment of this “modulation.” It is no longer merely physical confinement but data-driven surveillance of vital

signs. Its waveform patterns symbolize the real-time, continuous tracking and assessment of the subject's mental state. Power no longer contented itself with merely locking up the “mad,” but sought to transform their emotions, pulses, fears—their entire lives—into readable, analyzable, predictable data streams. This fence thus becomes a mental interface: one end connected to the inner life of the monitored, the other to the omnipresent control system.

More significantly, in Gotham, this imagery of fencing extends beyond Arkham's physical boundaries, permeating the entire urban space: the striped shadows cast by the blinds in GCPD offices, the yellow crime scene tape stretched across investigations, and even the ornate metal railings of Wayne Manor can be seen as variations of this “control apparatus.” Together, they form a fluid control network whose function goes beyond mere prohibition or isolation. Instead, it guides, manages, and regulates the flow of people and information—determining who is allowed passage and under what conditions. Consequently, Gotham's inhabitants—particularly those operating on the fringes of the law—endure not just the gaze of a specific institution, but a systemic, internalized discipline that permeates their daily lives.

3. Costume design: externalization of character identity and psychological state

Character costumes serve as pivotal carriers of Gotham's distinctive style within the series. The Penguin's attire seamlessly blends Victorian formalwear elements with contemporary tailoring: the combination of velvet bow ties, tailcoats, and metallic canes preserves classical elegance while exuding a sense of menace. This inherent contradiction perfectly embodies the “appearance versus essence” theme frequently explored within Gothic aesthetics [7]. The evolution of his attire visually externalizes his internal identity crises and power struggles. During his early days under Fish and the Maroni family, his ill-fitting, slightly wrinkled suits symbolized an “outsider” striving to integrate into an established order yet perpetually denied entry [8]. His signature umbrella initially served more as a clumsy, laughable physical crutch, hinting at his bodily ‘non-conformity’ and socially marginalized status. Yet as his power solidified, his attire grew increasingly tailored and fitted, with materials upgraded to luxurious velvet and silk. This evolution marked his transformation from a “challenger” of the order to its new “shaper.” Crucially, however, his clothing always retained a subtle sense of disharmony—perhaps a scarf in an overly bright color, or a slightly exaggerated lapel. This “slight discord” served as a metaphor for his core character: he desperately craved acceptance from the aforementioned society (manifested in his pursuit of classical elegance in dress), yet his inherent paranoia, cruelty, and voracious ambition could never be fully disciplined. Ultimately, they inevitably overflowed in some form beyond the “framework of convention.” His attire thus becomes a refined suit of armor—both a pledge of allegiance to high society and a declaration of war against his enemies—perfectly embodying his multifaceted nature as both servant and master, gentleman and outlaw. Simultaneously, the Penguin's distinctive limp and perpetually crooked smile hint at his twisted psyche, while his hair—eternally slicked back with gel—symbolizes his relentless craving for power and excitement.

The costume design for female characters is equally rich in symbolism. Catwoman's leather bodysuit borrows restraint elements from neo-Gothic fashion, where glossy black paired with flexible materials signifies her identity navigating the grey area between legality and illegality [8]. Fish's perpetually flamboyant, saturated-color aesthetic fuses 1920s gangster style with gothic exaggeration. Notably, her metallic prosthetic eye transcends conventional costume, entering into the realm of bodily modification. This act carries profound implications of gothic “body politics.” After losing her eye, she deliberately chose not a lifelike prosthetic but a stylized metallic one that accentuates her “otherness”—a defining moment of empowerment. This act can be interpreted as a

posthumanist declaration: she refuses to be defined by injury, rejects returning to her “complete” former self, and instead embraces imperfection, transforming it into a stronger, colder emblem of her new identity [9,10]. The metallic eye becomes her new organ for gazing upon the world—cold, incapable of reflecting emotion, symbolizing the absolute rationality and ruthlessness of her will. Complementing this is her attire, a fusion of 1920s gangster-boss style and operatic exaggeration—oversized furs, opulent jewelry, and heavy makeup. Together, these elements construct an intensely aggressive and performative visual image. Her entire aesthetic proclaims she no longer seeks to play a role conforming to men's expectations in their power games. Instead, she is forging her own set of rules and an entirely new aesthetic system.

