

# ***The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies 13 (Summer 2014)***

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## ‘A Very Serious Problem with the People Taking Care of the Place’: Duality and the Dionysian Aspect in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*

Margot Blankier

*The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick’s first and only foray into the horror-film genre, met with poor reviews when originally released in 1980.<sup>1</sup> *The New Yorker*’s Pauline Kael wrote at the time that, though the film had ‘a promising opening sequence’ and ‘some spectacular use of the Steadicam’, *The Shining* fails in part because Kubrick’s characters are too archetypal: ‘he’s using them to make a metaphysical statement about the timelessness of evil [...] that man is a murderer through eternity.’ Ultimately, Kael concludes, Kubrick places the audience at such a distance from his meaning and intention that the film ‘just doesn’t seem to make sense’.<sup>2</sup> *Film Quarterly*’s review, though longer and apparently more intrigued by Kubrick’s carefully constructed world, also finds the film ‘unsatisfying’. The ‘symbolic and literal levels of the film tend’, the reviewer writes, ‘to diverge from one another, sometimes to too great an extent to be reunited without artificial devices which confuse the viewer’.<sup>3</sup>

*The Shining* is a confusing film indeed. Interpretations as to its meaning, both scholarly and amateur, range from positioning the film as standard gothic horror to reading it as an indictment of Native American treatment at the hands of white settlers; from rejection of postmodern nostalgia for an idealised past *vis-à-vis* the ontological netherworld that entraps the film’s protagonist, to a position that defies any logical interpretation whatsoever.<sup>4</sup> A documentary has even been made, *Room 237*, that purports to explore the various interpretations of *The Shining*’s ‘hidden’ meanings, but is in effect more a portrait of how a single film can engender fierce, often obsessive analysis.<sup>5</sup> This article argues that the film’s resistance to being neatly defined and interpreted is not only inherent to Kubrick’s directorial

<sup>1</sup> *The Shining*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick (Warner Bros/Peregrine Productions/Hawk Films, 1980) [on DVD].

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Kael, ‘The Shining’, in *5001 Nights at the Movies* (New York: Picador, 1982), p. 674.

<sup>3</sup> Flo Leibowitz and Lynn Jeffress, ‘The Shining [Review]’, *Film Quarterly*, 34.3 (Spring 1981), 45–51 (p. 47).

<sup>4</sup> R. Barton Palmer, ‘*The Shining* and Anti-Nostalgia: Postmodern Notions of History’, in *The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick*, ed. by Jerome J. Abrams (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), pp. 201–20 (p. 205); and Jason Sperb, ‘A Kubrickian Look: Narrating in a Voiceless Voice-Over’, in *The Kubrick Façade: Faces and Voices in the Films of Stanley Kubrick* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006), pp. 99–123 (p. 99).

<sup>5</sup> *Room 237*, dir. by Rodney Ascher (IFC Films/Highland Park Classics, 2012) [on DVD].

style and iconographic preoccupations within the film, but essential to the film's efficacy as horror: *The Shining* continues to terrify and unsettle audiences today, and is regularly ranked among the greatest films ever made.<sup>6</sup> Its profound impact on audiences, critics, and filmmakers cannot be ascribed simply to 'spectacular' camerawork and some thrilling sequences, frightening though they may be. I would argue that Kael and the reviewers of *Film Quarterly* found *The Shining* dissatisfying for the very same reason that it is effective as psychological horror: the film's narrative defies rational or clear definition through its polysemic imagery, characters, horror elements, and its implications of audience guilt and complicity in the violence and mental dissociation of others. The film is therefore truly uncanny, and through our discomfiture at being unable to explain it, *The Shining* leaves us thoroughly unsettled, disturbed, and horrified. According to James Naremore, 'The emotions [Kubrick] elicits are primal but mixed; the fear is charged with humor [sic] and the laughter is both liberating and defensive.'<sup>7</sup> Because this alternating register is based so deeply in emotion rather than intellect, *The Shining* refuses to be interpreted neatly on a social or cognitive level.

Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886) and Sigmund Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919) both attempt to account for the pleasures of such irrational narratives. More than simply thrilling an audience, the works of Nietzsche and Freud suggest that such texts as *The Shining* appeal to emotional sensibilities repressed by traditional social expectations: specifically, the expectations of certainty, rationality, and civility. Informed by *The Birth of Tragedy* and 'The Uncanny', this article will explore a close reading of the film through the characters of Jack and Danny, Kubrick's visual iconography and filming techniques, and his use of the grotesque. These elements of *The Shining* interrogate the dichotomy between civility and repressed violent tendencies, and ultimately, through the use of irreducible ambiguities on every level of the text, cultivate a deep sense of audience culpability in perpetrating, observing, and repressing violence.

Kubrick and his screenwriting partner on *The Shining*, Diane Johnson, were heavily influenced by two texts in the course of their research: Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' and Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976). Christopher Hoile argues that the latter of these texts was used by Kubrick and Johnson to augment the narrative perspective of the

<sup>6</sup> The American Film Institute placed *The Shining* at twenty-ninth on their 2001 '100 Years ... 100 Thrills' list, while Jonathan Romney and Kim Newman, both British film critics, voted for *The Shining*'s inclusion in *Sight and Sound*'s decennial 'Top Ten' list. The film is also a mainstay on the Internet Movie Database's Top 250, as voted by registered IMDB users.

<sup>7</sup> James Naremore, 'Stanley Kubrick and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque', *Film Quarterly*, 60.1 (Autumn 2006), 4–14 (p. 14).

character Danny, ‘who begins life very much within [the animistic universe]’.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these texts, Johnson drew extensively on her background as a specialist in gothic literature to exploit traditional gothic tropes such as (among others) the extreme mental and physical isolation of the characters, and the claustrophobic malevolence of the film’s ‘haunted house’. Although there is no record that they turned to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, this text is a very fruitful means of exploring the themes of the film: Nietzsche’s propositions concerning the oppositional impulses present within the individual are powerful exploratory tools in considering Jack’s relationships with his son, and with himself and his own mental degradation. Thus, as this article demonstrates, ‘The Uncanny’ and *The Birth of Tragedy* effectively illuminate many of Kubrick’s stylistic choices, the film’s thematic complexity, and its impact on audiences, as both these texts wrestle with the concept of duality and multiple, apparently irreconcilable, identities.

The influence of ‘The Uncanny’ (itself a vague text teeming with imprecise language) on Kubrick is readily apparent. Freud, drawing on Otto Jentsch’s ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’, writes that one of the foremost examples of ‘persons and things, [...] impressions, processes and situations’ that unsettle us or ‘arouse an especially strong and distinct sense of the uncanny’ is (quoting Jentsch) “‘doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate’”. This doubt, Freud explains, must never be removed, as any hint of resolution will lead the reader to interrogate this ambiguity and the uncanny effect will dissolve.<sup>9</sup> In Kubrick’s film, the character Jack (played by Jack Nicholson) appears to be a thinking, functional individual, but as his stay at The Overlook continues, he seems less human and more an instrument of murder and destruction. Similarly, The Overlook appears to be just a building, but it invades its inhabitants’ minds with moving, dynamic images of blood and decaying ghosts. The hotel seems, truly, to be alive and even an active agent: the lights around the Colorado Lounge are always on, almost watching Jack hammer mindlessly away at his repetitive opus, and the camera becomes the eye of the hotel as it follows Wendy and Danny, stalker-like, from an unvarying distance, keeping each of them perfectly in the centre of its frame. The Overlook has an insidious agenda of its own, suggested by Kubrick’s surveillance-like camera techniques and control over its inhabitants’ delusions, while Jack mingles a robot-like vapidity — several scenes emphasise his blank, mindless stare — and dark humour,

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hoile, ‘The Uncanny and the Fairy Tale in Kubrick’s *The Shining*’, *Literature Film Quarterly*, 12.1 (1984), 5–12 (p. 5).

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 135.

particularly in his invocations of Johnny Carson and ‘The Three Little Pigs’ during a murderous rampage. It is quite impossible to decide conclusively just how much of Jack belongs, in a sense, to The Overlook.

Having broadly defined his terms, Freud goes on to describe the idea of the ‘double’,

in all its nuances and manifestations — that is to say, the appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike. This relationship is intensified by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other [...] so that the one becomes co-owner of the other’s knowledge, emotions and experience. Moreover, *a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own*. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged. Finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing [...] the same characters, the same destinies, *the same misdeeds, even the same names*, through successive generations. [Emphasis added]<sup>10</sup>

‘The double’, Freud writes, ‘is a creation that belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development [...] an object of terror’.<sup>11</sup> As Hoile observes, these themes are manifest in *The Shining*. He states that ‘a madman is “uncanny” to us because he seems to have lost his self and his actions seem involuntary’.<sup>12</sup> Both Jack and Danny have alter egos whose separate identities are deeply threatening — of dissolution into violence and brutality for Jack, and of horrifying visions and emotional suppression for Danny — because, as Freud explains, the development of one’s conscience gives rise to ‘self-observation and self-criticism’ while simultaneously suppressing one’s ‘primitive narcissism’.<sup>13</sup> Jack and Danny variously surrender to the violent or hallucinatory demands of their alter egos. They are frightening to us because they become, perhaps willingly, victims of their ‘doubles’, and undergo psychological trauma that, according to Freud, every one of us works hard to escape. Under this framework, the ‘double’ to which Jack falls victim is more disturbing because Jack is a grown man who, for Freud, should be in full control of himself, as well as being more physically powerful and therefore potentially more destructive. Wendy gives us the first clue that Jack’s developmental suppression has failed at the beginning of the film, when she explains to the doctor how Danny dislocated his shoulder as a toddler: ‘My husband had been drinking and [...] wasn’t exactly in the greatest mood that night, and [...] on this particular occasion, my husband just used too much strength and he injured Danny’s arm.’<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Freud, pp. 141–42.

<sup>11</sup> Freud, p. 143.

<sup>12</sup> Hoile, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Freud, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> *The Shining*, dir. by Kubrick.

Jack's violent tendencies thus seem, at first, to have their roots in his former alcoholism. Alcohol, as Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is an important agent separating what he calls the 'Apollonian' personality from the 'Dionysian'.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche uses the terms to characterise ancient Greek tragedy as a 'struggle between liberated Dionysian impulses and controlled Apollonian reason'.<sup>16</sup> The concept of this separation is also very helpful in approaching *The Shining* because this same struggle lies at the heart of Jack's turmoil. Nietzsche describes the divide in terms which resonate strikingly within Kubrick's film: 'Apollo, the god of all plastic energies, is [...] the soothsaying god. He, who is *the "shining one"*, the deity of light [...]. We must keep in mind that measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder emotions, that calm of the sculptor god' [emphasis added].<sup>17</sup> Conversely, 'the nature of the *Dionysian* is brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication' [emphasis in original].<sup>18</sup> The Apollonian aspect, Nietzsche explains, controls our reason and our good judgment, and it is under the influence of the Apollonian that people act with civility. The Dionysian aspect is animal-like, intoxicated, 'walks about enchanted, in ecstasy'.<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche writes that the Dionysian is so threatening to the Apollonian because it is so familiar: 'the shuddering suspicion that all this was actually not so very alien to [the Apollonian] after all, in fact, that it was only his Apollonian consciousness which, like a veil, hid this Dionysian world from his vision'.<sup>20</sup> Jack is very good at affecting a civil, Apollonian veneer as he interviews for the caretaker job with the manager, Stuart Ullman; they discuss the bloody past of The Overlook with a smarmy, grating falseness better suited to idle small talk than a history of filicide. However, Jack is an artist — specifically, an aspiring writer — which is the very sort of person predisposed to the Dionysian aspect, and is therefore extremely vulnerable to The Overlook's insidious influence.<sup>21</sup> After a month at The Overlook, Jack's civil veneer has crumbled into slovenliness and anger: Randy Rasmussen notes that Jack's unkempt appearance is 'aesthetically out of sync' with the mannered hotel,

<sup>15</sup> Also spelled 'Apollinian' in some translations.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 2000), p. xiii. Though this paper focuses on Kubrick's film largely independently of Stephen King's original novel, it is interesting to note here King's own use of the terms to illuminate horror films in his work *Danse Macabre* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). However, King's discussion is limited to interpreting the Dionysian aspect as one which literally destroys the human form, such as the drive behind a werewolf's transformation (p. 166) or a disease that threatens to wipe out humanity (p. 427).

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, p. 37.

and that Jack expresses his pent-up frustration by playing handball against an artistic installation, evidence of collective authority's weakening influence over him.<sup>22</sup>

Jack and Danny do not only experience dual natures within their respective selves, but together form an opposing pair in how they cope with the mysterious influence that The Overlook wields over each of them. This duality is expressed both internally in each character and echoed externally between them. Jack struggles with his violent tendencies, and does not appear actually to like his wife and son very much, even before he slides into madness: driving to the hotel, Jack is dismissive of Danny's hunger and grimaces at Wendy's reassurances. Moreover, Hoile observes that Danny is not the only character with an imaginary friend. Lloyd the bartender is Jack's 'evil guardian' (as compared to Hallorann, Danny's 'good guardian') while Grady is 'his alter-ego [sic] from the past, who *is* the worst in him' [emphasis in original].<sup>23</sup> While Danny is eventually taken over by Tony, responding to his mother's suggestion that they leave The Overlook with 'Danny's not here, Mrs Torrance',<sup>24</sup> in Tony's voice, Hoile writes that Jack, less obviously, is also taken over by Grady. However, while Jack's identification with Grady is uncanny and unnerving to both Wendy and the audience, Hoile notes that, according to *The Uses of Enchantment*, doubling is 'natural and therapeutic for the child'. While Jack surrenders utterly, whether to his alter ego or to the evil influence of The Overlook (something never made clear, to the frustration of Pauline Kael and *Film Quarterly*), Danny is able to overcome Tony and his own dissociated nature.

Danny watches his *Road Runner* cartoons with Tony's vacant stare, disaffected posture, and monotone voice, but after Jack's escape from the freezer (in which he had been locked by Wendy), his subsequent rampage, and attempts to break into the family's apartments with an axe, Danny reassumes his normal physical mannerisms, indicated by his wide eyes, quick movements, and the use of his normal voice after he escapes The Overlook's hedge maze. Danny is able to overcome the severe mental trauma of his father's violence, as well as his own bloody hallucinations, and integrate his identity as Tony into his rational thinking by keeping his wits about him while being chased by Jack in the maze, even tricking his pursuer by retracing his footsteps, possibly recalling a ploy seen by Tony on television. Tony protects Danny by insulating him from trauma, but Danny is also remarkably mentally resilient, accessing Tony's knowledge while maintaining his true identity as Danny.

<sup>22</sup> Randy Rasmussen, 'The Shining: Unsympathetic Vibrations', in *Stanley Kubrick: Seven Films Analyzed* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2001), pp. 232–84 (p. 251).

<sup>23</sup> Hoile, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> *The Shining*, dir. by Kubrick.

As Rasmussen puts it, Danny ‘copes with their terror by hiding behind his dispassionate alter ego, Tony, whose passivity he must later overcome in order to save himself from Jack’s murderous assault. In other words, he must become a *normal* child again in order to survive a threat which his *supernormal* vision warns him about long before the family reaches [The] Overlook’ [emphasis in original].<sup>25</sup> Jack, however, is swallowed entirely by his violent double. The nature of Jack’s double is a mystery: it could be the ghost of Grady, The Overlook itself, or Jack’s own Dionysian impulses. The film remains ambiguous about the nature of Jack’s duality. Read in the context of Bettelheim’s influence, and Grady’s comment that he murdered his daughters as a way to ‘correct’ them after they attempted to burn down The Overlook<sup>26</sup> — an indication that they, like Danny, attempted to resist the hotel’s sadistic influence — Jack’s ambiguous descent into madness and Danny’s ability to resist that descent seems to speak to the adult man’s receptivity for savagery and the resilience of the child’s mind.

Even The Overlook itself has two faces, two identities: the one it shows to summer guests and staff, benign and beautiful, and the one revealed in isolation to its winter caretakers, malevolent and terrifying. Ullman ascribes Grady’s madness to ‘cabin fever’, but the audience knows The Overlook contains something much more sinister, or perhaps *is* something much more sinister. In ‘The Uncanny’, Freud asserts that an uncanny effect is produced by doubt as to whether or not ‘a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate’.<sup>27</sup> This is surely the most unnerving aspect of The Overlook: the inability to determine whether Grady and Jack have gone mad because of isolation, or whether The Overlook has consciously driven them to insanity. The Overlook as a building functions as a standard trope of gothic horror, akin to Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto or Shirley Jackson’s Hill House, that of the dark, oppressive mansion with a mysterious past and influence over its inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> On his tour of the property, Ullman notes with pride that the site was supposed to have once been a Native-American burial ground and that the original construction site had to be defended against Native attacks. The haunting drums and war chorus that follow Jack’s first drive up the mountain suggest that the site is not as dormant as Ullman reports. Despite these bad omens, the hotel has become a popular vacation spot for the American upper class, ‘a stopping place for the jet set even before anybody knew what a jet set was’, Ullman brags,

<sup>25</sup> Rasmussen, p. 234.

<sup>26</sup> *The Shining*, dir. by Kubrick.

<sup>27</sup> Freud, p. 135.

<sup>28</sup> Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1998); Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Penguin, 1959).

a place for ‘all the best people’.<sup>29</sup> *Film Quarterly*’s review notes that The Overlook ‘is a symbol of America, haunted by a murderous past that made it what it is: a showy display of affluence and excess [...] built at the expense of innocent victims’. But this excess, as Leibowitz and Jeffress further note, is entirely superficial, betrayed by ever-present cheap brand names and the exploitative use of Native-American folk-art styles in an elegant hotel built over the graves of the very people who developed its aesthetic.<sup>30</sup> David A. Cook expands on this idea in his article ‘American Horror: *The Shining*’, where he argues that ‘*The Shining* is less about ghosts and demonic possession than it is about the murderous system of economic exploitation which has sustained this country [...] we soon learn that beneath its proud exterior the hotel contains a terrible secret: “Redrum”, as Danny first discovers it, the anagram for “Murder”’.<sup>31</sup> The hotel’s exploitative sensibility, and its disregard of the land’s original use as an indigenous holy site in exchange for bourgeois commercialism, is informed by Nietzsche’s duality, where Native-American violence and destruction (suggested by the presence of death in the burial ground and the need to repel subsequent attacks) is repressed by affected, white civility. Thus the very nature of The Overlook, as a site of Native death and white excess, marks it as one in which two apparently irreconcilable aspects must struggle. Furthermore, as Cook suggests, this duality necessarily implicates the film’s American audience, as participants in the economic system which underscores the hotel’s evil.

Cook writes that the murderous secrets of the hotel are ‘not very well concealed to those who see clearly, or, in the film’s metaphor, “shine”, but it is a secret which many Americans choose to *overlook*; for the true horror of *The Shining* is the horror of living in a society which is predicated upon murder and must constantly deny the fact to itself’ [emphasis in original].<sup>32</sup> In his article “Real Horrorshow”, Greg Smith asserts that much of the unease and horror the film arouses in its audience is because it ‘reflects us’ by underscoring our race and gender stereotypes, implicating ‘us as an American audience [...] in many ways, some visceral and some intellectual’.<sup>33</sup> Constant reminders of the film’s American context, invoking both Native and white aspects of American history, are presented visually: American flags paired with male figures of power, including Ullman and the forest rangers; Danny’s Apollo mission and Mickey Mouse sweaters, and his *Road Runner*

<sup>29</sup> *The Shining*, dir by Kubrick.

<sup>30</sup> Leibowitz, pp. 45–46.

<sup>31</sup> Cook, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Cook, pp. 2–3.

<sup>33</sup> Greg Smith, “Real Horrorshow”: The Juxtaposition of Subtext, Satire, and Audience Implication in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*, *Literature Film Quarterly*, 25.4 (1997), 300–06 (p. 300).

cartoons; the brand-name food in The Overlook's pantry, especially names so uniquely associated with America such as 'Tang' and 'Calumet';<sup>34</sup> Wendy's folksy clothes; and the Native art around the hotel. The American flag is even implicitly present during Jack's first confrontation with Grady, in the red and white of the bathroom and Jack's blue jeans.<sup>35</sup> The film therefore simultaneously suggests to us that, no matter the horror a white, American audience experiences at the action on screen, its members are still participants in the atrocities that have led to it; though they may no longer be colonisers specifically, they patronise bourgeois establishments like The Overlook, and continue to live on ground once seized from Native tribes.

Kubrick also employs very subtle strategies, external to the narrative, in implicating *The Shining*'s audience in its on-screen violence and interrogating the dichotomy of the Apollonian/Dionysian aspects, primarily through his visual direction. In filming *The Shining*, Kubrick made frequent and groundbreaking use of the Steadicam, a method of creating tracking shots that was introduced in 1976 by Garrett Brown, who worked as a camera operator for the film.<sup>36</sup> Jean-Pierre Geuens writes that 'camera movement played an intricate part in what is most often described as the director's style', and that 'the mobility of the camera became part and parcel of that ensemble we call *mise-en-scène* [sic], the more manifest element of an author's style, his or her "calligraphy"'.<sup>37</sup> The Steadicam offered directors some significant benefits over other methods of creating tracking shots: attached to the camera operator with a harness, the Steadicam can operate in a three-dimensional space, unlike a dolly, which must stay on a track; moreover, the Steadicam can keep a shot stable, unlike a handheld camera. 'Indeed', Geuens writes, 'to the crew, it can provide speed, flexibility, mobility, and responsiveness. And, of course, it can also energize the film with visual dynamism.'<sup>38</sup> He continues,

A good example of [quick acceleration or deceleration] is Garrett Brown's own bravura performance in *The Shining*, when, at the end of the film, the camera leads Shelley Duvall up two flights of stairs: first she climbs quickly and the camera precedes her at the same pace, then, as she hears strange

<sup>34</sup> 'Tang' is a powdered fruit drink which became successful after being used by astronauts on NASA's various manned spaceflight missions in the 1960s; 'Calumet,' or the Calumet Baking Soda Company, uses a graphic image of a Native American in a warrior headdress.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, p. 305.

<sup>36</sup> Sometimes called 'moving shots', although 'tracking shots' is the technical term. These camera shots are characterised by the movement of the camera itself, and until the invention of the Steadicam, these shots could only be accomplished either by holding the camera or by placing the camera on a moving platform (or 'dolly').

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Pierre Geuens, 'Visuality and Power: The Work of the Steadicam', *Film Quarterly*, 47.2 (Winter 1993–1994), 8–17 (p. 9).

<sup>38</sup> Geuens, p. 12.

sounds coming from the floor ahead, she slows down, almost stopping, and the camera does a marvelous [*sic*] job at matching her change of heart. [...] A fair illustration of [visual dynamism] would be, again at the end of *The Shining*, the shots when the camera rushes after Danny Lloyd and Jack Nicholson as they enter the maze.<sup>39</sup>

The most important factors to note about the use of the Steadicam in *The Shining* are the pace at which the camera follows the actors and the distance at which it keeps them, which has abundant and pervasive implications for underlying audience involvement. The camera keeps to fairly rigid geometrical paths while following Jack, Wendy, and Danny as they move through the enormous hotel; it rarely swoops around the room; it does not even move at an angle to the actors, adhering instead to the square architecture of the building itself. It also maintains an even view of the characters, typically keeping them in the exact centre of the frame, their entire bodies captured squarely in the shot, rarely altering the distance to them to achieve this. Taken together with the adherence to The Overlook's layout, the effect is to suggest that it is The Overlook itself that is coolly observing them. As we are observing them through the same eyes, we are thus a part of The Overlook.

At the same time, we are also positioned as a part of Jack's consciousness: we enter Room 237 from his perspective, without seeing his body, until his hand — and even then, a first-time audience would be unsure of whose hand it is — pushes the bathroom door open, and, for some time, the camera, assuming Jack's perspective, pursues Danny around the hedge maze. Kubrick even places us in the position of one of The Overlook's permanent inhabitants: when Jack first speaks to Lloyd, he speaks to us. Notably, however, we are very rarely given the perspective of Wendy, Danny, or Hallorann, except as a slow reveal of some horrifying element: Wendy's discovery of Jack's 'novel', Danny's first view of Room 237's open door, or Hallorann's television reporting that Denver is about to be hit with a terrible snowstorm. Kubrick only aligns us with anyone or anything benign to give us some terrible new information; more frequently, he positions us inside the most violent and malevolent elements of the film, making us complicit in the malevolence of both The Overlook and Jack. Such a perspective forces us to recognise a simultaneous duality within our viewing experience: horror at the violence wrought by Jack and The Overlook, and a kind of twisted empathy encouraged by looking through their eyes. During the film's final credits, Kubrick chooses to play 'Midnight, The Stars, and You', the song that played to the vast party of Jazz-Era ghosts. When the song ends, a rustling crowd can be heard — in Rasmussen's terms,

<sup>39</sup> Geuens, p. 12.

‘polite applause followed by the vague sounds of a party breaking up’ — echoing the sounds that a theatre audience make when leaving the cinema after a film’s conclusion.<sup>40</sup> We are, almost literally, listening to ourselves get up and leave. This moment, one very much outside the narrative proper, serves as a final underscore to the fact that we are not just passive observers but willing participants in this work.

As this implies, the Steadicam is not the only source of disconcerting, destabilising imagery within the film; images within the film also emphasise the unsettling atmosphere growing within *The Overlook*. Returning again to Freud’s uncanny duality, the film’s visual iconography is made more powerful by being constantly doubled or twinned. Such doubling can be seen in the ghosts of the murdered girls who seem to haunt *The Overlook* (Ullman says they were of different ages, but in the memory of *The Overlook*, they are identical), and more subtly in Kubrick’s use of symmetry: many shots, especially those of hallways in *The Overlook*, but also in Hallorann’s house, are composed symmetrically. Two elevator doors, flanked by identical chairs lining the hall; endless identical hallways; even the enormous Colorado Room — all of these spaces are symmetrical. This symmetry is sometimes emphasised by the positioning of a character in the exact centre of the frame, as discussed above, such as when Danny rides his Big Wheel into the hallways and sees the ghosts of the girls; nearly all the shots in this sequence are composed in this centralising way. As symmetry creates a sense of balance and simplicity through proportion, Kubrick uses this composition tool to subvert audience expectations: an environment so balanced and objectively pleasing to the eye, when covered with blood (as in the elevator scene and the scene where the girls invite Danny to play with them ‘forever’), seems all the more horrific because those elements are so dramatically out of place.

Objects, too, reflect a sense of ‘doubling’ within the characters’ shifting moods and thoughts. Mirrors, first in the Torrances’ Denver apartment, then throughout *The Overlook*, are employed subtly in order to manipulate and discombobulate the audience, serving different functions at different times, sometimes clarifying, sometimes confusing.<sup>41</sup> The first time we see Danny speaking directly to Tony, he is in front of the bathroom mirror, clearly watching himself even though his finger wags, indicating Tony’s presence in the same reflection. This raises an important question that is never answered: is Danny aware, even on a subconscious level, that Tony exists only in his mind? Tony cannot be a simple ‘imaginary friend’, because he gives Danny visions, explains them, and protects Danny when the fear he

<sup>40</sup> Rasmussen, p. 284.

<sup>41</sup> Rasmussen, p. 249.

is experiencing is too much to bear. He is both a psychological defence and a name to explain an ability that Danny cannot yet understand. Danny insists that Tony has his own will and thoughts, and yet he speaks directly to his own reflection when he claims to be in conversation with Tony. For Danny, mirrors both acknowledge and conceal the truth: Tony is both outside and inside his mind, and 'Redrum', the word that Danny (as Tony) constantly repeats, is later painted on a mirror, only to be reflected in another mirror and revealed to be the reversed spelling of 'Murder'. In contrast, mirrors reveal Jack's true mental state, albeit more to the audience than to Jack himself. When Wendy brings Jack breakfast in bed, she appears, in Rasmussen's terms, to be 'an attentive wife' when viewed directly. 'But, as viewed in the mirror, she hovers rather oppressively over him, which is how he will increasingly see her.'<sup>42</sup> Rasmussen's use of the word 'increasingly' implies that Jack does not already see Wendy this way, but by dismissing any of her possible concerns about staying at The Overlook during his interview with Ullman, telling Ullman that she and Danny 'will love it',<sup>43</sup> it becomes clear early on in the film that he already considers her thoughts and feelings to be inconsequential, or at least subordinate to his own. Rather more explicitly, the ghostly woman in Room 237 changes from beautiful and young in Jack's vision to decaying and rotting in the mirror, mirroring Jack's own descent, beginning as he does with the belief that his station in life will improve with his new job, writing work, and new 'friends', even as he is really slipping into his own mental decay.

Amidst *The Shining*'s violent imagery, the undercurrent of historical guilt, and the threatening presence of psychological instability, what is ultimately the most shocking aspect of the film is the undercurrent of humour that runs throughout the film, Kubrick's most subversive method of audience implication revealing the duality of our own experience with violence and horror. In his article, 'Stanley Kubrick and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque', James Naremore writes that Kubrick's entire *oeuvre* is characterised by a sense of emotional detachment, cultivated through a wide variety of *mise-en-scène* techniques that inform nearly every visual and aural element of his work: his visual trademarks and the unusual direction of his actors; the harsh light sources he uses; the deep, Wellesian focus 'to create an eerie, dynamic, sometimes caricatured sense of space'; the juxtaposing of his rigid tracking shots and erratic handheld shots; and finally, the conscious departure from a naturalistic acting technique employed by his actors, 'through a slow, sometimes absurdist playing of dialogue, in which equal weight is given to every line, no matter how banal [...] and through an over-

<sup>42</sup> Rasmussen, p. 249.

<sup>43</sup> *The Shining*, dir. by Kubrick.

the-top display of mugging.<sup>44</sup> But, Naremore writes, while these techniques are devastatingly effective in engendering the emotional detachment of the audience, they cannot wholly account for audience responses to Kubrick's gruesome humour:

For instance, exactly what kind of response is appropriate to [...] Jack in *The Shining* (1980) when he loudly complains about 'the old sperm bank' he has married? To be sure, these moments are blackly humorous, but they also provoke other kinds of emotion — shock, disgust, horror, obscene amusement, and perhaps even sadistic pleasure.<sup>45</sup>

I would add the further examples of Jack's pursuit of Wendy up the stairs of the Colorado Room and his chopping down of the bathroom door; his 'over-the-top mugging' combined with his violent intentions are surely the most emotionally ambivalent scenes of the film. The grotesque, Naremore explains, is comprised of two elements that simultaneously oppose and complement one another: the ridiculous and the horrifying: 'In effect, it fuses laughing and screaming impulses, leaving the viewer or reader balanced between conflicting feelings, slightly unsure how to react.'<sup>46</sup> But where most horror films vacillate, however rapidly, between registers, moving quickly from fear to amused disgust, *The Shining* combines 'laughing and screaming impulses' by making the audience *root* for Jack amidst much of his violence and mental degradation: he is so extreme, apparently having so much fun, and Wendy's character is so high-pitched and hovering, that we are actually manipulated into enjoying Jack.<sup>47</sup> The moments of humour in Jack's madness are noticeably absent from scenes in which he goes after Danny; Danny has rarely (if ever) been presented to us as annoying or dislikeable, only innocent, and therefore Jack's assault on him is pure horror, rather than grotesque or campy. However, while Jack's violence towards Wendy is not caricatured or exaggerated — it is authentic, almost banal, with very little blood — the moments before this violence are filled with Jack's absurd mugging and unhinged delight in anticipation of what is to come. As Greg Smith explains, 'As an audience, we don't know whether to laugh at this or scream at it, and our ambiguous reaction is all the more disquieting because of it.'<sup>48</sup> This conflict places us at a similar point of tension as Jack. We are torn between our revulsion at violence — our Apollonian nature — and our desire for madness and humour — our Dionysian aspect. We thus relate to a character — Jack — who unsettles

<sup>44</sup> Naremore, pp. 4–5.

<sup>45</sup> Naremore, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Naremore, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Carol J. Clover, 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film', *Representations*, 20 (Autumn, 1987) 187–228 (p. 205).

<sup>48</sup> Smith, p. 304.

and should disgust us, and perhaps the affection we are made to feel for a homicidal madman is the most disturbing element of *The Shining*: we love to watch him, yet we are horrified by what we see.

If we return to Ascher's *Room 237*, we are reminded that Kubrick's *The Shining* invites truly varied and radical interpretations. While one fan explains that *The Shining* is 'about' the Holocaust, another claims it is Kubrick's confession that he staged the Apollo moon landing, while a third (with whom this article admittedly has some sympathy) believes it is an apology for the British conquest of the indigenous people of North America. Although little of *Room 237* can truly be called scholarship, the film reveals, if nothing else, that *The Shining* is a testament to the iron grasp of ambiguity on the audience's imagination. *The Shining* integrates elements of campy horror with invocations of high art and philosophy; it employs a unique *mise en scène* not only to insinuate audience complicity in narrative violence, but to demand that this audience hold itself accountable for such complicity; it proposes, through its criticism of both the Apollonian veneer of civility and conformity and the blind Dionysian lust for violence, that there is an irreconcilable inner nature in grown men that is incompatible and destructive. *The Shining* is demanding, almost excessively so, and from this the film draws its power to continue exciting and horrifying audiences. As horror, the film is effective because it is so confusing; to rationalise something, to explain it, is to take away its power, but every 'explanation' of *The Shining* only raises more questions than it answers.

## Mashing up Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and the Limits of Adaptation

**Marie Mulvey-Roberts**

*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains.*

—Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*<sup>1</sup>

*'Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.'*

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*<sup>2</sup>

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) has proved sufficiently capacious to accommodate radical diversification. Adaptations are now commonplace and widely accepted. Reinventions of the novel have crossed genres, from Bollywood to P. D. James's murder mystery, *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011).<sup>3</sup> There are sequels, prequels, comic versions, graphic novels, romance fiction spin-offs, and even eroticised rewrites, including *Fifty Shades of Mr Darcy: A Parody* (2012) by William Codpiece Thwackery.<sup>4</sup> The two-hundredth anniversary of the novel's publication has spurred on this endless proliferation. But perhaps the most shocking and audacious adaptation of Austen's most cherished novel has been the highly successful mash-up by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), which combines the original novel with a zombified parallel version. Questions this raises are: how to account for such a successful publishing phenomenon; and should there be limits to adaptation? As we will see, there are issues around categorisation in regard to parody, adaptation, and appropriation. The zombified mash-ups actualise the horrors lurking in the margins of Austen's novels, particularly slavery and war, at the same time as making ironic concessions to the decorum of Regency society, as in euphemisms for the zombies as

<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe heirloom edn (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2009), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. by James Kinsley and Frank W. Bradbrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> See *Bride and Prejudice*, dir. by Gurinder Chadha (Miramax Films/Pathé Pictures, 2004) [on DVD] and P.D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> William Codpiece Thwackery, *Fifty Shades of Mr Darcy: A Parody* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2012).

‘unmentionables’ or ‘dreadfuls’.<sup>5</sup> In view of this, there is also the intriguing question of whether the readership is predominantly male or female. The book points to the versatility of Austen for a modern audience, with its gothic re-imagining and capacity for multiple interpretations, especially those relating to politics, gender, class, and war, which lurk beneath the surface of the original.

The idea for a marriage between the Regency novel of manners with zombie splatter fiction came from Jason Rekulak, the publisher at Quirk Books, an independent Philadelphia-based publishing house, which led to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* becoming the first of a new imprint — Quirk Classics. The internet has been their primary marketing tool, with the result that sales figures have soared into the *New York Times* best-seller list.<sup>6</sup> The book has sold over one million copies and been translated into more than twenty languages. A revised deluxe edition was produced for the Christmas market, and Hollywood studios started a bidding war for the rights in the hope of turning the book into a blockbuster movie.<sup>7</sup> The following years saw a prequel, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls* (2010), about the Bennet sisters; and the sequel, *Dreadfully Ever After* (2011), on the marriage of Mr and Mrs Darcy, both by Steve Hockensmith.<sup>8</sup> Another species of the undead joined these horror hybrids with Amanda Grange’s sequel *Mr Darcy, Vampire*, which appeared in August 2009, followed by *Vampire Darcy’s Desire: A Pride and Prejudice Adaptation* (2009) by Regina Jeffers.<sup>9</sup> The vampire motif spread to a different Austen novel, resulting in Jane Austen and Wayne Josephson’s *Emma and the Vampires* (2010) and even Austen herself turning into a vampire in *Jane Bites Back* (2010) by Michael Thomas Ford.<sup>10</sup> The hideous progeny of *Pride and Prejudice* led to more supernatural creatures being introduced into the menagerie, as in Jane Austen and Ben H. Winters’s *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009), and Jane Austen and Vera Nazarian’s *Mansfield Park and Mummies* (2009).<sup>11</sup> A legion of imitators applied the Austen and Grahame-Smith template to other canonical authors, with Charlotte Brontë and Sherri

<sup>5</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> It reached third position in April 2009. See *The Readers Unauthorized Guide to Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, ed. by Skyler Collins (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, 2011), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Confusingly, the revised edition on its title page states that it is a first edition, but undoubtedly this is deliberate in order to make it appear more ‘collectable’.

<sup>8</sup> See Steve Hockensmith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2010) and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dreadfully Ever After* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2011). Hereafter only the sub-titles will be cited.

<sup>9</sup> Amanda Grange, *Mr Darcy, Vampire* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2009) and Regina Jeffers, *Vampire Darcy’s Desire: A Pride and Prejudice Adaptation* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Jane Austen and Wayne Josephson, *Emma and the Vampires* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2010) and Michael Thomas Ford, *Jane Bites Back* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Jane Austen and Ben H. Winters, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2009) and Jane Austen and Vera Nazarian’s *Mansfield Park and Mummies: Monster Mayhem, Matrimony, Ancient Curses, True Love, and Other Dire Delights* (Winnetka, CA: Norilana Books, 2009).

Browning Erwin's *Jane Slayre* (2010), described on the cover as *The Literary Classic ... with a Blood-Sucking Twist* (2010); Lewis Carroll and Nickolas Cook's *Alice in Zombieland* (2011); and many more.<sup>12</sup> While George Eliot seems to have escaped this fate so far, even though a mash-up for *Silas Marner* (1861) was planned, William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens have not proven sacrosanct.<sup>13</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* has been mashed with both vampires and zombies, while Dickens and Sherri Browning Erwin's *Grave Expectations* (2011) turns Miss Havisham into a vampire and Pip into a werewolf.<sup>14</sup> Other publishers, besides Quirk Books, have joined this publishing frenzy, including Simon & Schuster.<sup>15</sup> Overwhelmingly, American publishing houses have brought out these mainly British titles, with the obvious exception of vampire and werewolf mash-ups of the American author Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868).<sup>16</sup> It is tempting to read into this a postcolonial sub-text. The trend appears to have spread to historical figures, which are predominantly British, as in *Queen Victoria: Demon Hunter* (2009) and *Henry VIII: Wolf Man* (2010) produced by the same British author and publisher, though American authors and publishers have brought out biographies of George Washington as a werewolf and Abraham Lincoln as a vampire slayer.<sup>17</sup> Calling these novels mash-ups is misleading, however, since they do not combine a pre-existing text, as indicated by the co-authored titles.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Brontë and Sherri Browning Erwin, *Jane Slayre* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), first published in the USA by Gallery Books, a division of Simon & Schuster in 2010; and Lewis Carroll and Nickolas Cook, *Alice in Zombieland* (New York: Sourcebooks, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> George Eliot and Paul Di Filippo's *Silas Marner vs. The Lizard Men* was projected in 2009 but has not yet appeared. In a post for 3 April 2012, it is noted that there has not yet been 'The Zombie Mill on the Floss'. See Rebecca Mead, 'A Middlemarch Moment', *The New Yorker*, <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-middlemarch-moment>> [accessed 4 August 2014].

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare and Claudia Gabel, *Romeo & Juliet & Vampires* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), David Linker, *Romeo and Juliet 2: True Love NEVER Dies* (Nook Book (ebook), 2011) and Jacob Lehman, William Shakespeare and Zeeyang Guo, *Romeo and Juliet and Zombies* (Kindle Edition (ebook), 2012). There is also the film, *Romeo & Juliet vs. The Living Dead*, dir. by Ryan Denmark (Third Star Films, 2009) [on DVD]. On the Amazon pages for Charles Dickens and Sherri Browning Erwin's *Grave Expectations* (New York: Gallery Books, 2011), there is the unintentionally ironic invitation to 'look inside', <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Grave-Expectations-Charles-Dickens/dp/1451617240>> [accessed 7 August 2014]. Subsequent references in the main text to these co-authored mash-ups will refer only to the contemporary author.

<sup>15</sup> They brought out Charlotte Brontë and Sherri Browning Erwin, *Jane Slayre*; see note 12 above.

<sup>16</sup> Louisa May Alcott and Lynn Messina, *Little Vampire Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010) and Louisa May Alcott and Porter Grand, *Little Women and Werewolves* (New York: Del Ray, 2010). There have been some European titles too, including Leo Tolstoy and Ben H. Winters, *Android Karenina* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2010) and Franz Kafka and Coleridge Cook, *Meowmorphosis* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See A. E. Moorat's *Queen Victoria: Demon Hunter* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009) and *Henry VIII: Wolf Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), Kevin Postupack, *George Washington Werewolf: A Novel* (Norristown, PA: Deep Kiss Press, 2011) and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> See Anthony Ocasia, 'Thirty Literary Mash-ups Crazier than "Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter"', <<http://screenrant.com/abraham-lincoln-vampire-hunter-literary-mash-up-list-aco-180542/>> [accessed 4

Attempting to describe the mash-up in terms of more familiar and well-established categories can be problematic. For instance, Rekulak does not classify *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* as parodic, seeing it instead as ‘a sort of “enhanced version” of the original text’ with modern material.<sup>19</sup> While the meaning of ‘enhanced’ can be either ‘improved’ or ‘expanded’, the notion of parody is even less straightforward. Gérard Genette sees parody as always tied to humour, whether it be satiric or playful, whereas Linda Hutcheon disagrees.<sup>20</sup> Although Grahame-Smith’s treatment of Austen is undoubtedly comic, it is also characteristic of the generally accepted concept of parody as creating ironic distancing and self-reflexivity through dialogue with another text. Hutcheon’s statement that ‘All parody is overtly hybrid and double-voiced’ is certainly applicable to the formula of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.<sup>21</sup> In his *Oxford Book of Parodies*, John Gross sees an overlap between parody and burlesque, the latter of which ‘fools around with the material of high literature and adapts it to low ends’, a process matching much of Grahame-Smith’s technique.<sup>22</sup> Despite transgressing Austen’s construction of the world of Regency manners, he still manages to retain many of its core values, from a sense of decorum through to the feistiness of its principled heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. Indeed, his gothicisation of Austen is appropriate in several respects, since she would have been familiar with the concept of zombies — even though the word was not used in English during her life-time — and embraced gothic parody early in her writing career.<sup>23</sup> Amongst Austen juvenilia may be found her unfinished epistolary novel *Lesley Castle*, probably written in early 1792, which parodies elements of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).<sup>24</sup> Her link to parody is further highlighted by Amanda Grange’s dedication of *Mr Darcy, Vampire* to Catherine Morland, the heroine of Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818), which, in turn, parodies Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).<sup>25</sup>

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August 2014]. Grahame-Smith’s authorship of *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, which has been made into a 2012 film directed by Timur Bekmambetov, might have added to the confusion.

<sup>19</sup> Rekulak, e-mail to Marie Mulvey-Roberts, 10 June 2013.

<sup>20</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> *The Oxford Book of Parodies*, ed. by John Gross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xi.

<sup>23</sup> See Linda Troost, ‘The Undead Eighteenth Century’, her EC-ASECS 2010 presidential address, *The Eighteenth-Century Intelligencer*, March 2011, <<http://www2.washjeff.edu/users/ltroost/troostzombies2011.pdf>> [accessed 1 July 2013]

<sup>24</sup> See my discussion of this in Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ‘Gothic Bristol: City of Darkness and Light’, in *Literary Bristol: Writers and the City*, ed. by Marie Mulvey-Roberts (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> 1818 appears on the title page of the first edition, even though *Northanger Abbey* was published in December 1817, nearly two decades after it was started.

Another way of classifying the novel is to consider it as adaptation. Yet Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as 'a form of repetition without replication', when applied to the mash-up, is contentious.<sup>26</sup> In the case of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Grahame-Smith uses about 85%<sup>27</sup> of what Genette terms the hypotext or anterior text, which consists of Jane Austen's words.<sup>28</sup> The textual transformation of the given or hypertext has been achieved partly by disrupting the linearity of the original. This conforms to one of the functions of parody — 'denuding or laying bare' the 'essential conventionality of literary form'.<sup>29</sup> The new material grafts onto the main body of the Austen novel a plague of zombie attacks in the Hertfordshire countryside, which the Bennet sisters, as exponents of the martial arts, seek to repel. The zombie invasion demonstrates how a contemporary popular narrative can invade a classic, not merely in terms of genre, but also metaphorically, as well as on the level of plot. Co-authorship of recent writers with classic authors is another form of colonisation. The original has not been wiped out, nor written over in the sense of a palimpsest, but inserted into a new contextual framework.

In view of this, perhaps the mash-up should be seen as closer to appropriation than adaptation. Both modes, according to Julie Sanders, carry out a sustained engagement with the original text, though appropriation 'frequently adopts a posture of critique, even assault'.<sup>30</sup> She points out that, 'as the notion of hostile takeover present in a term such as "appropriation" implies, adaptation can also be oppositional, even subversive'.<sup>31</sup> Certainly the zombie content corresponds to the language of 'assault', which Sanders is using to describe appropriation. Grahame-Smith simultaneously declares war on the novel at the same time as co-opting it. His subversion of Austen's work extends to an ironic attempt to destabilise (if not usurp) the authority of the canonical text in a kind of textual *coup d'état*. Indeed the appropriation of *Pride and Prejudice* could even include appropriating its very status as a canonical text, since the mash-up seems to be comically aspiring to the ranks of the literary canon in its own right. The deluxe edition produced by Quirk Books is presented as an heirloom and artefact for collectors, despite being digitally available. Like *Pride and Prejudice* itself, Grahame-Smith's appropriation has proved ripe for exploitation by other

<sup>26</sup> Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2013), p. xviii.

<sup>27</sup> Grahame-Smith gives this estimate in an interview. See Paige MacGregor, 'Exclusive: Seth Grahame-Smith Talks "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies"', 1 April 2009, <<http://filmschoolrejects.com/features/exclusive-seth-grahame-smith-talks-pride-and-prejudice-and-zombies.php>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

<sup>28</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Sanders, p. 9.

authors and, indeed, as outlined above, an entire industry has sprung up around it. Hockensmith's prequel and sequel provide the most direct mock tributes. These adaptations of an adaptation know their place. Even their titles are subordinate to that of the prototype, in being relegated to the sub-title as in, for example, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls*.

The exploitation of the classic for commercial purposes is nothing new in gothic literature. In Austen's early novel, *Northanger Abbey*, reference is made to Ann Radcliffe, whose major gothic novels, along with the work of Matthew Lewis, inspired imitations, redactions, and abridgements.<sup>32</sup> The extent to which these epiphenomena took advantage of best-sellers is demonstrated by the title of T. J. Horsley Curties's *The Monk of Udolpho* (1807), a synthesis of Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Another example is *Manfroné; or, The One-Handed Monk* (1809) written by the aptly named Mary Anne Radcliffe. Similarly, Quirk Classics and its kin have endeavoured to capitalise on the publishing success of canonical texts through the mash-up. Driven by the uncertainties of the market, many early gothic writers struggled to make a living. Even the relatively successful Sarah Wilkinson had to appeal to the Royal Literary Funds for the alleviation of her dire poverty.<sup>33</sup> Contemporary author Vera Nazarian was driven to publish *Mansfield Park and Mummies* due to desperate financial circumstances relating to mortgage foreclosure as a result of the economic collapse in America.<sup>34</sup> She started a public fund for donations to relieve her financial distress and sent out internet appeals to buy her book. Since the eighteenth century, struggling authors have often turned to the gothic novel or ghost story, in the hope of increasing book sales.

Many joined in the mass publishing phenomenon of the gothic bluebooks or short tales of terror during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These were 'literary mushrooms' growing under the shadow of the gothic novel and were invariably imitations of one sort or another.<sup>35</sup> It should not be assumed, however, that these publications are without literary merit, despite a tendency to be derivative and of an ephemeral nature. Printed on cheap paper with flimsy blue or pink covers, they were often read literally to pieces,

<sup>32</sup> See Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), ed. by Marilyn Butler, rev. edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> See Franz J. Potter, *The History of Gothic Publishing, 1800-1835: Exhuming the Trade* (Hounds-mill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 52, 113.

<sup>34</sup> See 'The Mummies and Their Author Need Your Help', 10 January 2011, <<http://www.veranazarian.com/Mummies-Help.htm>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>35</sup> Potter, p. 37.

becoming the proverbial ‘pulp’ fiction. Many did not survive the paper shortages of World War 2 and were disposed of as toilet paper.

By stark contrast, Grahame-Smith’s deluxe revised version of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is presented in a gold embossed leatherette binding designed to ‘endure for generations’ with ‘full-colour oil painting illustrations’ to convey quality and antiquity.<sup>36</sup> After having been published initially in paperback, in a reverse of the usual practice, the book re-emerged between hard covers, which Grahame-Smith jokingly suggests could also double up as a weapon in a zombie uprising.<sup>37</sup> Quirk Classics are designed to caricature the prestigious Penguin Classics, which have stood the test of time. Imitating the publisher’s trade-mark branding on the front cover, the use of traditional portraiture is deployed, only this time, blood-splattered or sufficiently decayed as to reveal a skull. The independent Chicago publisher Sourcebooks brought out *Emma and the Vampires*, whose heroine is depicted on the cover holding a bloodied sword and severed head next to the slogan ‘A Jane Austen undead novel’. This word-play alludes to the content of the hypertext, while simultaneously acknowledging the canonicity of Austen’s hypotext.<sup>38</sup> Similarly *Dawn of the Dreadfuls* has a metafictional moment when Elizabeth Bennet is asked by another character if she is famous: ‘Bennet. Hmm. It seems to me that name’s ever so important, somehow.’<sup>39</sup> Readers requiring notes for reference are advised to consult *Mansfield Park and Mummies* where annotations and appendices are provided, as if to appeal to the studious reader. The preface to Grahame-Smith’s revised edition, and afterword written by a Professor in English, imply that the book must be worthy of scholarly attention, which ironically has proved to be the case, here and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> Such adjuncts are identified by Genette as forming part of the paratextual realm, which he regards as a threshold of interpretation. Genette locates this paraphernalia on the fringes of a text, as elements of the peritext. This controls how the text is transmitted to the reader, governing expectations regarding genre, and includes the name of the author, book title, sub-title, preface, and so on.<sup>41</sup> To assist the reader in the generic mayhem of Grahame-Smith’s novel is *The Readers [sic] Unauthorized Guide to Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2011) edited by Skyler Collins. Rather anomalously for a printed book, it is compiled from

<sup>36</sup> Quirk Books, <<http://quirkbooks.com/book/pride-and-prejudice-and-zombies-deluxe-heirloom-edition>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>37</sup> See Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> The vampires function in a way which is virtually identical to the zombies in other Austen mash-ups.

<sup>39</sup> Hockensmith, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> The academic is Dr Allen Grove of Alfred University, New York, USA. See Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, pp. 354–57 and also Linda Troost, ‘The Undead Eighteenth Century’.