4. Use of light and shadow: distorting truth for dramatic effect

The use of light and shadow in *Gotham* serves as a textbook example of Gothic style. The show extensively employs high-contrast side lighting, often leaving characters' faces in a state of half-light, half-shadow. A strong side light from a single direction illuminates one half of the face, plunging the other half into darkness, creating a striking visual impact. This physical division serves as a direct visual metaphor for the internal struggles within characters—the conflict between good and evil, reason and impulse, and appearance and reality. It allows viewers to intuitively grasp a character's state of conflict or turmoil without relying on dialogue cues. This technique, known as “two-faced lighting,” vividly externalizes the moral conflict within a character's psyche [11]. Simultaneously, the series predominantly employs an endless black palette with overall dark tones, while the lighting itself is blindingly white. This sharp contrast with the narrative's direction, suggests the razor-sharp trajectory of the plot. In Gotham City, where nearly everyone is mad, darkness has long eroded the seemingly tranquil surface.

Particularly noteworthy is the show's treatment of rain scenes. Over 60% of exterior shots occur during rainfall, where neon lights create colorful reflections on the wet streets, transforming the city into a vast theater of light and shadow. These chromatic reflections echo the stained-glass panels typical of Gothic cathedrals, heightening the drama while creating tension between justice and evil. This metaphorically reflects the distortion and refraction of truth in Gotham City—a stark reminder of its scarcity [10].

5. Character development: continuity and innovation in the Gothic literary tradition

The characters in *Gotham* all possess distinct Gothic literary traits. The Joker's multiple personalities and unpredictability carry forward the archetype of the “mad genius” from Gothic tradition. His green hair and deathly pale makeup design are clearly inspired by classic Gothic novels like *Frankenstein* [12]. As Gotham's most utterly deranged figurehead, the Joker's split-mouth grin and unrestrained, manic persona serve as a rallying point for the city's powerless underclass dwelling within its dark underworld.

In stark contrast to the Joker, the growth journey of young Master Wayne is equally steeped in Gothic hues. Witnessing his parents' deaths firsthand, the once-colorful Wayne Manor of his childhood was cast into endless blackness after losing its masters. The enclosed space of Wayne Manor symbolizes the protagonist's inner turmoil, while the recurring bat imagery hints at transformation and rebirth [13]. This technique of intertwining architectural space with character development is a hallmark of the Gothic narrative [14].

Gotham breaks through traditional linear temporal narratives through spatial juxtaposition, creating a unique narrative rhythm. The series places modern technological devices within Gothic

architectural settings—such as holographic projections in Victorian-style study rooms—enhancing the story's dreamlike quality while hinting at Gotham City's developmental stagnation [15]. This temporal dislocation can be interpreted through Paul Virilio's theory of "speedology": technological advancement, as a pursuit of velocity, ultimately dismantles traditional notions of geographical distance and linear time, leading to a "collapse of temporality" where past, present, and future coexist and collapse within the same interface [16]. Gotham's urban landscape serves as a materialized allegory of this "collapse of temporality." Within the series, police officers wield advanced DNA analysis technology in offices equipped with vintage typewriters and cathode-ray tube monitors; crime lords orchestrate operations via smartphones from Art Nouveau-adorned nightclubs. This juxtaposition isn't an anachronism but a visual simulation of "speed space": under the pressure of velocity, all historical periods are flattened into a blendable repository of aesthetic symbols. This reconfigured temporal perspective deconstructs the linear narrative of "progress." Gotham City does not evolve along a linear path "from backwardness to advancement," but instead remains trapped in an eternal "present tense." Victorian-era crimes persist unresolved, and high-tech surveillance brings no redemption—only a more efficient repetition of ancient power games. The coexistence of typewriters and holographic projections within the GCPD headquarters symbolizes the collision and cohabitation of differing political and technological logics operating at disparate speeds, rendering time a chaotic, layered site. Thus, Gotham City's gothic aesthetic, through this Virilio-esque juxtaposition of time and space, reveals postmodernity's core anxiety: propelled by technological velocity, we plunge into an "eternal present" where the shadows of all eras coexist. This city possesses only cyclical trauma, no history; only escalating control and resistance, no progress. This utterly subverts the linear logic of superhero narratives—that "problems can be solved through technological or power advancement"—revealing the eternal nature of humanity's predicament: it shifts form with technological acceleration but never vanishes.