<sup>41</sup> See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

'high quality' internet articles, though some are distinctly lacking in scholarship, as indicated by the occasional editorial insertion of 'citation needed'.<sup>42</sup> Both this *Guide* and 'A Reader's Discussion Guide', appearing at the end of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, are metatexts parodying the ways in which canonical texts are deemed to merit study on the teaching curriculum.<sup>43</sup>

There is certainly a place for guidance about the mash-up novel which, as far as Austen is concerned, has incongruously inserted zombies, vampires, mummies, and sea-monsters into her world. Marjorie Kehe quantified the mash-up as 60-85% of a pre-existing text mashed up with another genre, while the term itself is borrowed from the music remixing industry and the computer world.<sup>44</sup> The link with technology is appropriate in view of the action-packed zombie episodes, which have more in common with computer-gaming than they do with Austen's fiction. Grahame-Smith's strategy for aligning 'Classic Regency Romance' with 'Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem' is demonstrated by his description of a zombie attack during a ball.<sup>45</sup>

From a corner of the room, Mr Darcy watched Elizabeth and her sisters work their way outward, beheading zombie after zombie as they went. He knew of only one other woman in all of Great Britain who wielded a dagger with such skill, such grace, and deadly accuracy.

By the time the girls reached the walls of the assembly hall, the last of the unmentionables lay still.

Apart from the attack, the evening altogether passed off pleasantly for the whole family. Mrs Bennet had seen her eldest daughter much admired by the Netherfield party [...] despite having their gowns soiled with blood and bits of brain, Catherine and Lydia had been fortunate enough never to be without partners, which was all that they had yet learnt to care for at a ball.<sup>46</sup>

Instead of watching the Bennet sisters dance, Mr Darcy, 'a man of many kills', observes them in mortal combat.<sup>47</sup> The conflation of the ball and the zombie attack draws together the refined and the primitive, encapsulated by Sir William Lucas's remark to Mr Darcy in Austen's original that dancing is 'one of the first refinements of polished society', to which the acerbic reply is that 'Every savage can dance'.<sup>48</sup> Grahame-Smith's ironic inversions

<sup>42</sup> *The Readers Unauthorized Guide to Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, ed. by Collins, pp. 50, 126.

<sup>43</sup> *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is taught on the university curriculum at George Washington University, Washington DC as an Austen adaptation.

<sup>44</sup> See 'Mashup (book)', <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup\\_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup_(book))> [accessed 4 August 2014] and *The Readers Unauthorized Guide to Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, ed. by Collins, p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, title page.

<sup>46</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 21.

satirise social and domestic activities, especially those associated with a very specific kind of femininity contained within Austen's depiction of that time. When Wayne Josephson's Emma Woodhouse contemplates giving up staking vampires, she resolves to make a needle-point sheath for her retired wooden stake. Rather than sewing, Grahame-Smith's Elizabeth Bennet may be found whittling blowgun darts in readiness for another zombie attack. In *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, she and her sister Jane not only comb each other's hair, but after almost a week's training in 'the deadly arts', find themselves dressing each other's wounds.<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth, who has been trained in Shaolin kung fu, imagines cutting off prattling younger sister Lydia's head and it falling into an open hat box. In addition to the muddy petticoat with which she arrives at Netherfield, she has 'pieces of undead flesh upon her sleeve'.<sup>50</sup> These are examples of what Genette calls 'transmotivization', when the intentions of an original character are altered within the adaptation.<sup>51</sup> Here, everyday domestic activities have been transformed into preparations for battle and extraordinary action sequences, which betray the influence of cinema.

Both Grahame-Smith and Hockensmith are screenwriters. The modern concept of zombies originated from George A. Romero's apocalyptic film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Here, zombie is crossed with vampire to produce 'a ghoulish plague monster', a hybridisation reflected in Austen horror mash-ups and the various other cultural phenomena that they have spawned.<sup>52</sup> Zombie apocalypse is currently re-enacted in the streets of Bath around Halloween on the Jane Austen Day of the Dead.<sup>53</sup> The portrait on the cover of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* stares out from the event's Facebook page. Costumed zombie walks are often said to have a political anti-consumerist agenda linked to Romero's second film in his *Night of the Living Dead* series.<sup>54</sup> This is *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), the title of which is parodied in Hockensmith's prequel, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*. In Romero's horror film, survivors find refuge from flesh-eating zombies in a suburban shopping mall, an updated version of buying ribbons and laces in Regency Bath.

<sup>49</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by Emily Auerbach, 'Pride and Proliferation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 186–97 (p. 195).

<sup>51</sup> Allen, *Intertextuality*, p. 107.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in *The Readers Unauthorized Guide to Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, ed. by Collins, p. 45. Like vampires, zombies rise from the grave and bite their victims, who then turn into versions of themselves. They do not conform to their more traditional voodoo antecedents as in the early films, *White Zombie*, dir. by Victor Halperin (United Artists/Edward Halperin Productions, 1932) [on DVD], or *I Walked with a Zombie*, dir. by Jacques Tourneur (RKO Radio Pictures, 1943) [on DVD].

<sup>53</sup> In Bristol there is an interactive apocalyptic zombie chase game called '2.8 Hours Later: Asylum' started in 2010.

<sup>54</sup> This is certainly the case in Bristol which has the oldest zombie walk in the UK.

In view of this link with consumerism, it may be significant that *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was published during the global financial crisis of 2007–08. In the USA, zombie and vampire films have been viewed as ‘competing parables about class warfare’.<sup>55</sup> According to a graph appearing on the internet, when Republicans are in power, more zombie movies are made, whereas when a Democrat is in the White House, a greater number of vampire films are produced. As S. Peter Davis explains, this is because Republicans are associated with conservatism and consumerism, while vampires are perceived as opposing conservative ideals.<sup>56</sup> Even though this survey should be approached with caution, the idea for *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was conceived around spring 2008, when Republican George W. Bush was still in office.<sup>57</sup> Grahame-Smith, who has satirically criticised Bush in his book, *Pardon My President* (2008), regards the characters in Austen novels as zombie-like in that ‘No matter what’s going on around them in the world, they live in this bubble of privilege’.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, as social commentary, the zombie motif can be interpreted in various ways, including one which is more sympathetic to Austen’s female characters, in spite of their privileged lives. As Stephanie Merritt indicates in her *Observer* review of Grahame-Smith’s novel,

on some level the monsters are not entirely inappropriate: the society Austen depicts is highly predatory on both sides, with young girls ready to be picked off and devoured by unscrupulous men such as George Wickham, and equally rapacious women bent on capturing their often unwitting prey. It might be argued that the mash-ups only make the metaphorical literal.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Peter Rowe, ‘With Obama Election Comes the Return of the Vampire’, 8 November 2008, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, <<http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/news/features/20081108-9999-1n8vampire.html>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>56</sup> See S. Peter Davis, ‘6 Mind-blowing Ways Zombies and Vampires Explain America’, 6 September 2011, *Cracked*, <[http://www.cracked.com/article\\_19402\\_6-mind-blowing-ways-zombies-vampires-explain-america.html](http://www.cracked.com/article_19402_6-mind-blowing-ways-zombies-vampires-explain-america.html)> [accessed 10 June 2013]. In the HBO TV series *True Blood*, Season 7 Episode 5 (2014), the vampires Eric Northman and Pamela Swynford de Beaufort are at a Republican convention in the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, where Pam says, ‘Of all the horrible things I’ve seen in the last hundred years this could be the most disturbing.’

<sup>57</sup> See Rekulak, e-mail to Mulvey-Roberts, 10 June 2013. This could just as easily be reversed, since city bankers can be equated to blood-sucking vampires, who are traditionally linked to aristocrats, while Republicans might be fearful of dishevelled zombie hordes in revolt; see Rowe, ‘With Obama Election Comes the Return of the Vampire’.

<sup>58</sup> See Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pardon My President* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2008), quoted by Carolyn Kellogg, ‘“Pride and Prejudice and Zombies” by Seth Grahame-Smith’, 4 April 2009, *Los Angeles Times*, <<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-zombies4-2009apr04,0,4685367.story>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>59</sup> Stephanie Merritt, ‘Pride and Prejudice and Zombies by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith’, 6 December 2009, *The Observer*, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/dec/06/pride-prejudice-zombies-grahame-smith>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

Grahame-Smith takes revenge on the profligate Wickham, who has to be bribed by Mr Darcy into saving Lydia's reputation through marriage, by turning him into an incontinent quadriplegic. This can also be seen as punishment for Lydia's foolishness and lack of remorse, partly through a de-glamorising of Wickham in a deliberate undermining of Austen's more conventional happy ending for the couple.

As some Austen readers might find such re-writing a distasteful send-up of the novel and be repelled by the zombie gore and general mayhem, initially Quirk Classics were reluctant to publish *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* for fear of alienating Austen fans, whose most devoted constituency are the Janeites.<sup>60</sup> This designation first appeared in George Saintsbury's 1894 introduction to a new edition of *Pride and Prejudice*. Traditional readers of an Austenite delicate disposition are unlikely to welcome graphic descriptions of beheadings, cannibalism and mass murder, despite concessions to the mock propriety of rarely mentioning the 'Zed word'. Besides the already mentioned 'unmentionables', euphemisms include 'the sorry stricken', 'the manky dreadfuls' and 'the de-graved dreadfuls'.<sup>61</sup> *Dawn of the Dreadfuls* opens with one of these creatures rising from the dead during a funeral:

WALKING OUT [*sic*] in the middle of a funeral would be, of course, bad form. So attempting to walk out on one's own was beyond the pale.

When the service began, Mr Ford was as well behaved as any corpse could be expected to be.<sup>62</sup>

But when Mr Ford sits up in his coffin, it is apparent that he has joined the ranks of the undead. So too, in a canonical sense, has Jane Austen. One might wonder if Grahame-Smith and his imitators were inspired by Mark Twain's notorious admonition of Austen when he wrote, 'Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* [*sic*] I want to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone!'<sup>63</sup> This statement resonates with the opening of Hockensmith's sequel *Dreadfully Ever After*, where Mr and Mrs Darcy are fighting off a zombie attack. Elizabeth launches into 'a tottering collection of old bones' and kicks off an arm, which she then uses as a bone-club to swipe off the head of an unmentionable from its shoulders.<sup>64</sup> The undead in states of semi-decay regularly climb out of graves to launch attacks on the living, littering Hockensmith's and Grahame-Smith's zombified Neo-Austen novels with body parts.

<sup>60</sup> See *The Readers Unauthorized Guide to Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, ed. by Collins, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, pp. 34, 182, 221.

<sup>62</sup> Hockensmith, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Joseph Twichell (13 September 1898) quoted by Devoney Looser, 'The Cult of *Pride and Prejudice* and its Author', in *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 174–85 (p. 176).

<sup>64</sup> Hockensmith, *Dreadfully Ever After*, p. 9.

Once bitten by an unmentionable, humans are afflicted by a plague which gradually turns them into zombies. A case in point is Charlotte Lucas who, by the time she has married Mr Collins, is three-quarters dead, a state unnoticed by her husband. Marriage, for Charlotte, has been accompanied by the gradual onset of zombification. Moreover, zombies have no respect for nuptials. In *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, a finger with a wedding band is found amongst zombie droppings. Nevertheless, Lydia Bennet insists, 'I'd still rather be an unmentionable than a spinster' [emphasis in original].<sup>65</sup> In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, the Bennet sisters resolve to protect Hertfordshire from its enemies, mainly zombies, until such time as they are 'dead, rendered lame, or married'.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, the zombie trope can accommodate a range of approaches to marriage and spinster-hood, subjects which are the focus of intense interest in *Pride and Prejudice*.

In the novel, Mr Bennet is put under pressure by his wife to agree to his second daughter Elizabeth's marriage to the odious Mr Collins, who will inherit their family estate. As Austen reveals, the reason for this is because Mr Bennet has not made adequate provision for his wife and daughters after his death. Grahame-Smith, however, rehabilitates the lethargic father through his efforts to train his daughters as warriors so that they can defend themselves against 'the unmentionables'. By contrast their mother's focus is on marital rather than martial arts. She fears that these masculine pursuits will detract from the marriageability of her daughters: 'The business of Mr Bennet's life was to keep his daughters alive. The business of Mrs Bennet's was to get them married.'<sup>67</sup> In *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, real horror arrives for Mrs Bennet when her daughters are banned from attending a spring ball because the hostess discovers that they are training in the deadly arts. A family friend Lord Lumpley, intent on seducing the eldest and most beautiful daughter Jane, comes up with a solution. To help the girls regain social acceptance, he suggests that Jane act as his bodyguard. To preserve her reputation, he provides her with chaperones. This may be seen as transcultural adaptation, through which authors import different cultural values into an existing fictional world.<sup>68</sup> Here it functions to satirise the notion of 'the weaker sex'. As Hockensmith and Grahame-Smith demonstrate, women in the novel not only break the bounds of traditional femininity, but actually reverse gender roles by protecting men from attack.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth tries to normalise this social aberration by telling her sister, 'You must simply think of yourself as a special sort of

<sup>65</sup> Hockensmith, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, p. 33.

<sup>66</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 254.

<sup>67</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> See Hutcheon with O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 147.

<sup>69</sup> A woman takes charge in the active defence of men against zombies in Romero's *Day of the Dead* (United Film Distribution Company/Laurel Entertainment/Dead Films/Laurel Day, 1985) [on DVD].

governess [...] And of Lord Lumpley as a particularly naughty child.<sup>70</sup> Younger sister Mary, who is renowned in Grahame-Smith's version as 'the most accomplished hapkido master in England',<sup>71</sup> tries comforting the horrified Mrs Bennet at the prospect of Jane's new employment by pointing out that 'Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself served as personal guard to the Duke of York during the Black Country Campaign'.<sup>72</sup>

The matriarchal Lady Catherine, who has 'a personal guard of five-and-twenty ninjas' is, like Elizabeth, a redoubtable zombie antagonist.<sup>73</sup> As Merritt notes, in 'the Austen adaptations, it is the women who are bold and quick-witted enough to take on the monsters, a nice reversal of the passive victim role traditionally handed to young women, in horror as in history'.<sup>74</sup> The active agency of Austen's heroine is put to the test by Grahame-Smith through a deadly confrontation with opponent Lady Catherine, who disapproves of Elizabeth marrying her nephew, Mr Darcy. Crossing swords, Elizabeth and Lady Catherine engage in aerial combat, which evokes the special effects associated with Asian cinema: 'After several minutes of flying about', the adversaries attack 'one another with force that would have sent legions of lesser warriors to their graves'.<sup>75</sup> The clash of these two powerful personalities, who break out of the restrictions governing their traditional gender roles, is literalised through mortal combat for comic effect.

Metaphorically, these female warriors may also be seen as trained in class warfare. Zombies represent fears of the untamed rabble from the lower classes and the chaos lying beneath the relatively ordered surface of Austen's society. The zombie apocalypse not only explodes the tinder-box of class conflict, but also points to the war being waged on Continental Europe. Austen's novels are full of military figures, who serve little purpose as soldiers, apart from bolstering marriage hopes, as in Lydia's elopement with George Wickham, an officer in the regiment. The presence of war lurks around the edges of Austen's novels, but is brought to the fore in the mash-ups. Throughout her life, Austen lived under the shadow of war, from the American Revolution through to the Napoleonic Wars. Her brothers were involved in naval engagements with the enemy, and the first husband of her cousin Eliza de Feuillide was guillotined during the Terror of the French Revolution in 1794.<sup>76</sup> Responding to the criticism that Austen failed to acknowledge the great events of the time in

<sup>70</sup> Hockensmith, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, p. 140.

<sup>71</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 23.

<sup>72</sup> Hockensmith, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, p. 141.

<sup>73</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 141.

<sup>74</sup> Merritt, 'Pride and Prejudice and Zombies'.

<sup>75</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 327.

<sup>76</sup> See Paul Poplawski, *A Jane Austen Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), p. 9.

her fiction, Marilyn Butler in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) says that the ‘crucial action of her novels is in itself expressive of the conservative side in an active war of ideas’.<sup>77</sup>

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen comes closest in a fictional context to hinting of political unrest and bloodshed. This is prompted by Catherine Morland’s comment, when she says, ‘I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London [...] more horrible than anything we have met with yet [...] It is to be uncommonly dreadful. I shall expect murder and every thing of the kind.’<sup>78</sup> Eleanor Tilney, not realising that Catherine is referring to a ‘horrid novel’, asks for more information about ‘this dreadful riot’, having already expressed the earnest hope that the government will seek to prevent it. Her brother Henry mischievously compounds her misunderstanding by saying, ‘Government [...] neither desires nor dares to interfere in such matters. There must be murder; and government cares not how much.’ He then goes on to reveal that the source of the horror lies merely in gothic fiction:

My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. The confusion there is scandalous. Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern — do you understand? — And you, Miss Morland — my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London — and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George’s Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons, (the hopes of the nation,) [sic] called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the gallant Capt. Frederick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window.<sup>79</sup>

*Northanger Abbey* was written circa 1798–99, during the period of the French Revolution, when it was feared that the effects would spread to Britain.<sup>80</sup> 1819, the year after its publication, was marked by real rather than imagined horror. Between 60,000 and 80,000 people had gathered at St Peter’s Field in Manchester to demand reform of parliamentary representation. The meeting ended in the Peterloo Massacre, in which around fifteen citizens were killed and 400–700 injured by a cavalry charge. Many of those trying to flee were

<sup>77</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 294.

<sup>78</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. by Butler, p. 107.

<sup>79</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. by Butler, pp. 107–8.

<sup>80</sup> The novel was then entitled *Susan* and underwent revisions over a number of years.

blocked by a line of fixed bayonets. Rioting followed and troops fired on a crowd. Clearly Henry's complacency proved wrong. There *was* cold-blooded murder, blood on the streets of Manchester instead of London, and the 'government care[d] not how much'. Comparisons can be drawn between zombie mayhem and the way in which people were cut down by sabres in a frenzied bloody massacre carried out by members of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, who were out of control. The Austen mash-ups can be seen as reflecting the violence of her era, which included the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution (1793–94) and the Napoleonic Wars, in which her family were involved. Yet, as Butler points out, Austen's novels 'do not mention the French Revolution and barely allude to the Napoleonic Wars'.<sup>81</sup>

By contrast, there is direct acknowledgement of war in Grange's *Mr Darcy, Vampire*, when Elizabeth and Mr Darcy decide to spend their honeymoon in war-torn Europe, rather than the Lake District. They go and visit Darcy's uncle, Count Polidori, who belongs to 'an older branch of the family'.<sup>82</sup> Grange borrowed the name from vampire author John Polidori, whose novella *The Vampyre* (1819) is set partly on the Continent. Darcy, we are told, used to own a town-house in Paris, which was destroyed in the French Revolution. Elizabeth fears for their safety on the trip and that the temporary truce with the English will be broken. She asks Darcy if the wars with France will ever end; his response, 'Everything does eventually', hints at a first-hand knowledge acquired from his longevity as a vampire.<sup>83</sup>

Another indication that Mr Darcy is a vampire relates to his reluctance to consummate the marriage. This could be a comment upon the implicit but unseen sexuality in Austen's novels. Grange's novel echoes Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005–08), in which vampire Edward Cullen withholds sexual gratification from his girlfriend Bella Swan for over three volumes because of fears that vampires and humans are incompatible. Mr Darcy is concerned that the sexual act will turn Elizabeth into a vampire. Both heroines are visibly dismayed at being sexually rejected. Although the reason is fairly obvious to Grange's reader, not least from the title of the novel, it takes Elizabeth longer to catch on. The formula of sexual expression and restraint, which worked so well for Meyer, has now been utilised by Grange for a predominantly young female readership. Austen's novel was even marketed by HarperCollins with the trademark red and black *Twilight* design on the front cover, as it is

<sup>81</sup> Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, p. 294.

<sup>82</sup> Grange, *Mr Darcy, Vampire*, p. 57.

<sup>83</sup> Grange, *Mr Darcy, Vampire*, p. 115.

said to have informed Meyer's first novel in the series, *Twilight* (2005).<sup>84</sup> The use of the brand was a targeted attempt to entice *Twilight* readers to read *Pride and Prejudice* as a romantic co-text. The ploy was extended to other classics which influenced Meyer, notably Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>85</sup> The branding and cross-fertilisation of genres are part of a marketing continuum on which the horror mash-ups sit at one extreme. These textual equivalents of the body-snatcher have also vampirically created a new art-form through generic hybridity.

Now, consequently, writers from the past have assumed an almost ghostly presence within the modern mash-up. In a blog entitled, 'I Write with Dead People: How to Collaborate with a Corpse', Ben H. Winters, co-author of *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, insists that co-authorship between the living and the dead is nothing new. But what is markedly different here is how the mash-up has enabled the modern text to vampirise the original with new textual blood. Winters cites numerous Sherlock Holmes stories written since the death of Arthur Conan Doyle, as well as Margaret Mitchell's posthumous collaborations with at least two sequels to *Gone with the Wind* (1936). In support of his assertion that 'Writing with the deceased is not as easy as it sounds', he provides guidelines. Rule No. 1 is 'Pick a really famous dead person' and rule No. 2 prescribes, 'Pick a really famous book.' But he cautions, 'Even when you are working with a super-famous dead person, do not let them pressurise you into doing one of their lesser novels.' He goes on to confess, 'Confidentially, when Austen and I started collaborating, she wanted to do *Persuasion and Sea Monsters*, because it's got lots of boats in it. I had to sort of gingerly explain that people don't read that one so much anymore.'<sup>86</sup>

Austen certainly knew about seafaring, as she kept up a correspondence with her two brothers, Francis and Charles, who were sailors. She spares her readers details of maritime horrors, such as floggings, blood-soaked decks, and men losing life and limb under cannon fire.<sup>87</sup> Charles was involved in the Battle of Camperdown (1797) as a Lieutenant and later was promoted to Captain. Francis, who eventually rose to Admiral of the Fleet, narrowly

<sup>84</sup> See Glennis Byron, 'Branding and Gothic in Contemporary Popular Culture: The Case of *Twilight*', 31 December 2010, *The Gothic Imagination*, <<http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/blog/branding-and-gothic-in-contemporary-popular-culture-the-case-of-twilight/>> [accessed 9 June 2013] and *The Twilight Mystique: Critical Essays on the Novels and Films*, ed. by Amy M. Clarke and Marijane Osborn (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), p. 35.

<sup>85</sup> Meyer has indicated that *Romeo and Juliet* influenced the second in the series, *New Moon* (2006) and that *Wuthering Heights* informed the following novel *Eclipse* (2007); see Byron, and Clarke and Osborn. A relevant gothic parody of the *Twilight* series is Blaine Hislop's *The Cullens* published by Wheelman Press, in 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Ben H. Winters, 'I Write with Dead People: How to Collaborate with a Corpse', 6 November 2009, *The Huffington Post*, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ben-h-winters/i-write-with-dead-people\\_b\\_347365.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ben-h-winters/i-write-with-dead-people_b_347365.html)> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>87</sup> Austen does have a callous account of the death of Richard Musgrave at sea in *Persuasion* (1817).

missed the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). The younger Charles was posted to Bermuda, where he intercepted ships illegally transporting slaves between the British West Indies and America's Southern states. From Jamaica, he records his achievement 'in crushing the slave trade'.<sup>88</sup> Prior to this, in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Sir Thomas Bertram voyages to Antigua, where he owns an estate. On his return, the family's poor relation Fanny Price questions him about slavery, only to receive 'a dead silence'.<sup>89</sup> A link between slavery and the dead may be found on another Caribbean island, Haiti, through the figure of the zombie. Val Lewton's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) is a film adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Informed by Haitian voodoo, it draws on the Caribbean origins of Bertha Mason, the mad-wife of hero Edward Rochester, and on the idea of people being turned into zombies in Haiti to work as enforced labour on sugar plantations. Undoubtedly, the zombie serves as a fitting metaphor for the state of enslavement. The film from which Grahame-Smith's adaptation evolved, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, was released in October 1968, the year of the Civil Rights Act, and is a critique of the legacy of slavery, with its lynch mobs, race riots and assassination of black leaders, most notably Martin Luther King, who was murdered six months earlier.<sup>90</sup> Within British culture, the association between zombies and race goes back to 1819, when the word was first used in English, two years after Austen's death.<sup>91</sup>

Racial aspects, however, are not a feature of the type of zombification that Grahame-Smith chose to depict. Instead, he selected the brain-eating variety, originating in the film *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985), directed by Dan O'Bannon. The cannibalism of brain-eating zombies figuratively tears apart and consumes the anterior text. The designation 'mash-up' has destructive connotations, while its intrinsic hybridisation partakes of the monstrous. For Grahame-Smith and his imitators, monstrosity is performative, a feature of content as well as form. The zombie apocalypse symbolises the invasion of the Austen canon by a different kind of reader. While it could be said to be 'a truth universally acknowledged' that most readers of Jane Austen tend to be female, in general the readers of zombie literature are assumed to be male.<sup>92</sup> So who is reading *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*? When he first signed up Grahame-Smith's book, Rekulak assumed it would appeal mainly to readers of

<sup>88</sup> Quoted by Brian Southam, 'Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers: Francis and Charles in Life and Art', *Persuasions*, 25 (2003), 33–45 (p. 38).

<sup>89</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), ed. by Claudia L. Johnson, p. 136.

<sup>90</sup> Rehan Hyder drew my attention to the last line before the credits: 'That's another one for the fire'. This evokes the torching of black bodies by white lynch mobs.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Southey first used the word 'zombi' [sic] in his *History of Brazil* (1810–19); see Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 212.

<sup>92</sup> Austen and Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, deluxe edn, p. 13.

horror and zombie fiction. This expectation is reflected in the marketing for the 2009 revised edition, which boasts ‘30% more zombies’. But now he says, to his surprise, that the book has been ‘much more popular with Austen fans than with horror fans’, including those ‘excited to re-experience the classic novel in a different way’.<sup>93</sup> To bring the two together has similarities with the earlier fusion between so-called male and female gothic writing (represented respectively by Lewis’s horror and Radcliffean terror) as in Curties’s *The Monk of Udolpho* though, according to Dale Townshend, this novel is ‘neither strictly male nor strictly female Gothic’, but ‘ought to be read more as a masculine disciplining and vanquishing of the feminine than any fictional hybrid transgressively formed by the suturing of the two gendered modes’.<sup>94</sup> This could also be applied to Charlotte Dacre’s racially controversial *Zofloya* (1806). Dacre dedicated her first novel, *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (1805), to Lewis and based her poet pseudonym Rosa Matilda on names from *The Monk*, a novel which combines revolutionary-derived horror with Enlightenment pornographic elements. Grahame-Smith, who has previously published books on both pornography and horror film, seems an unlikely Austen aficionado, for as the back of the paperback declares, ‘*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* transforms a masterpiece of world literature into something you’d actually want to read’.<sup>95</sup> In Ford’s *Jane Bites Back*, Austen has been reincarnated as a vampire, who runs a book shop in Upstate New York, where Grahame-Smith’s mash-up turns out to be one of her best-sellers. Initially, ‘Part of her bristled at the notion of someone taking *her* novel and inserting new, decidedly unorthodox text into it, and she’d briefly considered visiting some unpleasantness upon the author’ [emphasis in original], but eventually her irritation is replaced by amusement and she even recommends the book to customers, though she feels that ‘receiving royalties from it would be nice’.<sup>96</sup> Grahame-Smith endorses the book on the outside cover as ‘sharp-witted’ and ‘sharp-fanged Jane Austen’, along with the caveat ‘(and I’m not just saying that because she spares my life in chapter 6)’.

So why did *Pride and Prejudice* become the ur-text for this recent trend in horror hybridity? It was chosen most probably because it is so wildly inappropriate, despite

<sup>93</sup> Jason Rekulak, e-mails to Marie Mulvey-Roberts, 10 and 13 June 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Dale Townshend, ‘T. J. Horsley Curties and Royalist Gothic: The Case of *The Monk of Udolpho* (1807)’, *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 4 (June 2008), <<http://irishgothicandhorrorjournal.homestead.com/HorsleyCurtiesGothic.html>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>95</sup> Conversely David Moody endorses *The War of the Worlds Plus Blood, Guts and Zombies* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010) by H. G. Wells and Eric S. Brown as ‘A mash-up book that’s actually worth reading!’, 4 June 2011, *Coscom Entertainment*, <<http://coscomentertainment.com/tag/simon-and-schuster/>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>96</sup> Ford, *Jane Bites Back*, p. 45.

Grahame-Smith's ironic assertion to the contrary that 'it was just ripe for gore and senseless violence', and waiting to be taken apart.<sup>97</sup> Indeed Austen herself 'lopt & cropt' [sic] the first version of her novel.<sup>98</sup> The critical reception of Grahame-Smith's parody has drawn in commentators colluding with the spoof: 'Jane Austen isn't for everyone. Neither are zombies. But combine the two and the only question is, Why [sic] didn't anyone think of this before? The judicious addition of flesh-eating undead to this otherwise faithful reworking is just what Austen's gem needed.'<sup>99</sup> Another reviewer sharing in the joke comments, 'Such is the accomplishment of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* that after reveling [sic] in its timeless intrigue, it's difficult to remember how Austen's novel got along without the undead.'<sup>100</sup> The irony of this observation points towards the ever-increasing legion of alternate-Austen fans created by gothic Neo-Austenite writers, who may never actually read any of the original novels. For them, the experience of Jane Austen's fictional world could be one in which games of Crypt and Coffin or Stricken and Slayers are played at social gatherings in between fending off vampires and zombies.

Is the horror mash-up therefore a tribute to Jane Austen, an act of aggression expressing the hatred of which Mark Twain has been accused, or a device to annoy Janeites? Its inter-textuality may be seen as a re-enactment of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence envisioned through an Oedipal struggle between contemporary and classic author. With katana in hand, Elizabeth Bennet is hacking and mutilating, not just zombies, but *Pride and Prejudice* itself. There will always be those who prefer the adaptation to the original. Despite Linda Hutcheon's reminder that the adaptive text should not be denigrated as automatically inferior to the first, it is possible that reading a mash-up risks tarnishing readers' appreciation of the parenting text.<sup>101</sup> While this is an unavoidable risk when reading any adaptation, it is ironic that 'What begins as a gimmick ends with renewed appreciation of the indomitable appeal of Austen's language, characters, and situations', and that this should be at the expense of massacring the original.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>97</sup> *The Readers Unauthorized Guide to Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, ed. by Collins, p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted by Janet Todd in 'Criticism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 134–149 (p. 137). I am indebted to Kerry Sinanan for this connection.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted by Hockensmith, *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, p. i.

<sup>100</sup> Donna Bowman, 'Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith', 16 April 2009, A.V. Club, <<http://www.avclub.com/articles/jane-austen-and-seth-grahamesmith-pride-and-prejud,26559/>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>101</sup> See Hutcheon with O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. xiv.

<sup>102</sup> Bowman, 'Pride and Prejudice and Zombies'.

Yet divergences in discourse, taste, and propriety are all part of the mash-up experience. The spirit of Austen's irony has been preserved by some of her co-authors, as well as through their publishers' marketing departments. Many have waged aggressive publicity campaigns, some of which have been rather tongue-in-cheek. This has included incorporating blatant nepotistic endorsements written by other mash-up authors from the same publishing house.<sup>103</sup> In advance of the publication of Hockensmith's *Dawn of the Dreadfuls*, Quirk Classics may have been the first publisher to offer free chapters of a forthcoming book in the form of electronic serialisation.<sup>104</sup> The clash between the classic novel and the horror genre has proved a commercial success. The merging of the old and the new not only exploits the brand of the classic, but also subverts its canonical status through a postmodern collision of high and low culture. This democratising complies with parody as a mode of reconciling us with the 'rich and intimidating legacy of the past', and might account for some of the success of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, whose projected print-run for the first edition of 12,000 was increased to 60,000 copies, even before it had rolled off the press.<sup>105</sup> The momentum created was due to what Genette calls the epitext, consisting of the publicity announcements, endorsements, interviews, and so on, which operate outside the text, acting as a threshold to help form readers' expectations.

The mash-up novel has been an extraordinary cultural phenomenon, which raises questions about its subversiveness and whether canonical fiction ought to be sacrosanct from such tampering. As we have seen, the very nature of its hybridisation brings it closer to appropriation than to either adaptation or parody. The mash-up is a continuation of the early history of gothic publishing, not least through its novel approach to the polarisation of male and female gothic writing. Rekulak's rather unexpected discovery that *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* appears to be read mainly by Austen rather than zombie fans puts a different perspective on the readership. Through its violent yoking together of incompatible elements, the mash-up throws light on the parenting novel, as well as on the host text. Grahame-Smith and his followers have revealed what is implicit or marginalised in Austen's novels, at the same time as adhering to some of the conventions demanded by Regency fiction.

<sup>103</sup> Amanda Grange, 'bestselling author of *Mr Darcy, Vampire*' has written the back-cover endorsement of Austen and Josephson's *Emma and the Vampires*, as 'witty and entertaining!' Both novels are published by Sourcebooks.

<sup>104</sup> See 'Pride and Prejudice and Zombies's Prequel offered in Free Advanced Chapters', 15 March 2010, *The Independent*, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/pride-and-prejudice-and-zombies-prequel-offered-in-free-advance-chapters-1921967.html>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>105</sup> W. Jackson Bate, quoted by Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 4.

For the first few years, this publishing phenomenon experienced a rapid proliferation. Lev Grossman's provocative comment might have presaged an alarming future for purists, when he asked, 'Has there ever been a work of literature that couldn't be improved by adding zombies?', had it not been for indications that the trend, which peaked between 2010 and 2012, is now petering out.<sup>106</sup> Ever since Grahame-Smith's pioneering mash-up first appeared, the joke has been wearing thin. Yet *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* has managed to keep reinventing itself. In 2010 it reappeared as a graphic novel that pledged not to stint on the gore.<sup>107</sup> In the same year, the novel was given a new lease of life through the release of a video game. Two years later, the adaptation re-appeared as an interactive ebook.<sup>108</sup> Merchandising, in the form of a calendar, book of postcards, and the inevitable t-shirt, has co-opted the Jane Austen heritage industry, and next there is the long-awaited film.<sup>109</sup> Clearly the zombie plague infecting and mutating the pages of *Pride and Prejudice* has gone viral in every sense.

### Notes

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<sup>106</sup> Lev Grossman, interview with Seth Grahame-Smith, 2 April 2009, *Time Entertainment*, <<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1889075,00.html>> [accessed 4 August 2014]. This hybridisation has even spread to material culture as in Phil Davison, *Twisted Stitches: 30 Corrupt Cross Stitch and Embroidery Designs* (London: Fil Rouge Press, 2011), described as 'the craft equivalent of *Pride & Prejudice & Zombies*', <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Twisted-Stitches-Corrupt-Embroidery-Designs/dp/0956438210>> [accessed 10 June 2013].

<sup>107</sup> Marvel Comics brought out a version of the novel in 2009.

<sup>108</sup> This was published in 2012 by Quirk Books and PadWorx Digital Media.

<sup>109</sup> Shooting is set to begin in September 2014 and copies of the book are on sale at the Jane Austen Centre in Bath.

## Broadcasting Death: Radio, Media History and Zombies in Bruce McDonald's *Pontypool*

**Solveig Ottmann**

The Canadian film *Pontypool* (McDonald 2008) revolves around the emergence of infected zombie-like creatures in the small Canadian town of Pontypool, Ontario.<sup>1</sup> These creatures are characterised as 'conversationalists', as they become infected by diseased spoken words. As a result of the infection, they lose their comprehension of language, and as another consequence they seek human victims and their healthy flesh. *Pontypool* shows an intense affinity with radio broadcasting. The film's plot is (apart from the opening sequence) entirely located within the 'Beacon Radio' station. It concentrates on the radio announcer Grant Mazzy (Stephen McHattie), the station manager Sydney Briar (Lisa Houle), and the technical assistant Laurel-Ann Drummond (Georgina Reilly), and on how they experience the town's destruction from the isolated point of view within the station. The protagonists only learn about the events in Pontypool via information that is relayed by telecommunication media, especially the telephone and radio signal, which means that they and, for that matter, we as the audience while watching them, have to 'tune in' as (radio) listeners of the events happening outside of the station. This radio-station setting is important for the film's plot, as well as for the argument presented within this article. It is not only that the voice of Grant Mazzy, as well as wireless technology and radio signals, will become one of the crucial tools of the virus-induced apocalypse; it is also that the radio can function as the primary medium through which the film and its 'conversationalists' are to be understood. This reading of the film is supported by considering the history of broadcasting and the media history of the recording and the transmission of the voice, providing insight into spiritualist and media historic discourses about (blasphemous) alterations of communication, 'media zombies', and the radio signal that becomes the carrier of an apocalypse in *Pontypool*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pontypool*, dir. by Bruce McDonald (Maple Pictures/Ponty Up Pictures/Shadow Shows, 2008) [on DVD]. The movie was adapted from Tony Burgess's book *Pontypool Changes Everything: A Novel* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998), who also wrote the screenplay.

### Eavesdropping on the Apocalypse

From the outset, the film cements its dependence on vocal, sonic and technologically mediated communication, and makes clear that the story will be based around radio technology. Radio ‘is a *blind* medium’ [emphasis in original], as Andrew Crisell notes. He goes on: ‘We cannot see its messages, they consist only of noise and silence, and it is from the sole fact of its blindness that all radio’s other distinctive qualities — the nature of its language, its jokes, the way in which the audiences use it — ultimately derive.’<sup>2</sup> *Pontypool*’s opening sequence utilises this striking significance of the radio in its own unique way: the film begins with the static noise of a radio and a deep voice, while all we see is a black screen and a blue sound-wave diagram that both matches and accentuates the spoken words. The voice juggles with English and French words, telling a bewildering story about a Mrs French’s missing cat, Honey. The cat was missing until a woman, named Colette Piscine, had nearly hit Honey with her car on a bridge called Pont de Flaque. Just as we start to wonder what this story is about, the voice explains: ‘Colette’ sounds similar to the French word ‘culotte’ which means ‘panty’ (among other things), while the French words ‘piscine’ and ‘flaque’ can both be translated as ‘pool’. The voice goes on, explaining the result of the pun: ‘Colette Piscine’ equals ‘Panty Pool’ and ‘Pont de Flaque’ equals ‘Pont de Pool’ and thus Panty Pool resembles Pont de Pool, which in turn resembles Pontypool.

Already these few sentences (although at this early point the audience is lost about their meaning) make clear that language and spoken words will be crucial in terms of what will happen in *Pontypool*; and, equally importantly, that radio-transmitted speech will be central. Furthermore, it calls attention to the auditory sense and urges the audience to listen carefully to details, sounds, names, words, verbalisations, and languages, as they will become significant for the coming events. On another level, this story is an instant reminder of the bilingualism of Ontario, Canada, and, at the same time, points to the slipperiness and arbitrariness of language as well as the randomness of word meanings, and hints at the inaccuracy of both translated and spoken language. ‘Panty Pool’, ‘Pont de Pool’ and Pontypool have different meanings, but sound rather similar when either pronounced imprecisely (for example by non-native speakers) or listened to by an inattentive ear (of, for example, a radio listener), or when they are broadcast and the transmission signals encounter interference. The meaning of words is created when signs are interpreted. Words (signifiers)

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

— as conceptualised in Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics<sup>3</sup> — hint at concepts they represent (the signified); in association, they provide a meaning to the sign. Words, also conventionalised as sound patterns or sound images, provoke flawed or completely new meanings and crack open 'the symmetrical unity between signifier and one signified', as Terry Eagleton notes, especially when they are spoken.<sup>4</sup> *Pontypool*, Panty Pool and Pant de Pool may be different signs with different signifiers and signifieds; however, their sound patterns tend to be easily mixed up. The meaning of signifiers is created by 'fending off' similar signifiers, and thus, meaning 'is the result of a process of division or articulations, of signs being themselves only because they are not some other signs'.<sup>5</sup> And, beyond this, a sign is repeatable *and* can be reproduced, which means that reproducing it in different contexts changes its meaning; a detail that will become of central interest at a later point of both the film and this article.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of the opening sequence adds another facet in terms of signs, symbols and meaning, as the voice goes on to talk about Norman Mailer's book *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995), which deals with the events in the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's assassination. The voice explains that Mailer shows how seemingly unrelated things like street names, middle names, birthdates and so on strangely coincide, and form an overall picture (or meaning) of an event when they are arranged in the correct context with each other; only, however, if someone listens carefully enough and is willing to link the signifiers and the signified, does it become possible to understand the meaning of the signs.

Up to this point, the audience's receptive situation more closely resembles that of a radio programme (or even more a radio play) than a film, and interestingly, a *Pontypool* radio play was produced by the BBC World Service at the same time as the film, and begins with the same sequence.<sup>7</sup> However, while the radio naturally relies fully on purely acoustic means, the film at this point starts to embrace visual stylistic devices, dissolving radio's 'blindness': while the tale closes with the voice asking, 'So, what does it mean?', the blue sound waves on the screen change, turn into the shape of a talking mouth, then subsequently transform into a

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Owen, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> Eagleton, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> This play is available at the BBC World Service website, <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2009/06/090617\\_pontypool\\_audio.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/2009/06/090617_pontypool_audio.shtml)> [accessed 25 May 2012].

black circle in which letter by letter the word ‘PONTYPOOL’ appears right at the moment the voice ends, stating ‘Well, it means, something is going to happen, something *big*’.<sup>8</sup>

This beginning puts an extremely heavy weight on not only the voice as an autonomous stylistic and linguistic element, but also on the (transmitted) voice as a signal (referenced as sound waves) and the separation of sight and sound, of body and voice, of sender and receiver, and instantly calls the attention to (radiophonic) media technology that generates this separation. Samuel Weber describes this separation and its effects when he states that by ‘separating sound from sight, radio delocalizes and dismembers the relation to the world’. When sound is deprived of its ‘visual accompaniment’, Weber explains, its ‘power and scope’ is heightened ‘by liberating it from the constraints of a visually determinate situation’.<sup>9</sup> As this implies, the audio-visual separation strengthens the aural sensation as it sensitises the listener’s aural sense. Crisell explains that radio ‘offers sound-only instead of sound and vision’ and thus compels the listener ‘to “supply” the visual data for himself’. And, as he furthermore states, ‘as we all know, the scope of the imagination is virtually limitless: we may picture not only lifelike objects but the fantastical, impossible scenes of an experimental play’, or of an unfathomable apocalypse.<sup>10</sup> Sounds whose source we cannot see are thus not only the reason why horror radio plays are a popular genre; they are also a stylistic device that is often used in horror or ghost-hunting films and TV programmes, as they are sounds ‘from beyond the edges of the frame’, from ‘outside the current setting, which then assume the character of sounds from beyond and from the deceased’, as Richard Coyne states. He goes on:

The idea of disembodied sound has long conneded access to ethereal otherness — sounds from without. According to [Douglas] Kahn, the earliest days of the electronic recording and transmission of sound were accompanied by the notion that listeners could now hear the voices of the deceased. Detecting such subtle sounds from without requires tuning in to the glitches, crackles, and blips in the environment, and those occurring outside of the frame.<sup>11</sup>

These ‘glitches, crackles and blips’ are of particular interest in radio transmission as well as the discussed film, as transmission technology plays a key role for *Pontypool*’s apocalypse

<sup>8</sup> McDonald, 00:01:28.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Crisell, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Coyne, ‘Noise’, in *Sound Studies: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Michael Bull (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), pp. 13–35 (pp. 15–16). Coyne refers to Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 214.

and as its virus is closely linked to glitches, crackles and blips in human speech and articulation.

The introduction of the invasion happens in a familiar radio format, processed by the staff of the 'Beacon Radio' station, Grant Mazzy functioning as its anchor-man. Accordingly, apart from one short encounter with a 'conversationalist' in the scene that follows the opening sequence and precedes the events inside of the 'Beacon Radio' station, the first half of the film shows neither the apocalypse nor the 'conversationalists', but narrates it through phone calls with eyewitnesses, through intercepted police radiograms, and mainly through live transmission reports from the station's roving reporter Ken Loney, that disrupt the regular live programme whose production process we watch 'live'.<sup>12</sup> In this way we hear about a 'hostage situation' in Pontypool,<sup>13</sup> about an 'unruly' group consisting of hundreds of people attacking Dr Mendez's clinic in Pontypool, about military helicopters fighting and bombing these groups of people,<sup>14</sup> about disoriented, nonsense-babbling people walking around in herds behaving like bugs,<sup>15</sup> 'cannibals', 'man-eaters' or 'piranhas' that attack people, drag bodies away, bite people and crawl into them, trying to eat their way inside their human prey.<sup>16</sup> This unsettling information starts to come in while Mazzy broadcasts his morning show on Valentine's Day, a talk-radio programme in which he reports on regional news, chats with callers on the phone, and mocks them by expressing his deliberately offensive and provocative opinions in a shock-jock manner. His accounts of Honey, the cat, and his loose way of chatting away with callers as well as with Ken Loney, establish a unique tone that keeps us in suspense and creates an intense, unsettling anticipation that 'something big' will happen. Our imagination adds the pictures we are lacking by only listening: the idea of a zombie-apocalypse is triggered by the keywords 'disoriented', 'herds', 'man-eater' and 'cannibals', the main characteristics of recent zombie stories like, for example, *28 Days Later*, *Shaun of the Dead* or *The Walking Dead*, and a prevalent filmic narrative.<sup>17</sup>

The increasingly creepy atmosphere is created solely via sonic information, and recalls Orson Welles's infamous radio play *The War of the Worlds* (1938), which is an adaptation of H. G. Wells's science-fiction novel of the same name (1898) about an alien

<sup>12</sup> In this scene (McDonald, 00:01:37-00:03:04), Grant Mazzy encounters a disoriented, mumbling woman when he has to stop his car while driving through the blizzard on his way to the radio station.

<sup>13</sup> McDonald, 00:14:58.

<sup>14</sup> McDonald, 00:20:28.

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, 00:28:23-00:32:02.

<sup>16</sup> McDonald, 00:34:38-00:38:33.

<sup>17</sup> *28 Days Later*, dir. by Danny Boyle (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox/DNA Films, 2002) [on DVD]; *Shaun of the Dead*, dir. by Edgar Wright (Universal Pictures/StudioCanal/Working Title/Big Talk Productions, 2004) [on DVD]; *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–present).

invasion.<sup>18</sup> What was innovative about Welles's play was that it sounded like a regular radio programme, interrupted by news flashes and reports about the attacks. Legend relates that listeners, who had missed the beginning of the play, panicked and mistook the broadcast for the report of a real invasion. Although fictional, Welles's radio programme sounded authentic, closely mimicking genuine coverage, recruiting the radio listener as an unwitting earwitness, as it were, of the invasion.<sup>19</sup> *Pontypool* follows the narrative style of Welles's play and uses radio technology to develop its zombie-invasion plot. Mazzy's voice functions as an authoritative speaker/narrator, and the 'Beacon Radio' as the distributing centre that guides the listener through the apocalypse by collecting, structuring and diffusing all available information. At the same time, however, the chaotic mixture of Breaking News, reports, and the Beacon Radio staff's attempts to keep track of all the incoming incomplete and unsubstantiated information, as well as radio's blindness, arouse suspense and an overall eerie atmosphere, while the source of the mayhem remains invisible, immaterial, and unidentifiable.<sup>20</sup>

This 'blindness' and barrier to eyewitnessing what we earwitness raises the plot's crucial question: what is happening outside the station? Mazzy is unwilling to believe in the reports and rejects the possibility of a real menace. The immaterial nature of the acoustic stimuli forces him to verify that he has not fallen victim to a bad joke and that he is not being deceived by what he hears, that the other staff of the radio station aren't playing 'some kind of stunt' using his own shock-jock practices against him.<sup>21</sup> Even a phone call and the corresponding live TV-transmission by the BBC World Service reporter Nigel Healing cannot convince him.<sup>22</sup> Healing enquires into the events and gives an account of the French-Canadian Riot Police who are building up road blocks to prevent people from leaving Pontypool; finally he brings up the question of whether the specific situation of Ontario — the French/English divide — is the reason for the events, and asks if separatist terrorist

<sup>18</sup> Orson Welles, *The War of the Worlds*, CBS Radio, 30 October 1938.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to numerous contemporary newspaper articles, Hadley Cantril's study *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (1940) in particular, which discusses the reasons for the panic that the play — supposedly — had caused, gave initial grounding to the legend. See Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers, 2005). In October 2013, on the occasion of the play's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the topic was picked up again and such accounts of the 'panic' repeatedly revised. See, for example: Jefferson Pooley and Michael J. Socolow, 'The Myth of *The War of the Worlds* Panic', *Slate.com*, 28 October 2013,

[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/10/orson\\_welles\\_war\\_of\\_the\\_worlds\\_panic\\_myth\\_the\\_infamous\\_radio\\_broadcast\\_did.2.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/10/orson_welles_war_of_the_worlds_panic_myth_the_infamous_radio_broadcast_did.2.html) [accessed 13 July 2014].

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Macho, 'Stimmen ohne Körper: Anmerkungen zur Technikgeschichte der Stimme', in *Stimme: Annäherung an ein Phänomen*, ed. by Doris Kolesch and Sybille Krämer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 130–46 (pp. 130–31).

<sup>21</sup> McDonald, 00:44:40.

<sup>22</sup> McDonald, 00:32:03.

groups are causing the riots. Although the BBC, as a respectable source and authority on the worldwide media and especially the news sector, reports about the strange and unsettling events, Mazzy sticks to his disbelief and scepticism, still suspecting he is being mocked.<sup>23</sup> Mazzy plays tricks on his listeners on a daily basis in his programmes, and knows that deliberate confusion is a well-established narrative strategy of radio programmes, especially of scary radio plays like the aforementioned *The War of the Worlds*. Only minutes before, Sydney confessed to him that Ken Loney, said to be reporting from a helicopter, is actually located in a car on a hill and his calls are enhanced with a fake helicopter sound-track.<sup>24</sup> This technique is typical of a radio play or a radio prank in which misleading sound effects are an easily produced and common technique to create apparently authentic sounds and to fuel the listener's imagination. Aware as he is of such aural tricks, Mazzy needs to categorise and understand what he hears by seeing it, hurrying outside the station where he finally gets the chance to realise that there is really something going on ('I gotta take a look out there. I need to see what's going on'): the 'unruly group' of people, or the 'enemy' as Laurel-Ann puts it, has arrived at the 'Beacon', banging at the door and now turning into a real menace.<sup>25</sup>

### Dead Air: 'I Transmit; Therefore I Am'

Radio is a sound medium; silence, nevertheless, is one of its important elements, as 'the *absence* of sound can also be heard' [emphasis in original]. Andrew Crisell explains, 'It is therefore important to consider silence as a form of signification. It has both negative and positive functions which seem to be indexical.'<sup>26</sup> While the positive functions ('to signify that something is happening which for one reason or another cannot be expressed in noise') are negligible in this context, the negative functions resulting in 'dead air' are interesting.<sup>27</sup> Mazzy's absence from the microphone when going outside has a twofold importance. On the one hand, the absence of the announcer, and especially of the host of a talk-radio programme, means that the station's identity has gone missing. Crisell explains that the continuity announcer's perseverative voice 'will give a kind of composite unity to its [the radio station's] various programmes, set the tone or style of the whole network'.<sup>28</sup> Crisell continues, 'A voice may be interpreted merely as the index of a human presence; or on another level as the index of a personality [...]'; or on a third level as the index of a

<sup>23</sup> McDonald, 00:44:55.

<sup>24</sup> McDonald, 00:18:17.

<sup>25</sup> McDonald, 00:46:37 and 00:47:07.