The Gothic style innovation in Gotham manifests across multiple dimensions. First, it successfully modernizes traditional Gothic elements, such as transforming medieval gargoyle imagery into the decorative features of modern skyscrapers. Second, the series blends diverse visual styles—including film noir, Art Nouveau, and steampunk—to forge a distinctive "neo-Gothic" aesthetic system [17].

Culturally speaking, the Gothic aesthetic of Gotham City serves not only narrative ends but also functions as a visual metaphor for understanding contemporary urban maladies [18]. The juxtaposition of ubiquitous surveillance cameras and Gothic spires in the cityscape hints at the evolution of power dynamics in modern society [13]. By pairing mediaeval Gothic spires with modern electronic surveillance cameras, this seemingly incongruous combination profoundly reveals the historical shift in power operations from a "disciplinary society" to a "control society," while highlighting the enduring nature of power itself [6]. These ubiquitous surveillance cameras constitute components of the "visual apparatus" described by Virilio, serving as power terminals within the "society of control". Characterised by their miniaturisation, concealment, dispersion, and dynamism, they embody a fluid, decentralised, and omnipresent technocratic power. Their mechanism no longer relies on visual intimidation but instead on data capture, algorithmic analysis, and networked tracking. This constitutes an "electronics of power", designed to modulate behaviour through invisible, continuous data streams. Gothic spires (such as those of Wayne Tower), conversely, embody the monumental architectural paradigm of Foucault's "panopticism" [4]. Towering, immovable, and visible, they embody an immortal, centralised, awe-inspiring power. Its mechanism proclaims the ruler's sanctity and eternity through architectural grandeur and immortality, achieving a unidirectional, symbolic gaze through absolute spatial dominance. This

constitutes an “aesthetics of power”, designed to produce compliant subjects through visible intimidation. Gotham continually juxtaposes these elements within its visual compositions: a low-angle shot might simultaneously frame ancient spires and the cold, black spheres of modern surveillance cameras; Batman's leaps between pinnacles are invariably recorded silently by street corner cameras. This juxtaposition generates potent metaphorical tension. Thus, Gotham City's skyline transcends mere aesthetic collage to become a layered map of power archaeology. It lays bare the mechanics of modern governance, preserving the verticality and immortal ambition of Gothic power (spires) while integrating the fluidity, stealth, and technology of surveillance society (cameras).

6. Conclusion

This study analyzes visual elements such as architectural spaces, costume design, and lighting techniques in Gotham to reveal the series' innovative application of Gothic aesthetics. Findings include: The series establishes a comprehensive “neo-Gothic” visual system, successfully blending historical elements with contemporary aesthetics; Gothic style serves not merely as decoration but as a vital narrative tool for deepening thematic expression; Through spatial symbolism and character development, the series expands artistic approaches to non-traditional superhero narratives. The study also has limitations, such as failing to address the role of musical scores in creating a Gothic atmosphere and providing insufficient examination of audience reception across cultural backgrounds. Future research could further explore: stylistic comparisons between Gotham and other Gothic-themed series, the influence of contemporary digital effects technology on modern Gothic visual expression, and the variation and adaptation of Gothic aesthetics across cultural contexts.

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