<sup>26</sup> Crisell, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> Crisell, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Crisell, p. 43.

programme, broadcasting institution or entire nation.<sup>29</sup> This is also how we can read Sydney's cry when Mazzy leaves the microphone: 'Don't walk out on me, Grant! Please, I need you!'<sup>30</sup> She needs him to broadcast, to keep speaking, to keep the station running, to keep it 'alive' and to prevent everyone from going silent. On the other hand, silence's

negative function is to signify that for the moment at least nothing is happening on the medium: there is a void, what broadcasters sometimes refer to as 'dead air'. In this function silence can resemble noise (that is, sounds, words and music) in acting as a framing mechanism, for it can signify the integrity of a programme or item by making a space around it. But if the silence persists for more than a few seconds it signifies the dysfunction or non-functioning of the medium: either transmitter or receiver has broken down or switched off.<sup>31</sup>

To prevent dead air, Laurel-Ann interestingly enough has chosen Mazzy's pre-recorded show about Honey, the cat (a Norman Mailer-esque, aural nod towards the key to understanding the virus later on).<sup>32</sup> This way, she keeps the station running and makes sure that Mazzy's voice will still be on air, and thus keeps Mazzy 'alive', as a radio announcer *needs* to speak, or he or she metaphorically dies. Walter Benjamin experienced this 'death' in the late 1920s, when he gave his first talk on the radio. He describes his experience in his essay 'On the Minute' ('Auf die Minute'), which was first published in 1934. He recalls how much care he took to watch the clock, but, nevertheless, he misjudged the time and ended four minutes too early. Waiting for the announcer to enter the studio, the essay describes how he suddenly realises his mistake and is surrounded by nothing but dread silence. Listening to himself, he hears nothing but his own silence, and recognises it as the silence of death, which in that very moment was snatching him away in thousands of ears and thousands of homes simultaneously.<sup>33</sup> When Benjamin managed to talk on and finish his programme, he effectively escaped death.

After Mazzy returns to his post, we learn about the menace, bit by bit and mainly through the insights of Dr Mendez, whose hospital was the first building in Pontypool to be attacked by the 'conversationalists'. He takes shelter in the radio station, and is the first one to understand the character of the invasion and now serves as co-moderator of 'Beacon

<sup>29</sup> Crisell, pp. 43–44.

<sup>30</sup> McDonald, 00:46:43.

<sup>31</sup> Crisell, pp. 52–53.

<sup>32</sup> McDonald, 00:45:25.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin 'On the Minute [1934]', in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass., London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), pp.407–09 (p. 408).

Radio', explaining what has caused these people, who are now standing outside the station trying to get in, to begin attacking and killing their fellow townspeople. They have been infected with a virus; not a biological virus, however, but one that infests the human mind and language, and is passed on by the *spoken* word. Hence, the virus is not transferred by the usual path of physical contact, but is transmitted (or rather *broadcast*) when infected words are spoken. But, just as it is not sufficient simply to receive the sent signal but also to be able to decode its message, the contaminated words of Pontypool's virus do not have the ability to enter the human consciousness merely by being heard. Dr Mendez explains, 'It is when the word is *understood* that the virus takes hold and it copies itself in our understanding!'<sup>34</sup> The virus kills the human mind, not the human body. The director of the film, Bruce McDonald, describes the virus in an interview with Ryan Turek:

There are three stages to this virus. The first stage is you might begin to repeat a word. Something gets stuck. And usually it's words that are terms of endearment, like sweetheart or honey. The second stage is your language becomes scrambled and you can't express yourself properly. The third stage is that you become so distraught at your condition that the only way out of the situation you feel, as an infected person, is to try and chew your way through the mouth of another person.<sup>35</sup>

Alya Ahmad, basing her analysis mainly on the book *Pontypool Changes Everything*, remarks, 'Burgess' zombie virus is [...] a literary malformation, a tongue-in-cheek amalgam of influential semiotic theories. Like Baudrillard's simulacra, the virus is endlessly copying itself.'<sup>36</sup> The virus copies itself with the aim of multiplying its scope while the multiplication materialises in two ways: everyone speaking communicates the virus through face-to-face contact, and the 'Beacon Radio' station disseminates the virus over the airwaves. The tale about Honey, the cat, is a constantly recurring motif throughout the plot (even BBC World takes up the story) and can be classified as a vocal soundtrack of the film.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the word 'honey', as one of the main carriers of the virus, is permanently repeated and broadcast by Mazzy's voice — and probably indefinitely often uttered in every English-speaking part of the world (as a term of endearment) on this day: Valentine's Day. With the help of the

<sup>34</sup> McDonald, 01:01:19.

<sup>35</sup> Ryan Turek, 'McDonald Describes Pontypool's "Infected"', *shocktillyoudrop.com*, 26 August 2008 <<http://www.shocktillyoudrop.com/news/7454-mcdonald-describes-pontypools-infected/>> [accessed 4 July 2014].

<sup>36</sup> Ahmad, 'Gray Is the New Black: Race, Class, and Zombies', in *Generation Zombie*, ed. by Stephenie Boluk and Wylie Lenz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), pp. 130–46 (p. 140).

<sup>37</sup> McDonald, 00:42:48.

radio, however, the spoken word is freed from the speaking body, freed from limitations, addressing an infinite number of listeners and sending out the virus to the whole world.

Today the idea of viral dissemination is more closely linked to the internet than to media like the radio; the World Wide Web seems to be *the* global network, connecting most parts and most inhabitants of the earth — a false conclusion, however, as in 2014 still only about 2.923 million people have access to the web.<sup>38</sup> This shows that the radio is the medium of choice for the virus in *Pontypool* for good reasons, incorporating qualities the internet doesn't. Also, radio is by no means the outmoded medium it is often called; statistics show that even in 2012, Canadians spent more time listening to the radio (29% of time spent with media) than using the internet (20%); radio and television together account for a noteworthy 76%.<sup>39</sup> The wireless can be received nearly everywhere, even in the most remote, rural places, connecting its listeners with the rest of the world via DX. Also, as an acoustic medium, based upon the three basic elements of words, sounds, and music, the radio is the perfect means to transmit a virus that ravages speech.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the media history of storing and transmitting the voice, intertwined with the radio's media history, provides useful contexts that can help in understanding the unique suitability of the radio for *Pontypool*'s story, as will be explained later in this essay.

The virus of *Pontypool* can be characterised as a memetic virus, in reference to the theory of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. In his book *The Selfish Gene*, first published in 1976, Dawkins states that human evolution is not only based on genes, but also on memes, which are responsible for cultural development. A meme operates like an idea or a perception, which can be transferred to fellow human beings and, like genes, is subject to natural selection and mutation.<sup>41</sup> The same applies for the virus of *Pontypool*, to which we are *listening*. Attacking the human mind, it is transmitted without the necessity of any physical contact. The voice is the carrier of the virus and the infection can be understood as mind-to-mind communication. In the film, the 'conversationalists' fall silent only with death. From this point of view, talking equals living, but conversely, talking also threatens mankind, as talking means infecting. Mazzy asks the crucial question: 'Should we talk about it? Should

<sup>38</sup> The Statistics Portal, 'Number of worldwide internet users from 2000 to 2014 (in millions)', *statista.com*, 2014, <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/273018/number-of-internet-users-worldwide/>> [accessed 28 July 2014].

<sup>39</sup> The Statistics Portal, 'Distribution of weekly time spent with media in Canada in 2001 and 2012, by medium', *statista.com*, 2014, <<http://www.statista.com/statistics/261804/distribution-of-time-spent-with-media-in-canada-by-medium/>> [accessed 28 July 2014].

<sup>40</sup> For further reading, see, for example Crisell, pp. 42–63 (Chapter 3: Radio Signs and Codes).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (1976; repr. London: Paladin, 1978). On the theory of memes and its challenges, see Susan J. Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) or Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2011).

we be talking *at all?*' Dr Mendez confirms that 'Well, to be safe — no. Probably not. Talking is risky. And well, talk radio is high risk. So, eh, we should stop.' Mazzy, however, sticks to the fundamental assignment of radio work: 'But, eh, we need to tell people about this, people need to know, we have to get this out!'<sup>42</sup> Radio needs to inform and to transmit to prevent dead air. Accordingly, a radio announcer has to speak, or he loses his consciousness of self, his 'indexical mark of existence'. Or, as Jeffrey Sconce puts it, 'I transmit; therefore I am.'<sup>43</sup> Mazzy has to speak, regardless of Dr Mendez's warning about possible consequences: 'Well, it's your call, Mr Mazzy. Let's just hope that what you are getting out there isn't going to destroy your world.'<sup>44</sup> According to the biblical paradigm, speaking means living, as God created the world with words ('For He spoke, and it came to be'), while Pontypool's virus intends to end the world with words.<sup>45</sup>

The way in which Dr Mendez explains Pontypool's virus live on air, follows a similar level of comprehension and meaning:

It's viral. That much is clear. But not of the blood; not blood, not in the air, not on or even in our bodies. It is *here* [...]. It is in words. Not all words, not all speaking, but in *some*. Some words are infected, and it spreads out when the contaminated word is spoken. Ohhhh. We are witnessing the emergence of a new arrangement for life and our language is its host! It could have sprung spontaneously out of a perception. If it found its way into language it could leap into reality itself, changing everything! It may be boundless, it may be a god bug.<sup>46</sup>

The notion of a 'god bug' coincides with the 'often mystical dialogue over the emerging wonders of wireless technologies' of the 1880s to 1920s that 'took place during a period of unprecedented cultural transformation in the United States and Europe', as Jeffrey Sconce puts it in his book *Haunted Media*.<sup>47</sup> Wireless technology, on the one hand, for the first time fully overcame spatiotemporal limitations and allowed long-distance communication; but, on the other hand, it 'also served as a reminder of the individual listener's separation and even alienation from this larger social world'. Furthermore, its 'uncanny liberation of the body in time and space seemed not only alienating, but also absolutely blasphemous', as it (seemingly) allowed paranormal conversations via telepathy, for example, and even with the

<sup>42</sup> McDonald, 01:01:39.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence From Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> McDonald, 01:02:12.

<sup>45</sup> Psalm 33. 9.

<sup>46</sup> McDonald, 00:59:34.

<sup>47</sup> Sconce, p. 64.

dead.<sup>48</sup> The wireless technology broke open traditional and conventional dimensions of communication, crossed god-given human limitations and thus, so to speak, changed everything (in, or rather through, mediated communication). Here, the virus or ‘god bug’ as Dr Mendez terms it, turns the aforementioned biblical paradigm around, using voice, speech and words to destroy mankind by destroying the social structure of language, causing an apocalyptic outbreak of alienation and misunderstanding that uses communication as its weapon. The virus and the invasion appears like a god-sent biblical plague, like a divine revenge, which amplifies its impact by exploiting the ‘Beacon Radio’ that fittingly is located in an erstwhile church.

### **Radio Signals: Communication as an Aetherial Menace**

Much media history is interlinked with the history of spiritualist communication. John Durham Peters notes that together with the intellectual reception of media technology, spiritualism

and its later scientizing offshoot psychical research, is a chief vehicle for the formation of ideas about communication in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The word, voice, or image of a person dead or distant channeling [sic] through a delicate medium: this is the project common to electronic media and spiritualist communication. Indeed, all mediated communication is in a sense communication with the dead, insofar as media can store ‘phantasms of the living’ for playback after bodily death. In sum, the new media of the nineteenth century gave new life to the older dream of angelic contact by claiming the bonds of distance and death.<sup>49</sup>

Emerging communications media like the telephone, invented by Philip Reis (1861) and Alexander Graham Bell (1876), and storage media like Thomas Alva Edison’s phonograph (1877) and Emil Berliner’s gramophone (1892), revoked spatiotemporal limits and changed the conditions of human communication.<sup>50</sup> John Durham Peters explains that media like photography, telegraphy, phonography, or electroencephalography (and some decades later the radio) continued what the ability of writing had begun: ‘The far could now speak to the near, and the dead could now speak to the living.’<sup>51</sup> Peters asserts that media ‘of transmission allow crosscuts through space, but recording media allow jump cuts through time. The

<sup>48</sup> Sconce, p. 81.

<sup>49</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 142.

<sup>50</sup> Macho, p. 137–38.

<sup>51</sup> Peters, p. 138.

sentence for death of sound, image, and experience had been commuted. Speech and action could live beyond their human origins.<sup>52</sup> Neither death nor spatiotemporal limitations stood as natural borders for communication anymore and, as Jussi Parikka remarks, ‘[f]ragments of people in terms of voices and images were having an afterlife now through storage media.’ Storage media made speech and the voices of the dead immortal; the idea of ‘media zombies’ was born.<sup>53</sup> Through media, we now all can have some sort of afterlife, can mock death by storing, for example, our voices, disembodying them and thus keep some parts of us ‘alive’, turning us into mediated, technologised transgressors of life and death via communication media. Transmission media, especially the radio, is the logical and historical continuation of these discourses and adds another level: the airwaves and radio signals. These are of special importance for the understanding of *Pontypool*. On the one hand, the virus ‘frantically’ tries to ‘keep its host’, and thus the infected human being, ‘alive’, as Dr Mendez explains,<sup>54</sup> which is why the ‘conversationalists’ need to find victims by ‘rooting voices’.<sup>55</sup> However, on the other hand, the recording or transmission of the virus operating in spoken words separates it from the person speaking. The disembodied, infectious vocalised words lose their ephemerality and the virus itself turns into some kind of media zombie, nesting in recorded or transmitted voices, living on without its human source, capable of infecting people without the necessity of face-to-face communication. Accordingly, the radio, operating on invisible airwaves, serves as a media weapon of mass destruction, disseminating the deadly menace via media technology, turning people into ‘conversationalists’.

In turn, the ‘conversationalists’ serve as a medium or a media-based carrier of the virus when transmitting the infected words, and are positioned as functioning identically to the radio signal, as one utterance by Dr Mendez demonstrates. Before Mendez elucidates that the source for the mayhem is a memetic virus, Ken Loney calls to report about herds of people, who walk by and chant sentences like ‘Look out for u-boats’.<sup>56</sup> Loney understands this as a ‘symbol of the disorder’,<sup>57</sup> but he becomes disoriented, mixes up the words ‘symbol’, ‘sample’ and ‘simple’, and starts to loop them. Obviously all these words (signs) do have different meanings, but their similar sound patterns mean that they are easily

<sup>52</sup> Peters, p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Oxford: Polity, 2012), pp. 60–61.

<sup>54</sup> McDonald, 01:04:03.

<sup>55</sup> McDonald, 00:54:15. When a conversationalist fails to find a victim, he or she dies, as the example of Laurel-Ann Drummond shows. Once infected, she becomes confused and starts to repeat words. Unable to find a victim, she vomits a large amount of blood, slumps down and dies.

<sup>56</sup> McDonald, 00:55:33.

<sup>57</sup> McDonald, 00:55:49.

confused with one another. Loney (now more of a ‘loony’) is infected and we listen to his transformation. Dr Mendez comments, ‘That’s what he is now. He’s just a crude radio signal. He is seeking. [...] He’s gone. I mean ... he’s gone *somewhere*.’<sup>58</sup> At this point, another little detail suddenly starts to make sense in Mailer-esque terms. During Loney’s first detailed accounts of the ‘conversationalists’, as he watches some of them from nearby and describes them extensively, his voice is visually underlined with sound waves depicting his transmitted voice’s radio signal, which we see on a laptop monitor used for the production process of the morning show, in a way that foreshadows the eventual links between Loney, the ‘conversationalists’, and the radio signal.<sup>59</sup>

The radio signal is more than just a technical reality; it also bears a historical spiritualist dimension, as Peters explains:

The radio signal is surely one of the strangest things we know; little wonder its ability to spirit intelligence through space elicited immediate comparisons to telepathy, séances, and angelic visitations. At any point on the earth’s surface in the twentieth century, silent streams of radio voices, music, sound effects, and distress signals fill every corner of space. In any place you are reading this, messages surround and fly past you, infinitely inconspicuous, like the cicadas in the *Phaedrus*, who sing of things we cannot hear with our unaided ears. The remarkable property of the radio signal [...] is its inherent publicity. Electromagnetic signals radiate ‘to whom it may concern’; they are no respecters of persons, and they rain on the just and the unjust.<sup>60</sup>

The understanding of the infected as radio signals is a crucial point and marks the main link between the idea of conversationalists and the history of oral and radiophonic media technologies. In this sense, the virus, which is transmitted via multiplied physical and media communication channels all over Pontypool, is addressed to every human, regardless of class, race, nationality, gender, or age. This recalls the idea of the aether, a theoretical substance within the field of physics that was, amongst many other properties, believed to be an omnipresent, transparent, weightless, and undetectable elastic solid.<sup>61</sup> Introduced by Aristotle as the fifth element, the *quinta essentia*, to understand and explain the nature of the cosmic order, aether was rediscovered in the seventeenth century to explain the propagation of light to avoid both action-at-a-distance and void (*horror vaccui*), and to explain reflections and

<sup>58</sup> McDonald, 00:56:56.

<sup>59</sup> McDonald, 00:35:32–00:38:31.

<sup>60</sup> Peters, p. 206.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, James Clerk Maxwell, ‘Ether, or Æther’, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica Ninth Edition*, 1875–89 <<http://www.1902encyclopedia.com/E/ETH/ether.html>> [accessed 4 July 2014].

refractions of the light.<sup>62</sup> In the nineteenth century, aether became an integral part of physics and, together with new developments in the field of electromagnetism, it was needed to explain the transmission of electromagnetic waves. Furthermore, it became an important part of the scientific exploration of natural phenomena, and of spiritualism and occultism. It was not only believed to be omnipresent but also conducive of telepathy, telekinesis, and communication with the dead, caused by a mythical action-at-a-distance — a common belief in this time as the rapid progress of physics and the invention of innumerable machines and technological instruments were witnessed.<sup>63</sup>

Electromagnetic waves are the basis of wireless technology, which is why the development of the radio is intertwined with the understanding of the aether. In *Pontypool*, communication is crucial for the emergence of the ‘conversationalists’. By communicating with infected words, the virus is transmitted radiophonically. The airwaves allow the connection of minds without any ‘physical presence or personal acquaintance’.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the vision of an omnipresent and omnipotent aether seems to be fulfilled in *Pontypool*. When the virus is not only transmitted on a face-to-face level, but also disseminated via airwaves, its range is multiplied and it can reach an infinite number of listeners, enabling a global apocalypse. As Peters puts it, ‘those who have ears to hear, will hear’.<sup>65</sup>

### Symbol is Sample: (Mis)understanding the Virus

Wireless technology does not know about geographical or political boundaries, which is why the broadcast virus of *Pontypool* won’t stay in *Pontypool*. Wireless technology also does not acknowledge psychical, social or cultural boundaries, and enters the human body via the ears of everyone within the operating range. In *Pontypool*, however, there is one fundamental exception, which restricts the infinite range of the virus as a media zombie, and thus of the radio signal. In keeping with the memetic virus, which relies on cultural conditions, a trigger word and its cultural denotation needs to be understood; the recipient’s mind or soul needs to be affected. Only they will ‘hear’, who also understand what they hear; only those who can *understand* the English language will be infected, as only English is diseased. Being a non-native speaker, however, does not prevent someone from being infected, a fact we also learn from Dr Mendez who becomes infected despite having another mother tongue. The film

<sup>62</sup> Károly Simonyi, *Kulturgeschichte der Physik: Von den Anfängen bis heute* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsch, 2004), p. 85; and Simonyi, p. 282.

<sup>63</sup> For further reading on nineteenth-century spiritualism and media technology, see Peters, p. 89ff.

<sup>64</sup> Peters, p. 211.

<sup>65</sup> Peters, p. 63.

provides no answer, as to what this might mean. Aalya Ahmad reads it as a reminder of the social and political situation of Canada:

The devastating conclusion of the film is a grim reminder of the wars in which Canada is currently engaged, which flourish on nothing so much as breakdowns of understanding, erasures of difference and spectacular failures of empathy. The arrival of such monsters in Canadian cultural productions ought to serve as a warning that no national identity can remain fixed and complacent in the globalized world that is mirrored so darkly in our zombie tales.<sup>66</sup>

Not only does Canada stand within the top ten countries with the highest rate of immigrants (20.7% in 2013),<sup>67</sup> but the special bilingual situation of Ontario, with two official languages and a ‘century-old controversy’ caused by its multi-ethnicity and bilingualism, if not multilingualism,<sup>68</sup> also surely offers a rich and diverse linguistic landscape. This may generate cultural diversity, but at the same time it also raises potential issues of (cultural and linguistic) misunderstanding and arbitrariness. A language is, in Saussure’s words, ‘both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty.’ Whereas speech ‘straddl[es] several areas simultaneously — physical, physiological, and psychological —’ and belongs ‘both to the individual and to society’, language is ‘a self-contained whole and principle of classification’.<sup>69</sup> When too many languages and too many classifications clash, misunderstanding and alienation from each other seems unavoidable. Interestingly, Pontypool is a place name that actually is neither English nor French but Welsh (‘pont’ meaning ‘bridge’), and derives from the Welsh town Pontypool (*Pont-y-pŵl*) placed at the edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park. The name Pontypool in itself thus signifies multiple places and adds another level of historical and cultural background, and potential misinterpretation.

Speech enables the virus to operate in the first place. Not only do the words need to be spoken, but speech also adds the individual aspect to language: ‘Speaking [...] is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual.’<sup>70</sup> Whereas ‘language [...] is homogeneous’ and a ‘system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images,

<sup>66</sup> Ahmad, p. 143.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander E. M. Hess and Thomas C. Frohlich, ‘Countries with the Most Immigrants’, 247wallst.com, 2014, <<http://247wallst.com/special-report/2013/09/25/countries-with-the-most-immigrants/2/>> [accessed 29 July 2014].

<sup>68</sup> Donald G. Cartwright and Colin H. Williams, ‘Bilingual Districts as an Instrument in Canadian Language Policy’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 7.4 (1982), 474–93 (p. 474).

<sup>69</sup> Saussure, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Saussure, p. 14.

and in which both parts are psychological', speech, as Saussure notes, 'is heterogeneous'.<sup>71</sup> The virus of *Pontypool* affects the will and intellect of the infected, destroys the comprehension and understanding of cultural codes, and causes the misinterpretation of signs. Again, (talk) radio functions extremely well as a means to reinforce this. Andrew Crisell explains, 'Since words are signs which do not resemble what they represent (we may represent a canine quadruped by the word "dog" but we may equally refer to it as "*chien*", "*hund*" or "*cur*" or even invent a private word of our own), they are symbolic in character' [italics in original]. This is of special importance for radio, as the word's 'symbolism is the basis of radio's imaginative appeal [...], for if the word-sign does not resemble its object the listener must visualize, picture or *imagine* that object' [emphasis in original]. Thus, every listener might imagine different things. And finally, Crisell adds the crucial point: 'words on the radio are always and unavoidably *spoken*' [emphasis in original].<sup>72</sup>

This coincides with what Jonathan Sterne calls the '*audiovisual litany*', a 'set of presumed and somewhat clichéd attributes' that are historically associated with seeing and hearing. Sterne notes that these clichés include attributes such as 'hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective', 'sound comes to us, but vision travels to its object', 'hearing places you inside an event, seeing gives you perspective on the event', or 'hearing tends towards subjectivity, vision tends towards objectivity'.<sup>73</sup> Although scholars engaged with sound work on overcoming this '*audiovisual litany*' of commonplace assumptions, these associations are still closely linked to sound and hearing, particularly the idea that sound inevitably penetrates us and enters our minds (we can close our eyes but never our ears). The same applies to the virus transmitted via spoken words: you cannot help hearing it.

Interestingly, in *Pontypool*, spoken words are curse and cure at the same time. This occurs to Mazzy with the help of the BBC reporter Nigel Healing who brings healing in a Mailer-esque way. While trapped inside the station, Mazzy listens to the recording of the earlier phone call from Healing and begins to understand that the virus can be stopped when the link of comprehension is broken, asking the crucial question: 'How do you stop understanding? [...] How do you make it *strange*?'<sup>74</sup> Sydney Briar responds, 'You kill the word that's killing you'.<sup>75</sup> The cure for *Pontypool*'s crisis of language is to destroy the meaning of the words, and to break the hermeneutic circle of symbolic (mis-)understanding.

<sup>71</sup> Saussure, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> Crisell, pp. 42–43.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Sterne, 'Sonic Imaginations', in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. by Jonathan Sterne (London, New York: Routledge, 2012) pp. 1–17 (p. 9).

<sup>74</sup> McDonald, 01:19:18.

<sup>75</sup> McDonald, 01:20:20.

When Sydney gets infected by the word ‘kill’, Mazzy succeeds in disinfecting it by renewing its meaning to ‘kiss’, shouting ‘kill is kiss’ at Sydney in a loop. And, apparently, ‘kill’ not only means ‘kiss’ to her now, but also the other way round.<sup>76</sup> Finally, the pun from the beginning of the film makes sense: Pontypool is Pont de Pool is Panty Pool. You have to change the meaning of the words and give them new ones to stop the virus. In this sense, talking operates as a *pharmakon* that is both cure and poison; it can infect the listener with the memetic virus, but it can also restore them.

### Pontypool Changes

The ending of *Pontypool* finally brings together all of the jigsaw pieces that were important for the film, as well as this article’s argument. Having solved the mystery of Pontypool’s infection, Mazzy does one last radio programme, intending to cure Pontypool. Sticking to the belief of ‘I transmit; therefore I am’, he tries to disinfect the English language by shouting phrases like ‘kill is kiss’ or ‘sample is stable’ into the microphone. Simultaneously, the French Canadian Riot Police arrive at the station, indicated by recognisable helicopter and military sounds, and a male French voice transmitted via loudspeakers demanding that the transmission be stopped; at least we are made to believe that it is the Riot Police, as (helicopter) sounds can be faked easily. Given that it is the Riot Police, the officials seem to have understood that broadcasting multiplies the threat, that airwaves, radio signals and Mazzy’s mediated radio voice carry a unique significance, as described throughout this article. While the surroundings of the station are bombarded, Mazzy carries on regardless. When he finally falls silent, the loudspeaker-voice is heard again, counting down from ten. Upon reaching zero, the movie ends with a black screen. The station has been wiped out and the core source of the epidemic’s infection apparently exterminated. Not ultimately, however, as the virus lives on as a media zombie, disembodied from its original sources, as it is broadcast by other stations that cover the Pontypool incident, and infects an increasing number of people within and outside of Pontypool. The newly transformed ‘conversationalists’ then again operate as radio signals that transmit the virus further. The end titles signal this with crude radio static, underlined with the typical sound of flipping through radio channels: we hear snippets from reports about the Pontypool Valentine’s Day massacre.<sup>77</sup> These are mixed with excerpts from reports about random and everyday topics, but also with fragments from reports about an increasing crime rate, about people repeating

<sup>76</sup> McDonald, 01:21:17–01:22:28.

<sup>77</sup> McDonald, 01:29:42–01:31:43.

words, or about an inexplicable and mysterious disease, which fills hospitals with patients. We also hear about churches filling up with people escaping the virus, thinking that it was transmitted via blasphemous communication media that seemed to mock God by living on despite being dead and speaking to absent people in partially stored or transmitted fragments of themselves (their voices). Apparently, however, the spread of the virus continues undiluted via the airwaves. Not only has Mazzy failed to stop the virus, as it lives on in the media, but his broadcasts have in fact worsened — or maybe even caused — the epidemic; soon the infected words will be looped on myriad channels, sending out an epidemic plague with infinite reach.

The very last sequence leaves the audience with another riddle: having apparently survived the station's bombardment, Mazzy and Sydney sit at a bar chatting about their new lives, discussing how to go on now.<sup>78</sup> The bar seems to be located in a very different cultural setting; this is indicated by the completely different look of the now black-and-white images, the changed *mise en scène*, and the way Sydney and Mazzy are dressed. What the film presents here might be an outlook on the new 'arrangement for life' that Dr Mendez had predicted. They seem to have transcended into a new sphere of life without any 'establishing rules'. The 'god bug' presumably has 'changed everything'. We might learn about this in the second film of the planned trilogy, called *Pontypool Changes*. This sequel might clarify some of the unresolved issues as the film's teaser poster promotes the slogan, 'You've HEARD it all before, but you ain't seen nothing yet!', which suggests that this time, the audience will turn from 'earwitnesses' into eyewitnesses of the apocalypse.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> McDonald, 01:31:44.

<sup>79</sup> Originally, the sequel was said to be scheduled for release in 2013 but is still classified as 'in development' at the time of writing. See Unknown, 'Pontypool Changes', in *upcominghorrormovies.com*, <<http://www.upcominghorrormovies.com/movie/pontypool-changes>> [accessed 30 July 2014].

## ***monstrorum artifex: Uncanny Narrative Contexture and Narcissism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray****

**Andrew Wenaus**

*Among the sacred objects belonging to a sultan of Menangcabow named Gaggar Allum was the cloth sansistah Kallah, which weaves itself, and adds one thread yearly of fine pearls, and when that cloth shall be finished the world will be no more.*

—W. W. Skeat<sup>1</sup>

*This disturbing, full-length portrait of a Dorian Gray will haunt me, as writing, having become the book itself.*

—Stéphane Mallarmé<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between the mutating painting and the fictional world of Victorian London in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) raises particularly interesting questions regarding the relationship between multiple levels of narrative and how this structural strangeness relates to narcissism and the uncanny. The association these different levels share with one another disrupts a reading that privileges one level over another; consequently, such a structure upsets the stability produced by representing a consensus reality. The work is emblematic of Modernist literature in that it tends to integrate conceptual instability between different levels that simultaneously establish, and become part of, the aggregate of multiple narratives. In Wilde's text, this reflexivity operates between the fictional world of the novel and the painting of Dorian. Yet, despite the oddity of this structural conundrum, the diegetic eloquence of Wilde's novel suggests that its strange form can be examined as being in a state of structural homeostasis and paradoxical balance. The collapse of two levels into a single narrative tangle asks readers to reconceptualise the unsettling effect of a logically paradoxical structure. Furthermore, this unsettling structural effect mimics the content of the novel.

Not only is Wilde's novel largely preoccupied with narcissism and the uncanny on the level of plot, but the diegetic structure itself produces the effects of narcissism and the uncanny. Narcissism here does not mean vanity or self-love. Instead, I adopt Marshall

<sup>1</sup> W. W. Skeat, 'The Cloth Which Weaves Itself', in *The Book of Fantasy*, ed. by Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo and A. Bioy Casares (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1988), p. 256 (p. 256).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 298.

McLuhan's understanding of the term as narcosis and numbness: that the gazer is transferred into the realm of the reflection, while the physical body is left without sensation. Thus, the gazer occupies a paradoxical conflation of two locales: the originary physical level as well as the level of the reflection. The two levels in Wilde's novel likewise do not simply mirror one another but are interwoven and transferred into each other. Narcissism itself is an uncanny experience as it is an example of irreconcilables which entangle in unsettling ways. By conflating the narrative level of the fictional world that Dorian inhabits with the narrative level of his portrait, Wilde effectively creates a structure that simulates the uncanny experience of narcissism. This conceptual diegetic structure as a logical impossibility occupies two self-embedded narrative levels simultaneously; it is intensely self-reflexive, and is unsettling because it will not settle into a static concept by which one can objectively observe it. As a result, Wilde's novel — on the structural level — seems to take on a life of its own. Indeed, 'it was the creation of such worlds [...] that seemed to Dorian Gray', Wilde writes, 'to be the true object, or amongst the true objects, of life.'<sup>3</sup> The strange structure — the novel's paradoxical reflexive quality — simulates a kind of bringing to life of a monstrosity.

The novel's paradoxical structure strives for internal equilibrium despite its constant state of conceptual reorganisation. Such a metamorphosis between the distinct narrative levels establishes pre-existing conditions of quirky logic which, in turn, generate those logical conditions for the unsettling structure of the novel. Following this chain of structural metonymy leads to an examination of the metonymical relationship between the 'living' painting and the novel itself. In 1946, Jorge Luis Borges wrote, 'to speak Wilde's name is to speak of a dandy who was also a poet; it is to evoke the image of a gentleman dedicated to the meager [*sic!*] proposition of shocking by means of cravats and metaphors. It is also to evoke the notion of art as an elite or occult game [...] and the poet as a laborious "*monstrorum artifex*" [maker of monsters].'<sup>4</sup> If the novel itself is governed by reflexive internal textual processes — the looping homeostatic relationship between different ontological levels of diegesis — it may indeed be simulating a kind of monstrous textual organism. Since the structural eccentricity of the novel is metaphorically akin to the autonomic, internal dynamics of basic life, the reflexive relationships that constitute the

<sup>3</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, and Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), pp. 17–167 (p. 105).

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Oscar Wilde', in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, trans. by Eliot Weinberger, ed. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000), pp. 314–316 (p. 314).

novel's diegesis may operate as a literary proxy for the processes associated with affective responses normally designated to the biological. As such, the internal textual dynamics relating the multiple ontological levels of diegesis in Wilde's novel, certainly in an abstract sense, give birth to a monstrosity. The novel, like the portrait, appears to have 'a life of its own'.<sup>5</sup>

Because Wilde's narrative structure — as a logical monster, an uncanny contexture, a paradoxical tangle — attests to a playful, open self-reflexivity as well as a seriously crafted yet gaudy rehashing of tired gothic tropes, it stands to reason that we may consider the novel as a kind of postmodern work *avant la lettre*. Yet, it is also a remarkably unique novel in the strangeness of its structural tangling. Indeed, critics have convincingly commented upon the postmodern qualities of Wilde's work. Vicki Mahaffey's *States of Desire: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Experiment* (1998) employs the Deleuzoguattarian model of desire to demonstrate how Wilde, Yeats, and Joyce all — aesthetically and biographically — challenge and subvert official authoritarian and national systems of control and consolidation by destabilising conventions. In *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (1997), Lawrence Danson remarks that 'according to *Intentions*, to be modern is to be *not* of one's age [emphasis added], and to know one's self is to know the "moods" of otherness. According to *Dorian Gray*, to be not of one's age and to be made of moods is to be a flower of decadence. Decadence *is* modernity in this inverted formula' [emphasis in original].<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, 'the decadent program', Danson continues, 'is the empowering of the special individual [...] to receive the greatest number of "impressions" and realize most intensely the moods and modes that create this dissident modernity'.<sup>7</sup> Wilde also intimates that to be absolutely modern is not only to be politically empowered but to achieve a kind of self 'whose potency comes precisely from being not only itself, not [...] self-consistent, but rather from being [...] the many moods, the masks and poses, by which it fleetingly makes and remakes itself'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Danson writes that Wilde's 'own paradoxes, after all, also perform the decentring, of meaning and of its authorizing agencies, which presages the postmodernist author-as-text'.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Gillespie in *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'* (1995) remarks that the fundamental structure of the novel 'stands apart from other nineteenth-

<sup>5</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Danson, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Danson, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Danson, p. 9.

century works of fiction' and that 'through the multiple perspectives imbedded in its narrative, it encourages diverse readings, anticipating the direction taken by the experimental efforts of twentieth-century fiction'.<sup>10</sup> As a kind of proto-postmodern work, the novel eschews 'a prescriptive cause-and-effect discourse that emphasizes one invariable interpretation' for a mode of interpretation whereby the 'novel involves the reader's imagination in the creation of meaning'.<sup>11</sup> In *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (1996), Gillespie captivately demonstrates that Wilde's body of work is profoundly influenced by both public and critical reception, and yet is comprised of an *oeuvre* that is radically multiple and resists single interpretation. In this way, Gillespie suggests that Wilde's canon invites 'a dialectical equilibrium rather than the imperative to impose some form of interpretive closure',<sup>12</sup> and that Wilde's writing stimulates 'approaches that support disparate methodologies' and that 'acknowledge the presence of multiple levels of reading (an aesthetic metasystem)'.<sup>13</sup> Gillespie aims to demonstrate that 'the ability of characters to sustain a multitude of conflicting moral values without any sense of disruption or contradiction within their consciousnesses enforces the idea that to understand these individuals one must come to grips with the concept that a breadth of contending principles guides their behavior [sic] without any one holding primary'.<sup>14</sup> Arguing that Wilde altered his work both to challenge and suit the expectations of Victorian audiences, Gillespie is interested in Wilde's moral pragmatism: Wilde is able to meet the expectations of the audience, while at the same time develop an art practice that is experimental, multiple, inconclusive, and attests that 'readers have the benefit of a range of diverse constructions'.<sup>15</sup>

Just as Gillespie's identification of Wilde's work as an aesthetic metasystem which readers meet with interpretations that are multiple — at once familiar and reaffirming, and yet unfamiliar and challenging — we may consider the unusual multi-layered narrative tangle of *The Picture of Dorian* as a kind of uncanny logic in and of itself that at once settles and unsettles itself. 'The narrative', Gillespie notes, 'encourages perceptions of multiplicity through numerous representations of characters reforming their values to meet evolving conditions, yet at the same time the discourse still relies upon the counterforce of existing

<sup>10</sup> Michael Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'* (London: Prentice Hall International, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 63.

attitudes to define events and disrupt any sense of stability.<sup>16</sup> Wilde's tangled and warped narrative paradox, because it refuses intellectually to settle and sit still for the reader, feels as if it is in a process of making, remaking, and unmaking itself. 'The complex narrative structure of formal and thematic elements truly set *The Picture of Dorian Gray* apart', Gillespie notes. He continues by remarking that 'Wilde's discourse does not simply displace conventional interpretive perspectives with iconoclastic ones. It acknowledges both the impact of a variety of views and the ability of individual readers to maintain simultaneously a sense of multiple responses to the novel.'<sup>17</sup> Wilde's is a unique work of gothic fiction in that it employs the common trope of embedded narratives so as to create the effect of making and unmaking of logic and linear consequence. Ultimately, Wilde's novel is unique not in its content but in its structural gesture: it is an interweaving of narrative levels that seems to self-perpetuate through the making, remaking, and unmaking of logical consistency and contradiction. Indeed, the novel is an amusing and unsettling, irrational monstrosity.

This relational tangle between the alternate narratives of the painting and the fictional world in Wilde's novel is, thus, best considered as an interwoven contexture, a 'novel [...] as lovely as a Persian carpet, and as unreal', in which the narrative levels of London and the painting are intricately knotted together into a complex and dynamic whole.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it is tempting to analyse this knotted structure hierarchically, by privileging the diegetic level of the fictional Victorian world over the fantastic narrative in the metamorphosing painting. Gillespie attests that this

willingness to acknowledge multiplicity without succumbing to diffusiveness reflects a particular cultural/historical context that has led to the ontological duality facing contemporary readers of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the novel clearly situates itself in a deterministic Victorian context. At the same time in a decidedly postmodern fashion it repeatedly introduces elements into its discourse that disrupt prescriptive interpretive impulses without clearly signaling [*sic*] the primacy of any alternative point of view.<sup>19</sup>

The problem here is due to the difficulty of uniting multiple levels of narrative that are tangled and conflated in a paradoxical way: the narratives are distinct and yet occupy the same textual space. The novel, Gillespie notes,

<sup>16</sup> Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Gillespie, "What's in a Name?" Representing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *Irishness and (Post)Modernism*, ed. by John S. Rickard (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1994), pp. 44–60 (p. 44).

substitutes a structure in which multiple meanings are possible in every reading of the novel. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* changes the traditionally passive reader into an actively involved figure, allowing him or her to decide how to incorporate independent ideas in the narrative into an interpretation that permits different, sometimes even contradictory perspectives to coexist. As a result, Wilde's novel rejects the idea that fiction can be read by progressively narrowing the interpretive options until only a single meaning remains.<sup>20</sup>

Such active involvement engages not only the interpretive involvement of the reader; it also involves an affective engagement from the reader. The difficulty of consolidating the multiple meanings therefore upsets the stability of an analytical position from which one can experience the narrative. Coexisting interpretations as well as tangled narrative levels result in contradictory perspectives that are unsettling in both intellectual and physically emotional ways.

However, the monstrous nature of the text's structure may not be immediately acknowledged by the reader because it is the almost invisible constituent of the novel's tropically conventional content. Jerusha McCormack aptly observes that 'it is hard to say anything original about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, largely because there is so little that is original in it. As if in two facing mirrors, the novel and its analogues seem to multiply towards a possible infinite, in a kind of self-perpetuating critical machine.'<sup>21</sup> She further suggests that 'Wilde has tapped a root of Western folklore so deep and ubiquitous that the story has escaped the literary and returned to its origins in the oral tale'; Wilde's narrative crosses from one diegetic level, print, to another, that of the storyteller and listener.<sup>22</sup> This, an instance of those analogues that multiply towards infinity, also operates in the opposite direction. The novel itself *contains* this process. Not only is the novel like two facing mirrors, but it is also a structural expression of the phenomenon of such iterative mimesis. The novel in both form and content escapes from one mirror into the other, back again, and so on, oscillating *ad infinitum*. This split, for McCormack, between the literary and the oral, 'explores the fault line that, in itself, defines modernity'.<sup>23</sup> The novel thus marks an explicit moment in English literature: the recognition of a multi-diegetic tangling of the corporeal with the literary that would become so characteristic of modernity. Indeed, McCormack remarks that 'modernity [...] entails the blurring of the boundary between the human and the

<sup>20</sup> Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Jerusha McCormack, 'Wilde's Fiction(s)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 96–117 (p. 110).

<sup>22</sup> McCormack, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> McCormack, p. 111.

artefact'.<sup>24</sup> It is this blurring, this reiterative analogue of analogue itself, that constitutes Wilde as a maker of monsters.

Moreover, this loopy logic underpins Wilde's work, philosophy, and aesthetic. 'Wilde saw that the "self" was not inevitably indubitable, rational and progressive', writes Reginia Gagnier, 'but was socially constructed. It was constructed through language, which is why he waged a life-long subversion of conventional speech patterns. It was constructed through social institutions, which was why the school, marriage and family, medicine, the law and the prison [...] so exercised his critical faculties.'<sup>25</sup> The self is a product of society and of social artefact. Because the constructed individual also constructs according to his or her reflection, the constructed individual already determines his or her constitutive environment. Both artefact and individual are self-perpetuating critical machines. Or, as Wilde himself suggests, this way of thinking 'treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation'; the artefact and the individual are equally creative entities.<sup>26</sup> Wilde thus 'draws on the deep structure of a kind of tale which pretends to order sequentially, in a narrative, what is actually the destruction of all sequence'.<sup>27</sup> Wilde's narrative, as a conceptual architecture or structure, is that which defies linearity, directionality, and predictable sequence. It is a self-perpetuating critical machine in the logically paradoxical sense: a kind of monstrosity that acts as the starting point for the creation of new monstrosities. It is the artefact that weaves itself into identity and, oddly, appears to come to life. Indeed, its tangled narrative contexture, likewise, appears to have a life of its own.

What may be called the 'originary' ontological level of narrative is the fictional world of late-Victorian England that occupies the majority of the novel's diegesis. This is the world — the 'deterministic Victorian context' — which opens the book: 'The studio was filled with the rich odor [*sic*] of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.'<sup>28</sup> Here

the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making [Lord Henry Wotton] think of those

<sup>24</sup> McCormack, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> Reginia Gagnier, 'Wilde and the Victorians', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 18–33 (p. 20).

<sup>26</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, and Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), pp. 1009–59 (p. 1029).

<sup>27</sup> McCormack, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 18.

pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio [sic] who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion [...]. The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ.<sup>29</sup>

This is the ontological plane which bored men experience ‘through the thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whirls from [...] heavy opium-tainted [cigarettes]’<sup>30</sup> as they lie on couches; where Basil Hallward paints his magnificent ‘full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty’;<sup>31</sup> in which the young and beautiful Sibyl Vane is found ‘lying dead on the floor of her dressing-room’ after swallowing ‘some dreadful thing they use at theatres’ composed of ‘prussic acid or white lead’;<sup>32</sup> where ‘the wretched boy in the Guards’<sup>33</sup> and Alan Campbell each commit suicide;<sup>34</sup> and where Sir Henry Ashton, Adrian Singleton, Lord Ken, the Duke of Perth, and Lady Gwendolen are shamed, broken, and scandalised as a result of their association with Dorian;<sup>35</sup> as well as where Dorian murders Basil by digging a ‘knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man’s head down on the table, and stabbing again and again’.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, this ontological level is where Dorian puts his new hedonism into practice, untouched — until the novel’s conclusion — by the physical consequences of either a life of excess or of the ravages of time. This is the ontological level of diegesis in which a fictional London is hyperbolically and ornamentally represented, created, and established as a literary proxy for the extra-diegetic London; in short, this narrated world is where the characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exist.

Yet, embedded within, and directly affected by and effecting, this narrative is another narrative level: Hallward’s mutating portrait of Dorian. The portrait involves Dorian as its sole character and mutates in accordance to a changing sequence of events taking place on a different ontological plane of narration, and therefore qualifies as a narrative in its own right. The portrait, however, is embedded within the originary diegetic plane — of London in which Basil, Lord Henry and Dorian exist — which is itself inserted into the extra-diegetic level occupied by the reader in the form of a material book. However, unlike the originary and extra-diegetic planes in which sequences of events presumably precede one another, the

<sup>29</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>31</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>32</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 159.

<sup>35</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 117–18.

<sup>36</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 123.

narrative nature of the painting exists *ab ovo*. Indeed, the moment of the portrait's completion marks a diegetic fissure:

The sweep and dash of the brush on the canvas made the only sound that broke the stillness, except when, now and then, Hallward stepped back to look at his work from a distance. In the slanting beams that streamed through the open door-way the dust danced and was golden [...] Hallward stopped painting, looked for a long time at Dorian Gray, and then for a long time at the picture, biting the end of one of his huge brushes, and frowning. 'It is quite finished,' he cried.<sup>37</sup>

Wilde's tropically ornate style here is reminiscent of Christian teleology. After tasting the vinegar, Jesus utters his final words on the cross: 'It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.'<sup>38</sup> Yet Basil's utterance also evokes a kind of creation mythology. A primordial act of painting establishes 'the only sound that broke the stillness', while 'slanting beams' of light stream into the room to reveal golden dust dancing in the air: an abyss is filled, a new narrative world comes into being, a grammatical ghost or structural double that materialises and haunts. For Dorian, 'as if awakened from some dream', the act of producing new worlds through art is an act of both aesthetic and ontological magnitude.<sup>39</sup> Firstly, Dorian's recognition that these worlds — those created aesthetically — are 'true objects', truer than the distant roar of London, suggests a conceptual collapse of the ontological level occupied by the artist and the work of art; indeed, the artefact is brought to life by its poetic equivalence with life. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, this recognition signifies the blurring between multiple diegetic levels that compose the novel itself.

The narrative status of the portrait, however, is not necessarily firmly established until Dorian first notices a physical change in its composition. After Sibyl Vane's disastrous performance at the theatre, Dorian grossly and irrationally mistreats the young actress, and thus instigates the vertiginous ontological level-crossings that propel the supernatural intrigue of the remainder of the novel. Leaving the theatre, and the weeping actress, Dorian returns to his home only to notice that the face of the portrait is slightly changed:

The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth [...] the strange expression that he had noticed in the face of the portrait seemed to linger there, to be more intensified even. The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of a cruelty round the mouth

<sup>37</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> John 19. 30

<sup>39</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 33.

as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing.<sup>40</sup>

That the ‘portrait had altered’ signifies the confusing shifts between narrative levels: although the ‘great events of the world take place in the brain’, the actions of one narrative level manifest their effects in another ontological plane.<sup>41</sup> For Dorian, ‘This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul.’<sup>42</sup> Despite the fact that he finds it unsettling, Dorian must keep this magical mirror — this object that signifies the level-crossing of traditionally Cartesian ontological divisions of the body and soul — as he feels the portrait will ‘bear the burden of his shame’.<sup>43</sup>

As Dorian’s excesses become increasingly extreme, so too do the effects on the narrative of the painting. Indeed, the sentence ‘the terrible portrait whose changing features showed [Dorian] the real degradation of his life’ emphasises the collapsing of the diegetic reality of the portrait into that of a consensus reality.<sup>44</sup> The ‘real degradation’ committed in one level of narrative is, paradoxically, manifest in another: the death of the living artefact is a death in actuality. The collapse and blurring of these different ontological levels is intensely experienced by a reaction of surprise and shock, not solely by Dorian, but also by Basil, the creator of the painting. We are told that ‘The surface [of the portrait] seemed to be quite undisturbed, and as [Basil] had left it. It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful.’<sup>45</sup> Basil’s experience of the ontological level of the painting — and his curious understanding of its reflexive relationship with the narrative world that he and his friends occupy — ultimately prompts Dorian to murder the portraitist. Because the two ontological planes are confused, Dorian’s reaction is not altogether the passionate act of a paranoiac, because the incriminating evidence of his behaviour exists in both the painting itself and London: both hold equal ontological status within the novel’s structural tangle. The assumed unidirectional relationship between the two planes — the consequence of Dorian’s actions marking a change in the portrait — ultimately undergoes a strange reversal at the novel’s conclusion.

<sup>40</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 80, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 88.

<sup>43</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 111.

<sup>45</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 122.

Dorian, determined to free his conscience and ‘kill the past’, reasons that he must destroy the painting: ‘As it [the knife] had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that it meant.’<sup>46</sup> Yet the attempted destruction of the painting famously leads instead to Dorian’s death. The diegetic level of the painting not only remains intact, but actually loops back to its original unsullied state: ‘hanging upon the wall, a splendid portrait of their master as [the servants] had last seen him, in all the wonder of its exquisite youth and beauty.’<sup>47</sup> The mutations that the painting have undergone abruptly relocate into the originary ontological level, leaving Dorian ‘lying on the floor [...] in evening dress, with a knife in his heart [...] withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage’.<sup>48</sup> It is this startling shift at the novel’s conclusion that unhinges the ontological status of a singular consensus reality.

Indeed, Wilde’s novel complicates the horizontal relation as well as the vertical relation between different ontological levels of narrative, in that the effects of what occurs on one level are spontaneously displaced, ultimately affecting another level. Because the correlation between the diegetic level of the painting and the narrative world inhabited by the characters is a continuum of interweaving level-crossings rather than one of mediation, the surprising reconfiguration of the two levels of narrative at the end of the novel raises particular difficulties in envisioning a quirky spatial relationship. Brian McHale, in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), writes that many narrative strategies associated with creating multiple diegetic worlds involve the juxtaposition of

microworlds occupying the same ontological plane [arranged] along the same horizontal axis. It is also possible, however, to foreground the ‘worldness’ of world by juxtaposing worlds not [...] in series, on a horizontal axis, but rather *in parallel*, on a *vertical* axis; that is, it is possible to juxtapose worlds occupying *different* ontological planes — worlds and meta-worlds, or world and inset world. [Emphasis in original]<sup>49</sup>

The narrative levels in Wilde’s novel are neither fully juxtaposed nor in parallel; instead, they are complex and conceptually illogical in their tangled configuration. The effect is an amusing and discomforting sense of a story that is at once intricately crafted yet a logical impossibility and a conceptual monstrosity. Consequently, the relationship between the ontological level occupied by Dorian and that occupied by his portrait is not one that can be satisfactorily interpreted as either horizontal or vertical. As Dorian’s excesses on one

<sup>46</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 167.

<sup>48</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 167.

<sup>49</sup> Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 251.

ontological level of narrative increase in intensity, the effects are manifest in another level according to a logical structure akin to a complex knot. The spatial conceptualisation of the tangled relationship between these two levels must furthermore accommodate reflexivity and metonymy. Conceived of as two facing mirrors, as McCormack notes, the novel multiplies towards infinity in which each iteration contains both a part and the whole.

All of this complicates the discussion regarding Dorian's narcissism, a discussion largely dominated by psychoanalysis and stemming from Freud's foundational 1914 paper 'On Narcissism: An Introduction'. Marshall McLuhan's discussion of the Grecian Narcissus story offers an alternative interpretation that is more explicitly concerned with homeostasis, level-transfer, and self-regulating dynamics. In her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles writes, 'homeostasis had been understood as the ability of organisms to maintain steady states when they are buffeted by fickle environments. When the temperature soars, sweat pours out of the human body so that its internal temperature can remain relatively stable.'<sup>50</sup> Indeed, according to the logic of reflexive systems, an organism can maintain homeostasis by employing feedback loops. As such, organisms maintain a state of equilibrium by mutual exchange of certain elements with their environment; in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one diegetic level maintains stability 'metabolically' by casting off certain narrative elements and redistributing them, through narrative level-crossing, to another diegetic level, thus maintaining a state of textual equilibrium. This is evident in the way in which the picture is made to serve as a repository for Dorian's hidden guilt: 'What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would be always alive.'<sup>51</sup> Indeed, for McLuhan, narcissism is explicitly homeostatic. The word 'Narcissus', he notes, comes from the Greek word 'narcosis, or numbness'.<sup>52</sup> McLuhan here draws attention to the common misrepresentation of the Narcissus story in which Narcissus is said to have fallen in love with himself by admiring his own reflection in the water; and admittedly, it is this focus on the idea and activity of vanity which plays out in some ways between Dorian and his portrait. Nevertheless, the novel associates Dorian and his actions far more closely with the qualities that McLuhan positions at the centre of the myth: narcosis and numbness. The tale of Narcissus, like Wilde's novel, is not one primarily concerned with vanity, McLuhan argues. Indeed, Narcissus, in seeing his

<sup>50</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 97.

<sup>52</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkley: Ginko, 2011), p. 63.

own reflection, took this image to be another person. This reflection is, for McLuhan, a medium, an extension; the reflected image effectively numbs Narcissus's perceptions until he 'became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image'.<sup>53</sup> Narcissus is then no longer able to hear the voice of Echo because he, by becoming servile to the medium (his reflection), is anesthetised. Adapting to this extension of himself, Narcissus becomes a self-regulating closed system. The reflection as a medium/technology becomes an extension of his body; he adapts and mutates in the way he experiences his own body and his environment as a result of his extension. Like Narcissus, he is numb because his experience of his own body is transferred into the reflected image. Because the transfer between body and extension in this myth is complete, Narcissus becomes completely anesthetised: this act of transfer and level-crossing maintains the equilibrium within the closed system. As Wilde put it, 'Art has no influence on action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile.'<sup>54</sup> Like Narcissus, whose mind and senses are numbed through their extension and reconfiguration as alternative levels of organisation, Dorian 'watched with listless eyes the sordid shame of the great city, and now and then he repeated to himself the words [...] "To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul." Yes, that was the secret. He had often tried it, and would try it again now. There were opium-dens, where one could buy oblivion'.<sup>55</sup> So, in this sense, where Narcissus amputates his whole body, Dorian seeks oblivion by being transferred completely to the extension; yet the extension itself is entirely dependent upon the body.

The story of Narcissus and his narcosis is, then, a meditation upon art and the self as self-updating and dynamic systems of representation. 'When Dorian Gray', writes Christopher Craft, 'stands before his portrait, therein to consider both himself and his difference from himself, he requires a prosthesis'.<sup>56</sup> A response to a kind of absolute autoamputation, the prosthetic in question here is that of a complete double of Dorian's body. The prosthesis Dorian requires is, Craft writes, 'so familiar it hardly seems like one. Dorian requires a mirror'.<sup>57</sup> Craft analyses the significance of both mirrors proper and of the portrait, since this dipartite reflection is the only way Dorian can place his enduring beauty and developing monstrosity in contradistinction. The 'Gothic technology' or medium that Wilde implements here, that of a supernatural mirror/portrait, is for Craft a formal meditation upon

<sup>53</sup> McLuhan, p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 163.

<sup>55</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 140.

<sup>56</sup> Christopher Craft, 'Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Representations* 91.1 (2005), 109–36 (p. 109).

<sup>57</sup> Craft, p. 109.

the alienation-effects experienced by the individual when encountering his own reflection.<sup>58</sup> Like McLuhan's Narcissus, Craft notes Dorian's 'silent delirium' upon his first encounter with Basil's painting.<sup>59</sup> Craft's Dorian is an exemplar of Lacanian psychoanalysis: 'Wilde insists that disclosive moments of self-recognition entail a complex semiotic interchange between the one who apprehends himself in an image and the visual image that has already apprehended the "same" him over there.'<sup>60</sup> However, Craft adds that Wilde insists on focusing extensive attention upon the 'visual technology [the portrait, rather than Dorian the character] that generates the flux (and reflux) of information'.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, this logic of flux and reflux places a marked emphasis upon, not simply the technology or the character, but upon the loopy dynamics of reflection. 'As that "most magical of mirrors"', Craft suggests,

the portrait effectively conjoins Wilde's lazy gothic plot with the formal dynamics of self-regard. This, in turn, enables Wilde to map the saturated, irreal space that intervenes between a self-apprehending subject and the mimetic apparatus that returns this subject to himself, but always in the guise of objectal or phantasmal other.<sup>62</sup>

A viewing subject, according to Craft, when reflected in a mirror, may, according to the circularity of reflection, return from the duplicated image to the physical locale from where the image originates. However, upon this return, the viewing subject is not the same subject as when one began. Beginning as a complete and present human being, the viewing subject returns from the reflection to the originary world as an 'image-being devoid of precisely *this* presence' [emphasis in original].<sup>63</sup> The complication of Narcissism is that it simultaneously provides an image of the viewing subject and all that the viewing subject is not. In short, as Manganiello suggests, Narcissism 'distorts as it reflects'.<sup>64</sup> The return effect establishes an illusion of unity in the face of evident splitting, yet simultaneously provides processes of 'perpetual disintegration'.<sup>65</sup> This complex process of spatio-temporal dislocation between the subject and the image of the other — the reflection or *imago* — results in alienation. Such a reading brilliantly engages with concerns about the subject and an 'erotics of self-

<sup>58</sup> Craft, p. 114.

<sup>59</sup> Craft, p. 114.

<sup>60</sup> Craft, p. 113.

<sup>61</sup> Craft, p. 113.

<sup>62</sup> Craft, p. 114.

<sup>63</sup> Craft, p. 110.

<sup>64</sup> Dominic Manganiello, 'Ethics and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 9.2 (1983), 25–33 (p. 31).

<sup>65</sup> Craft, p. 110.

identification'; however, when speculating upon narrative level-crossing from the perspective of the novel's uncanny narrative structure, the logic of self-reference operates somewhat differently.<sup>66</sup> While Lacanian identification with the *imago* leads to alienation and the 'perpetual disintegration' of the subject, McLuhan's self-reflection and self-extension brings one back precisely to the point of one's departure from the originary world. Rather than analysing the misidentification between two spatio-temporal locations, the multi-levelled narrative structure of the novel upsets the habitual assumption regarding the directionality and temporality that link two locales — origin and reflection — by effectively making these apparent opposites a single unit. Certainly, gothic doubling and the implication of the viewing subject with the other occur time and again in the novel; however, this uncanny repetition also takes place conceptually via the logical monstrosity constituting the loopy structure of the novel.

The monstrosity of the novel's structural paradox, between maker and artefact, individual and object, is an instance of familiarity and strangeness. 'From the moment he speaks of his desire', McCormack suggests, 'Dorian himself becomes an artefact, neither alive nor dead: one of the fabulous undead, such as Dracula, who must draw life from others.'<sup>67</sup> Dorian's victims are not the only ones from whom Dorian must draw life. He must also claim life from the narrative level of the portrait: the painting takes from Dorian, and thus gives to Dorian. Dorian takes from the painting, and thus gives to the painting. The economy here is homeostatic and recalls narcissistic anaesthesia: 'Dorian anaesthetises himself with things,' McCormack writes, 'inventing himself by means of his own collections. His relationship with himself, as with others, is dictated by an object; but which Dorian is now the artefact? '<sup>68</sup> He is therefore a *doppelgänger* without a primal individual from whom to copy; indeed, the novel presents two *doppelgängers*: Dorian and the painting, like mirrors, reflecting one another, multiplying to infinity. Declan Kiberd suggests that 'the self and the *doppelgänger* have the makings of a whole person' [italics in original], and, so it seems, the novel supports this claim fully both as it is and in its reverse: the whole person has the makings of a self and a *doppelgänger*.<sup>69</sup> The novel then develops a conceptual structure that acts as a proxy to this process whereby the logic of cause and effect does not fully comply both in the content of the novel and in its form. The effect of this narrative structuring is one

<sup>66</sup> Craft, p. 114.

<sup>67</sup> McCormack, p. 113.

<sup>68</sup> McCormack, p. 113.

<sup>69</sup> Declan Kiberd, 'Oscar Wilde: The Resurgence of Lying', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 276–294 (p. 292).

that is remarkably unsettling: it creates the overwhelming sense of that which is intimately familiar conflated with that which is alien and logically impossible. The novel's narrative structure, like its content, is uncanny.

Like Wilde's novel, Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' both describes the concept of its title in its content and enacts it in the logical structure of its argument. The essay is a fascinating piece largely because it does not necessarily offer a conventional definition of the 'conceptual term', *uncanny*, while simultaneously establishing a semantic and structural matrix which justifies this move.<sup>70</sup> A peculiar aspect of the work is the implication of the first of the three parts of Freud's essay: the denotative and etymological elucidation of the strange relationship between the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. *Heimlich* denotes both one thing and its opposite; if we follow this logic, the morphological negation of that word, *unheimlich*, establishes an oscillating semantic relationship between these two terms. The inherent conceptual instability of the subject of Freud's essay — the uncanny — establishes, and becomes part of, the essay's structural form. While Freud purports to describe 'the uncanny' in the psychoanalytic experience, he rather succeeds in representing it in the structure of his analysis.

The etymological examination that opens Freud's analysis is not only fascinating in itself, but also leads to a conclusion that is remarkable in that it is innately inconclusive. Freud's investigation into the word *heimlich* in Daniel Sanders's *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* introduces the reader to the inbuilt strangeness of the term. While, as Freud demonstrates, *heimlich* denotes 'belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly', its secondary definition is 'Concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others'.<sup>71</sup> Freud concludes that

What interests us most [...] is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word '*heimlich*' exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, '*unheimlich*.' What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich* [...] In general we are reminded that the word '*heimlich*' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different. [Italics in original]<sup>72</sup>

Freud links this strange etymological relationship with the psychoanalytic experience, through Schelling's suggestion that 'everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained

<sup>70</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 930.

<sup>71</sup> Freud, pp. 931, 933.

<sup>72</sup> Freud, p. 933.

secret and hidden but has come to light'.<sup>73</sup> This is the pressing anxiety that forces Dorian to keep the portrait 'hidden away at all costs',<sup>74</sup> while, at the same time,

creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured by his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul.<sup>75</sup>

The uncanny, for Freud, supports the psychoanalytic theory regarding the return of the repressed, while, for Wilde, the uncanny supports the looping reflexive structure of multi-diegetic monstrosity.

Here, then, it is the complex relationship between the content and structure of Freud's essay that is of immediate interest. If, as Freud suggests, '*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*', then it is precisely the unsettling semantic implication of this ambivalent logic that both establishes and constitutes the structure of the rest of the analysis.<sup>76</sup> The form of Freud's argument, though the whole is framed within 'the specialist literature of aesthetics', is tripartite: a thorough etymological study of the word *unheimlich*, a psychoanalytic reading of Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman', and finally a differentiation 'between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about'.<sup>77</sup> What is striking about the latter two parts of the essay — Freud's reading of Hoffmann's story, and the discussion of the incongruity between the aesthetic uncanny and the uncanny of actual experience — is that these sections do not seem to follow the etymological study by means of causal logic.

Rather, these arguments are more like variations on the significance of the term; in other words, variations on a concept that do not tell the reader anything new about 'the uncanny' but, instead, become — more akin to Wilde's narrative structure than to the three works Freud examines in the essay — a specialist literature of aesthetics itself. The logical relationship between these three sections seems *hidden* from the reader, yet all three divisions of the argument simultaneously *reveal* the unsettling nature of attempting to deal with the

<sup>73</sup> Freud, p. 934.

<sup>74</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 96.

<sup>75</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 167, 102–03.

<sup>76</sup> Freud, p. 934.

<sup>77</sup> Freud, pp. 930, 948.

concept. The implications of the uncanny build in intensity by having the term loop back upon themselves. The argument operates by forcing the reader to ask ‘which uncanny?’ in much the same way that the reader of Wilde’s novel is constantly asking ‘which Dorian? The one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture?’<sup>78</sup> But never is the concept brought to rest in a stable and conclusive way. If the meaning of *heimlich* ‘develops in the direction of ambivalence’ until it is indistinguishable from *unheimlich*, the same process must apply if we begin with *unheimlich*. In this sense, the subject of the essay is absolutely ambivalent and is therefore a convenient metonymy to justify the disjointed and inelegant structure of Freud’s argument. And what becomes even more captivating about Freud’s essay, here, is the way in which both the conceptual term and the constituted structure of the essay simultaneously both peak, like Wilde’s narrative, in a state of homeostasis and of reflexivity.

The denotative ambiguity of the word *heimlich* suggests that its meaning, like the structural narrative peculiarity of Wilde’s novel, can be examined as being in a state of semantic homeostasis. There is a tendency in the semantics of this term to gesture toward a complex kind of stability through constant oscillation and feedback between its two conflicting meanings. The term attempts an internal equilibrium, despite the fact that it is in a state of constant conceptual reorganisation. *Heimlich* may be used to signify one of either two opposing signifiers, yet this internal semantic structure of the word asserts that it covertly constitutes both one thing and its opposite. To think about this logic as a metonym for the form of Freud’s essay is of particular interest: it implies that the denotation of the term uncanny is subject to two ambiguous meanings simultaneously, and furthermore, that the ambiguous self-reflexive doubling both informs and gives form to the logical structure of Freud’s analysis. Again, like the strange metonymical loop structure of Wilde’s novel, Freud’s mode of writing seems ‘to be able to give a plastic form to formless things’.<sup>79</sup>

Homeostasis, however, as a metaphor for the function of the word *heimlich*, is not entirely satisfactory on its own. It is that logical structure to which homeostasis gives rise that is critical in understanding the metonymic function of the term in relation to the essay and novel’s structure as a whole. In its logical structure, homeostasis is like narcissism and the uncanny: an evolving and auto-updating form of self-reference. In this sense, the constantly oscillating logic of the relationship between the conceptual terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* is used by Freud to generate a representational system, yet also becomes representative of both

<sup>78</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 36.

<sup>79</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 30.

part and the whole of the argument. The intriguing status of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in Freud's paper, consequently, functions as an indicator of how the overall analysis operates. The metonymic function of the etymological study establishes pre-existing conditions of vertiginous logic which, in turn, generates those logical conditions for the essay's structure.

If the conceptual term, *heimlich*, is inherently semantically ambivalent, then any formal investigation into it is subject to representing a similar effect. Freud attempts to explain the uncanny in terms of the psychoanalytic experience, Wilde in terms of an aesthetic experience; yet in some ways both seem to represent it in both the structure and content of their respective works, rather than describing the concept. It is in this sense that Freud's essay itself is uncanny; in the same way, this is the structural logic that makes Wilde's novel an essentially uncanny experience, as much as the content itself does. If 'The Uncanny' seems to provide an unsettling — even unsatisfactory — study that is more akin to variations and permutations on an ambivalent conceptual theme than a formal argument proceeding by logical consequence, this is perhaps the brilliant point of Freud's essay and, we may add, of Wilde's two Doriens. Perhaps, however, McCormack is correct to remark that mirrors facing mirrors is indeed the appropriate model by which to understand a narcissistic and uncanny selfhood; in this sense, the reader experiences the structure governing his or her own mind embedded within narrative forms of this kind. This is why a narrative of this form 'has a life of its own'; it mimics autopoetically as a representational system, and becomes the invented hyperreal extension of the structural peculiarity of a mind itself.<sup>80</sup> A tangled narrative contexture is strange because it is the quasi-perceptible, quasi-familiar structure of the mind itself; the 'idea [is] monstrous'.<sup>81</sup>

Like the portrait, the text itself is not literally an organism; however, the quirky structural apparatus governing the relationship between the multiple levels of diegesis in the novel does share some similarities with the most basic functions of a life form. Constantly fluxing and reorganising itself through internal textual dynamics, the multi-levelled diegesis of Wilde's novel, as it is governed by the topographical conceptualisation of the strange loop, paradoxically maintains and equalises itself. The multiple ontological levels of diegesis, through the strange logic, refuse to remain stable and fixed — rather, the textual aggregate consists of an ever-moving tangled hierarchy in which any diegetic locale paradoxically occupies the same textual space as an alternative narrative space. These features may constitute the rules — the aesthetic principles and regulations — behind the 'elite or occult

<sup>80</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 95.

<sup>81</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 121.

game' through which Wilde animates the multi-diegetic contexture of his novel. Indeed, perhaps Borges is eloquent in describing Wilde as a 'laborious *monstrorum artifex*'.

## The Mindfreak: Monstrous Memory in McGrath's *The Grotesque* (1989) and Nolan's *Memento* (2000)

Dennis Yeo

### Introduction

Marked by difference, the freak does not conform to natural, social, or scientific norms. Whether monster, mutant, or undead, the abhuman body retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different. According to Patrick McGrath, the 'New Gothic' foregrounds the workings of the psychotopia. This 'turning inward' of the gothic from landscape to mindscape places the emphasis on 'minds and souls haunted by the urge to transgress and do evil, crippled with distortions of perception and the moral sense, and obsessed with death and morbidity', all in instances of 'interior entropy — spiritual and emotional breakdown'.<sup>1</sup> The mind is entropic as it cannot think outside of itself and constantly reinforces what it thinks, resulting in psychosomatic states like obsessive compulsion, claustrophobia, neurosis, paranoia, schizophrenia, and psychosis.

The New Monster of the gothic is the psychopathological freak, or 'mindfreak'. The perception, reception, and conception of our reality are products of one's state of mind, from which there is no escape. This essay analyses Patrick McGrath's novel *The Grotesque* (1989) and Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* (2000), and examines the existential incarceration that both their narrator-protagonists suffer.<sup>2</sup> Although they are set in different contexts and are expressed through different forms, both texts study the interior entropy of aberrant mental states in the act of re-membering narrative. In *The Grotesque*, Sir Hugo, after a 'cerebral accident', becomes a quadriplegic who suffers from locked-in syndrome.<sup>3</sup> Although he continues to possess the faculty of memory, imagination, thought, and will, he has no

<sup>1</sup> Patrick McGrath, *The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (New York, Toronto: Random House, 1991), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> This article will cite quotations from McGrath's novel and Nolan's published script. References will also be made to *Memento*, dir. by Christopher Nolan (Summit Entertainment/Newmarket Films/Team Todd, 2000) [on DVD], and to some of the extra features available on the Limited Edition DVD release (Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2002). It will not make reference to the 1995 movie of *The Grotesque* (also known as *Grave Indiscretion* and *Gentlemen Don't Eat Poets*) directed by John-Paul Davidson, as it is not an accurate adaptation of the book.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick McGrath, *The Grotesque* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 8.

expression or psychomotor ability. He is ‘able to see, know, and evaluate the world, yet lift not a finger, nor even *blink* at will’ [emphasis in original].<sup>4</sup> *Memento* is about Leonard Shelby who wants to remember the motivation for his actions but suffers from anterograde amnesia, meaning that ‘[he has] no short-term memory [and] can’t make any new memories’.<sup>5</sup> Both *The Grotesque* and *Memento* are thus inherently interested in the workings of the brain, particularly the faculty of memory.

Both mindfreaks are doomed to repeat indefinitely the cycle of their warped perspectives. From Edgar Allan Poe to Neil Gaiman, the New Gothic perceives the mind itself as ‘a kind of supernatural space, filled with intrusive spectral presences’.<sup>6</sup> *Memento* is a gothic film because ‘Gothic is the terrain on which we are never sure what — if anything — we have remembered’.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in the fiction of McGrath, ‘we find a mordant glee in the failings of taxonomic classification and the futility of all attempts to establish an objective, orthodox version of reality.’<sup>8</sup> To Botting, ‘the internalization of Gothic forms represents the most significant shift in the genre’ as ‘psychological rather than supernatural forces became the prime-movers in worlds where individuals could be sure neither of others nor of themselves.’<sup>9</sup>

With no reference point to anchor any interpretation, the uncertainty of self and reality threatens to reveal the fictionality of one’s being, compelling a fabrication of some semblance of coherence and credibility from shreds of imposture, assumption, and speculation. Trapped within the entropy of their mental states and its self-conceived simulacra, the isolation of both their conditions requires Sir Hugo and Leonard to devise coping mechanisms to make sense of their world. They re-create, re-present, and recover the narrative of memory by imposing order and stability on their histories and allowing the past to be rewritten ‘in a fashion acceptable to the conscious mind’.<sup>10</sup> This loss of a sense of history results from an inaccessible past that has become a ‘multitudinous photographic simulacrum’, a contrived

<sup>4</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Nolan, *Memento and Following* (London; New York: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 114.

<sup>6</sup> Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 164.

<sup>7</sup> David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Ferguson, ‘Dr McGrath’s Disease: Radical Pathology in Patrick McGrath’s Neo-Gothicism’, in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, ed. by Glennis Byron and David Punter (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), pp. 233–43 (p. 242).

<sup>9</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 92, 12.

<sup>10</sup> David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day — Volume Two: The Modern Gothic* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 48.

text that is open to indeterminacy, misinterpretation, and self-deception.<sup>11</sup> Thus what the viewer or reader has to accept as the only historically accurate point in the narrative is also thrown into question. With all of this in mind, this article will examine the mindfreak and the subjectivity of narrative in the self-invention and self-correction of memory, truth, and history. To the mindfreak, the distortion of perception that results from the dissolution of boundaries of time and space is necessary to stabilise the mental structures that make the world liveable.

### The New Monster — Going Mental

Marked by otherness and difference, the freak is a threat and disruption to our notion of human identity and social normalcy. Sir Hugo describes his monstrous self as ‘humped and cadaverous’ with ‘clawlike’ hands and eyes that ‘gaze blankly from a bony, sunken head’.<sup>12</sup> He is wheeled out like a freak show before doctors who, unable to diagnose his malady, choose instead ‘to gloss over the gulfs in their knowledge with jargon’ and merely label him for their convenience.<sup>13</sup> Sir Hugo finds himself ‘in the grid of a medical taxonomy. My identity was now neuropathological. I was no longer a man, I was an instance of a disease.’<sup>14</sup> As a specimen of an undefined disorder, Sir Hugo is medically categorised in order to contain and define his monstrosity. Like a ghost, he is ‘a man without a body’, an absence present in the halls of his property, Crook.<sup>15</sup> He concedes that ‘to be a grotesque is my destiny’; by ‘grotesque’ he means ‘the fanciful, the bizarre, the absurdly incongruous’.<sup>16</sup>

As ‘Gothic novels, all contain, as a main theme, the depiction of an anxiety with no possibility of escape’, the gothic dis-ease is the paralysis of entropy.<sup>17</sup> At the start of *Memento*, Leonard explains his illness and, indirectly, the structure of the film as being ‘all ... backwards [...] you gotta pretty good idea of what you’re gonna do next, but no idea of what you just did’.<sup>18</sup> Each self-contained segment of time in his life is entropic, an ‘eternal present tense’ within which Leonard is encased as he continually seeks to discover the

<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Versa, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 8, 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p 115. To Natalie, Leonard is the ‘the memory guy’, the ‘idiot’, ‘retard’, ‘stupid fuck’, the ‘freak’ who is ‘blissfully ignorant’ of all around him. *Memento*, pp. 185–97.

identity of a man he knows as John G, whom Leonard believes attacked and killed his wife.<sup>19</sup> Leonard is even a monstrous spectacle to himself, as is evident when he discovers his ‘freaky tattoos’ in the mirror, which in the gothic acts as a reflection of identity definition and doubling.<sup>20</sup>

The menace of the gothic *mise en scène* is brought closer to home when its conflict, crisis, and chaos take residence in the geography of an individual’s troubled mental space. The French term for Sir Hugo’s condition, *maladie de l’emmuré vivant*, literally translated as ‘walled-in alive’ disease, suggests the gothic motif of being buried alive. Sir Hugo uses the Latin etymological origins of the word ‘grotesque’ in his description of himself as a fossil ‘locked in the grotto of his own bones’.<sup>21</sup> Since ‘in the absence of sensory information, *the imagination always tends to the grotesque*’ [emphasis in original], the grotto is actually a mental ‘experience of isolation’.<sup>22</sup> This analogy is evident when Sir Hugo refers to himself as being ‘trapped in the dungeon of my own skull’.<sup>23</sup> ‘Cocooned in bone’, he is imprisoned in both mind and body.<sup>24</sup>

In *Memento*, Leonard’s mindscape is represented by the transitory ‘anonymous motel room’ he occupies.<sup>25</sup> Nolan likens the claustrophobia of being confined in the room to being a ‘rat in a box’, fed with ‘different stimuli’.<sup>26</sup> The rootless world Leonard lives in is ‘stripped of any cultural specificity and historical marking’.<sup>27</sup> Nolan wanted ordinary, realistic, anonymous places to evoke the ‘dead end nowhere sensibility of classic *film noir*’.<sup>28</sup> The world conjured up in the film is as compartmentalised as the limited scope of Leonard’s memory, and is encapsulated in microcosm in a mind-map of locations and characters that he hangs up on the wall. The coordinates of this map, like the neurons in Leonard’s brain, are his Polaroids of people and places. The geographical displacement and mental dislocation of the protagonists of both the novel and the movie demonstrate that the entrapment of the gothic is not just physical or psychological, but existential.

Both Sir Hugo and Leonard Shelby are acutely aware of memory’s tendency towards fabrication, and that the fictionality of any history necessitates a location that functions as an

<sup>19</sup> Chris Darke, ‘Mr Memory’, *Sight and Sound*, 10.11 (Nov 2000), 42–43 (p. 43).

<sup>20</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 123.

<sup>21</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 61, 8.

<sup>23</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 109.

<sup>26</sup> Director’s Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento*, [1:09:37].

<sup>27</sup> William G. Little, ‘Surviving *Memento*’, *Narrative*, 13.1 (Jan 2005), 67–83 (p. 77).

<sup>28</sup> ‘Anatomy of a Scene’, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento*, [13:00].

anchor of stability and permanence for their narrative. Sir Hugo's mindsphere is a laboratory where he puts together the fragments of his narrative and recounts to the reader the circumstances surrounding his accident 'by going backwards, step-by-step'.<sup>29</sup> He admits that the artificial order imposed by memory is inevitable and inaccurate, and notes that 'retrospection does yield order [...] but I wonder if this order isn't perhaps achieved solely as a function of the remembering mind, which of its very nature tends to yield order'.<sup>30</sup> Instead of gaining more control over his memory, however, the biased nature of retrospection falsifies experience and makes him a prisoner of the simulacrum of his own making.

In the same way, Leonard concedes that 'memory can change the shape of a room or the colour of a car. It's an interpretation, not a record. Memories can be changed or distorted and they're irrelevant if you have the facts.'<sup>31</sup> Trapped in his vignettes of time, Leonard's only sense of continuity is provided by his mementos, his Polaroids and his tattoos, which serve as a dialogue between his past, present, and future selves. The nature of Polaroids also emphasises a moment of seeing and ensures that there is no digital mediation or manipulation of the image. He tattoos himself with what he perceives to be facts as notes for his future self to trust and act on, since he knows his present self is going to forget them.

Although both protagonists devise systems to guard against subjective perspectives, they cannot escape the fact that the act of re-membering past events is inherently delusional. Consequently, 'the inductive method' that Sir Hugo uses, which has 'guided [his] thinking for over thirty years', is revealed to be part empirical and part guesswork.<sup>32</sup> He applies this process to his 'reconstruction of the entire skeleton' from the bones of a dinosaur species that he calls *Phlegmosaurus*.<sup>33</sup> He admits that, in his piecing together of the narrative, 'cracks have appeared, and from out of these cracks grin monstrous anomalies'.<sup>34</sup> His constant apostrophes to persuade the reader to accept his version of events also serve to convince himself of its accuracy. For example, he tells the reader,

You must forgive me if I appear at times to contradict myself, or in other ways violate the natural order of the events I am disclosing; this business of selecting and organizing one's memories so as to describe precisely what happened is a delicate, perilous undertaking, and I'm beginning to wonder whether it may not be beyond me.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 113.

<sup>31</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 135.

<sup>32</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

<sup>34</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

<sup>35</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 106.

His self-awareness of the unreliability of his accounts testifies to the fleeting nature of memory and the potential for self-deception. It is this indefiniteness and invention of past narrative that render memory intrinsically monstrous.

The malleability of memory is compounded when one has to rely on a memory that cannot remember. Leonard relates the story of his client Sammy Jankis who, like him, suffered from anterograde amnesia. He feels contempt for Sammy, as Sammy's inability to remember things eventually resulted in him administering insulin to his diabetic wife and causing her death. While Leonard differentiates himself from Sammy and prides himself on his discipline and organisation, his reliance on impressions and the need to summarise his conclusions in bite-sized notes reveal the potential for his system to be undermined.<sup>36</sup> Although he asserts 'I use habit and routine to make my life possible', his readiness to rethink and alter one of the 'facts' with which he tattoos himself from 'ACCESS TO DRUGS' to 'DRUG DEALER' when prompted by a caller he does not even know exposes how relative his conclusions are.<sup>37</sup> Sibielski argues,

Both his past and his identity become entirely dependent upon a network of mediation which, it is revealed by [the] film's end, may in fact be closer to simulation than an accurate accounting, thereby casting doubt upon the 'truth' of both Leonard's identity and his experience as he conceives of them.<sup>38</sup>

Leonard's condition and his belief in the accuracy of his notes render him incapable of perceiving that his quest for the truth is a mirage of self-deception. Because both narratives are founded upon memory, this state of unknowingness renders Sir Hugo and Leonard vulnerable to being manipulated and victimised by others, resulting in a state of paranoia which is further aggravated by their marginalisation from a life of normal human interaction. Sir Hugo's obsession is focused on his butler Fledge, and the gnawing belief 'that even before he entered the front door of Crook — even before he *met* me! — Fledge had conceived the ambition to usurp me' [emphasis in original].<sup>39</sup> Sir Hugo even preposterously attributes Fledge with the ability to manipulate his dreams, musing, 'I wonder, for example,

<sup>36</sup> It is significant that the tattoo that says 'Remember Sammy Jankis' is the first one that is presented to the audience and the only one that is returned to repeatedly throughout the movie.

<sup>37</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, pp. 121, 172.

<sup>38</sup> Rosalind Sibielski, 'Postmodern Narrative or Narrative of the Postmodern? History, Identity, and the Failure of Rationality as an Ordering Principle in *Memento*', *Literature and Psychology*, 49.4 (2004), 82–100 (p. 85).

<sup>39</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 19.

whether he was responsible for that disgusting dream. And in retrospect I rather think he was.<sup>40</sup>

Leonard also displays an awareness of his vulnerability, and with good reason, as we discover when Burt, the clerk at the motel in which Leonard stays, confesses that Leonard is checked into two different rooms at the Discount Inn.<sup>41</sup> Leonard's gullibility makes him seem surrounded by evil, deceptive characters. His mnemonic aporia do not allow him to build any relationship of trust, and when the bartender Natalie advises him to 'trust yourself', we realise that this is equally futile.<sup>42</sup> He can trust no-one and has to believe that he will 'go on facts, not recommendations', 'facts' which also prove to be unreliable.<sup>43</sup> His distrust of Teddy's warning concerning Natalie and his misplaced faith in her are vital turning points in the narrative. Given his short attention span, Leonard is 'acting on instinct' when he is caught between trusting Natalie or believing Teddy.<sup>44</sup> As the movie is structured to simulate Leonard's condition, the audience likewise encounters characters with whom we are unfamiliar. Unlike Leonard, who does not have access to earlier events in the narrative, the audience realises that their own tendency to rely on first impressions is seriously flawed when it becomes clear that Natalie only appears to be sympathetic and sincere in wanting to help Leonard, and that she has in fact previously manipulated Leonard's debility. Likewise, the ambiguity of the character of the self-serving Teddy throws doubt on whether he is telling Leonard the truth about his wife's death. The assessment of character thus changes as the reversed chronology discloses new back-stories to which the audience, like Leonard, does not have access.

### **The New Order — Organising Chaos**

The gothic undercuts conventional modes of storytelling and even questions the ability of narrative to depict reality. 'From its beginnings, the literary Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge.'<sup>45</sup> As 'a literature of psychic grotesquerie', the gothic is an oneiric narrative

grounded on the terrain of hallucination: this would be another way of saying that it is a mode within which we are frequently unsure of the reliability of the narrator's perceptions, and thus of the extent to which we as readers are

<sup>40</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 130.

<sup>42</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 143.

<sup>43</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 134.

<sup>44</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 141.

<sup>45</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 273.

enjoined to participate in them or to retain a critical distance [...] one question here would be about what it might mean for a person in this 'altered' state to know something to be 'true'. What, one might wonder, might truth actually mean when the senses have been changed.<sup>46</sup>

The distortion of this aberrant state of mind is further filtered through memory, trauma, and invention, and the reader finds him- or herself inevitably trapped in a palimpsest of competing narratives.

This quest for order and empiricism is indicative of the severe anxiety caused by the fragmentation and dissolution experienced in both gothic narratives under discussion. Coupled with the narrators' self-reflexive awareness of their own unreliability, the emphasis on the verification of facts paradoxically accentuates the very precariousness of the reconstruction of the narratives. The signification, interpretation, and accuracy of language and signs, essential aspects of both stories, are interrogated and revealed to be arbitrary. By simulating the subjective experiences of the narrators, the style and structure of the texts encourage our vicarious identification with the protagonists.

The realisation that one is reading a book that could never have been written and 'listening' to a narrative voice that could never have been heard contributes to the fantastic nature of *The Grotesque*. As the narrator is immobilised, the events narrated by Sir Hugo are all played out in the theatre of his mind. This is made clear from the start, as we are told that 'All this I have reconstructed since being confined to a wheelchair' [emphasis added].<sup>47</sup> Despite his insistence that he will 'describe it just as it happened' and 'try to construct [...] as full and coherent an account [...] of *how things got this way*' [emphasis in original], Sir Hugo does not attempt to hide the disjunction between fact and fiction, and has no qualms in admitting that the entire account is speculative and obsessive.<sup>48</sup> It is ironic that Sir Hugo does not realise that his criticism of scientists like Sykes-Herring that 'they see what they expect to see and no more' applies equally to himself.<sup>49</sup>

His endorsement of 'informed, imaginative speculation [...] to make the sudden brilliant intuitive leap to revolutionary truth' hints at how he has come to some of his conclusions concerning Fledge.<sup>50</sup> He describes Fledge's disposal of the body of Sidney, his daughter's fiancé, as if he were present. 'I saw him guide the bicycle over the edge, and I saw

<sup>46</sup> Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, pp. 293–95.

<sup>47</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 45, 106.

<sup>49</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 35.

it tip, and fall, and splash to rest in the black water at the bottom. He stood there at the edge of the pit, framed against the moon, *and it was as though I were* at the bottom, gazing up at him' [emphasis added].<sup>51</sup> The subjectivity of the process Sir Hugo employs in his re-creation of the event is evident when he relates how 'I allowed my mind to go blank, my thoughts to wander, and slowly, in my imagination, a picture began to form', yet insists that 'for some weird reason I felt certain that this indeed was what had happened'.<sup>52</sup> He admits, 'In fact, I began to find that the only events that I could record with any real precision were not those that happened outside myself but, rather the operations that my own mind performed upon the fragmentary stimuli that now constituted reality for me'.<sup>53</sup> As he sits confined in his wheelchair, Sir Hugo imagines his gardener George, who is in prison because he has taken the fall for the murder. He describes his visions of George as being 'entirely illusory, at the same time, they appeared quite real: they felt real. But they were hallucinations, merely, symptomatic of the sort of slippage, or dislocation to which [his] mind was increasingly subject'.<sup>54</sup> Although he warns of 'the distortions to which the passive and isolated mind is prone', this is the only reality on to which he can desperately cling.<sup>55</sup>

The reliance on storytelling as a means to grapple with the surreal reality that confronts these gothic protagonists is constantly undermined by the dream-like intangibility of the account itself. Like Sir Hugo, Leonard employs narrative to concretise memory because it is his only source of solidity. In trying to convey the instability of his mind, the structure of *Memento* replicates Leonard's experience by literally structuring itself backwards. The movie adheres to the tradition of confessional, amnesiac, and paranoid investigative narratives in *noir* film but proceeds from back to front in brief, incremental, remembered episodes. Leonard tells his wife that 'the pleasure of a book is in wanting to know what happens next', but the pleasure of this movie is in finding out what happened earlier in the plot.<sup>56</sup>

The opening three scenes (in Nolan's words, 'a sort of micro-representation of the structure of the whole film') literally instruct the cinematic audience how to watch the film by establishing the pattern with which the audience has to familiarise themselves in order to proceed.<sup>57</sup> Over the title sequence, a Polaroid print un-develops and fades away in real-time,

<sup>51</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 76, 77.

<sup>53</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 151.

<sup>54</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 155–56.

<sup>55</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 151.

<sup>56</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 163.

<sup>57</sup> Director's Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento* [1:02].

a graphic example of Leonard's lack of short-term memory where 'everything fades'.<sup>58</sup> The Polaroid then slides back into the camera, followed by a scene in which a murder is played in reverse. The reverse action is a defamiliarising technique, which nonetheless alerts the audience to the way in which the film is constructed. The sudden cut into extreme close-ups in black-and-white film stock extends this technique. The first line, 'So you're in some motel room',<sup>59</sup> is in response to the unspoken question 'where are you?' which echoes what an ideal audience might ask. Throughout the rest of the film, this recurring motif, of Leonard waking up in a strange environment and orientating himself, functions as a concrete experience of Leonard's lapses of consciousness, which is 'like waking. Like you always just woke up.'<sup>60</sup> The audience is made to experience his disorientation as there is a 'continual fresh moment of discovery' every time he regains awareness.<sup>61</sup>

This is further complicated by the concurrent dual narrative structure, the two strands of which are differentiated by the film stock used. The black-and-white sequences (which depict incidents prior to the events which occur backwards in colour) are shot from a more objective photodocumentary-like point-of-view. Unlike the first-person perspective in the colour sequences, the voiceover in the black-and-white segments is rambling, uncertain, and hesitant, and Leonard also refers to himself in the third person as if he is objectively studying his own condition.<sup>62</sup> Coupled with a camera perspective that is shot, in a stark *cinéma-vérité* style, from a high angle, this serves to distance the audience.

By highlighting the threat of erasure of one's hold on reality and identity, these texts emphasise an awareness and appreciation of what could potentially be lost when these categories come under threat. The proclamation of his neurologist Dendrite that he is 'ontologically dead' irks Sir Hugo, who insists that he is 'the most ontologically *alive* person in that room' [emphasis in original].<sup>63</sup> This 'ontological instability' is the anxiety that, in his words, 'my identity were merely a reflection, or construct, of the opinion of others [so that he is] forced to assert my own self to myself and thus confirm that I was still, in effect, viable.'<sup>64</sup>

Having lost his short-term memory, Leonard is terrified that what he does not remember loses its significance to him, including the revenge that he lives for. It is the memory of his wife dying, the last thing he remembers, that spurs him on to vengeance and

<sup>58</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 114.

<sup>59</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 109.

<sup>60</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 114.

<sup>61</sup> Director's Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento* [41:20].

<sup>62</sup> Mark Olsen, 'Total Recall', *Film Comment*, 37.1 (Jan/Feb 2001), 62–63 (p. 63).

<sup>63</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 143.

action. He asserts, 'The world doesn't disappear when you close your eyes, does it? My actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them.'<sup>65</sup> The need for meaning and purpose is so compelling that Teddy suggests to Leonard that 'You lie to yourself! You don't want the truth [...] So you make up your own truth [...] to set yourself a puzzle you won't ever solve [...] You're living a dream [...] a romantic quest which you wouldn't end.'<sup>66</sup>

The drive for stability therefore supersedes the quest for truth. Any form of permanence is welcomed in this state of transience. Tattooing vital information 'in all directions, some upside-down, some backwards' on his body is, to Leonard, 'a permanent way of keeping a note.'<sup>67</sup> The use of the body as a textual message board emphasises the importance he attributes to text as signifier. Leonard believes that 'the present is trivia, which I can scribble down as notes' and that by doing so, he can provide some continuity to his life.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Leonard's faith in the written word is misplaced 'because you're relying on [words] alone. You don't remember what you've discovered or how.'<sup>69</sup> Caught between knowing and not knowing, between forgetting and remembering, Leonard is not intentionally deceiving the audience. Instead, without a sense of context or memory, it is his reading of the situation that is faulty. In imposing a definitive order on events, narrative, whether written or oral, becomes arbitrary, deceptively comforting, and thus, inevitably entropic.

### The New Vision — Seeing Double

Within this context, the presence of the gothic double serves further to interrogate the constitution of identity in both texts. The projection of repressed emotions or memories onto their doubles, Fledge and Sammy Jankis, raises the suspicion that Sir Hugo is implicated in the murder of Sidney, and that Leonard shares more with Sammy than he is willing to admit. Sir Hugo observes that Fledge 'maintains [him] with his hatred' and contemplates 'the irony of [his] existence, that [he has] come to require the hatred of a bad servant simply to *be*' [emphasis in original].<sup>70</sup> His fear is that he will be usurped by Fledge, who takes over Sir Hugo's wife Harriet, Crook, his clothes, and his identity. 'Dressing in a manner very similar to [his] own now', Sir Hugo suggests

<sup>65</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 124.

<sup>66</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 222.

<sup>67</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 119; Director's Commentary, Limited Edition DVD of *Memento* [10:56].

<sup>68</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 144.

<sup>69</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 135.

<sup>70</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 80.

I am his grotesque double; he reads in me an outward sign of his own corruption, I am the externalisation, the manifestation, the fleshly representation of his true inner nature — which is a deformed and withered thing [...] his shrivelled conscience [...] a sort of inversion of himself, the negative to his positive.<sup>71</sup>

Sir Hugo projects his self-disgust onto Fledge and argues instead that ‘the irony is that in truth he is the negative of me [...] Fledge is the grotesque — not I!'<sup>72</sup> His suspicion and antagonism towards Fledge is further fuelled when Fledge allegedly attacks him. Yet what Sir Hugo interprets as an attempt on his life can also be read instead as an effort to save him. Sir Hugo feels a pain before Fledge supposedly forces him to the ground. He ‘could do little but gaze up’ and was ‘powerless to resist’ when Fledge kisses him.<sup>73</sup> The sequence as described from Sir Hugo’s first-person perspective could easily be re-interpreted as Fledge coming to his master’s aid as he convulses in a stroke, supporting him as he falls, and attempting to save Sir Hugo with the ‘kiss of life’, or Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). Sir Hugo’s delusion and homophobia distort Fledge’s intention in order to throw suspicion on Fledge and away from himself.

It is also possible that Sir Hugo constructs a narrative in which Fledge pursues Harriet to distract the reader from his own lust for Fledge’s wife Doris. He alludes to this when he refers to ‘the dinosaur-bird connection, and the possibility of a kinship far more intimate’. He had earlier described Mrs Fledge as a crow, while he is associated with the dinosaur because of his research about dinosaurs.<sup>74</sup> His sexual appetite for Mrs Fledge is expressed in gastronomical terms. He is ‘well satisfied’ with her cooking, and enjoys her looking flustered as he asks what she plans to tempt him with at luncheon.<sup>75</sup> His repressed desires for Mrs Fledge find release in an act of masturbation, which he theorises as a displacement of the frustration at being prevented from presenting a lecture he was scheduled to deliver.<sup>76</sup> He later admits how Doris becomes his ‘source of life’ and how he had ‘come to crave and adore the touch of her hands on my body’.<sup>77</sup> What he defers telling us till later is that Fledge discovers him molesting Doris. This incident is also described in displaced sexual imagery. We are told,

<sup>71</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 164–65.

<sup>72</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 165.

<sup>73</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 133–34.

<sup>74</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 11, 21.

<sup>75</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 15–17.

<sup>76</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 42–43, 64.

<sup>77</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 107.

Sardine tins, as you know, are opened with a sort of key with a slit in it, into which one inserts a small metal tongue that protrudes from the edge of the tin; by turning the key, one peels away the lid of the tin and reveals the oily treasures within.<sup>78</sup>

With Sir Hugo turning the key to open a sardine tin, the blood on Doris's apron and the repeated mention of cocktail sausages, the imagery is obvious. What is less evident is the significance of the detail that this happens 'just after the first snow'; it was on the night of 'the first snow of the year', specifically dated 15 December, that Sir Hugo comments on the instinctual 'predilection we have for constructing effigies of ourselves' and expresses his hatred for Fledge and his 'secret lusts'.<sup>79</sup> It is telling that, in terms of the narrative structure, it is also at this time of the year that Sir Hugo begins fantasising about Fledge and Sir Hugo's wife Harriet.<sup>80</sup>

While it is pertinent to the narrative of *The Grotesque* that the reader focuses on Fledge's scheme to take over Crook, this is a red herring, distracting the reader from Sir Hugo's involvement in Sidney's murder. If Sir Hugo could project his scandalous desires for his butler's wife onto an attraction that Fledge has for Harriet, it is equally possible that he might displace his murder of the spineless future son-in-law he abhors onto Fledge. His proposal is that Fledge kills Sidney because Fledge is being blackmailed by Sidney, as they are having a homosexual relationship. He conjectures, 'I *think* I'd seen Sidney taking Fledge into his arms to kiss him' [emphasis in original].<sup>81</sup> On the one hand, his imaginative account of how Fledge takes Sidney's body into the marsh is uncannily described in great detail. He later dreams of 'a Mesozoic swamp' in which his *Phlegmosaurus* attacks a brontosaurus calf, a subconscious revelation of his part in the murder.<sup>82</sup> The gradual decomposition of Sidney's corpse parallels the decaying infestation of Sir Hugo's *Phlegmosaurus* bones, which are indicative of Sir Hugo's own degeneration. On the other hand, there is little objective evidence to validate Sir Hugo's accusations against Fledge. Besides the sneers and looks that Sir Hugo imagines, he admits that Fledge shows little sign of his involvement in Sidney's murder.

<sup>78</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 128.

<sup>79</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, pp. 127, 64–65.

<sup>80</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 69.

<sup>81</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 48.

<sup>82</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 92. The mammal-dinosaur comparison alludes to the relationship between Fledge and Sir Hugo. The account of Rupert Brooke's death from a mosquito infection and the anecdote of the pike and the cow have analogical significance to the narrative.

Sir Hugo also evades the topic when Cleo tells him that Sidney is missing.<sup>83</sup> His description of George as having a ‘strong uncomplicated nature’ characterises him as a devoted lackey who would dutifully dispose of the corpse.<sup>84</sup> Despite facing death at the gallows, George does not retract his final confession of Sir Hugo’s role in the murder. By extension then, the plot weaving together homosexuality, blackmail, and murder implicates Sir Hugo, and not Fledge. Sir Hugo projects his own frailties onto Fledge, calling him ‘a monster [...] a doubly inverted creature [...] a paranoid schizophrenic [...] [and] a homosexual’, who is ‘clinically insane’ and ‘suffers from an acute sense of inferiority’.<sup>85</sup> This train of thought is self-referential, especially since it follows immediately after Sir Hugo’s lingering description of Fledge’s penis. It appears that his repressed jealousy of the blossoming relationship between Fledge and Sidney may have caused him to commit murder. By living in self-denial, Sir Hugo attains some sense of equilibrium as he now only has himself to live with.

A similar destabilising of narrative authority occurs in Nolan’s film. The audience is faced with a crisis of belief as our interpretation of events hinges on whether Teddy, arguably the shadiest character in the movie, is trustworthy. At the end of the movie, which is the chronological beginning of the plot, Teddy reveals that Leonard’s wife survived the assault and that it was Leonard’s wife who had diabetes, and not Sammy’s, as Leonard had previously believed. He then reveals that he ‘was the cop assigned to your wife’s *death*’ [emphasis added] and that the real John G had already been killed, except that Leonard no longer remembers it.<sup>86</sup> Teddy’s propensity to modify his version of events for his own purposes causes further uncertainty. If what Teddy is saying were true, then Leonard resolves to kill Teddy because he wants to continue living in his world of make-believe, which is the only stable reality he knows. Unwilling to exchange sanity for truth or fact for instability, in this version of events, he has to do whatever it takes to maintain his hold on reality. As Teddy says, ‘So you lie to yourself to be happy. Nothing wrong with that — we all do. Who cares if there’s a few little details you’d rather not remember?’<sup>87</sup>

As a result, his present self creates a situation for his future self to solve when he says to himself as he records Teddy’s license plate number, ‘Can I just let myself forget what you just told me? You’re a John G? Fine, then you can be my John G. Do I lie to myself to be

<sup>83</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 26.

<sup>85</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 131.

<sup>86</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 221. In the movie, Teddy says he was assigned to ‘your wife’s case’ which makes it more uncertain whether Leonard’s wife dies in the assault.

<sup>87</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 218.

happy? In your case, Teddy ... yes, I will.<sup>88</sup> The presumption is that he intentionally does this knowing full well that he will not remember his actions. Like Sir Hugo, Leonard turns in on himself. As Tubrett argues, 'Leonard's way of coping with his past is to dis-member it (as opposed to a remembering) and to reconstruct it according to a paradigm that minimizes his accountability and maximizes his motivation.'<sup>89</sup> His paranoia that 'someone's fucking with me. Trying to get me to kill the wrong guy' is vindicated — but that 'someone' is himself.<sup>90</sup>

The layers of simulacra in *Memento* promise a sense of closure but only present a mirage of reality that persistently defers definition and conclusion. Leonard's drive to deceive himself is demonstrated when he hires a social escort to re-create the night of the attack, complete with props. Besides this being a vain attempt to relive and reaffirm the last memory of his wife, it opens up the possibility of altering the outcome of that night, using the social escort as a stand-in for his wife. Our understanding of the murder is further complicated by the way in which the movie blurs the boundary between objective reality and subjective imagination in its depiction of Sammy as Leonard's double. In the earliest scene, Sammy is sitting in a mental institution and for a split second he is replaced by Leonard. As Teddy presents his version of events at the end of the film, the audience is first shown a frame of Leonard's wife opening her eye, presumably after the attack, suggesting that she may have survived it. The audience is unsure if this is a reconstructed memory, fantastical imagination, or a visual representation of Teddy's narrative. We then see a shot of Leonard's wife sitting on the same couch on which Sammy's wife sat earlier in the film. A shot of Leonard administering insulin to his wife appears to indicate that Teddy is telling the truth but in a later scene, Leonard is seen merely to be pinching her thigh. The audience is no longer sure which scene, if any, depicts the truth.

Lastly, we see a scene with Leonard's wife resting on his chest, again suggesting that she could have survived the assault. On his chest, there is a tattoo which reads 'I've done it' in the space which he was reserving for a tattoo that will remind him that he had taken his revenge. However, this space on his chest is blank throughout the film, implying that this scene is either a future event or an imagined one, thus throwing doubt on the reality of the other extraneous scenes we have seen. Leonard fears that he might have done something

<sup>88</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 224.

<sup>89</sup> Dion Tubrett, "'So where are you?' On *Memento*, Memory and the Sincerity of Self-Deception", *Cineaction*, 56 (September 2001), 3–10 (p. 8).

<sup>90</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 143.

wrong that he cannot remember and alludes that he may have killed his own wife when he asks, 'What if I've done something like Sammy?'.<sup>91</sup>

The answer lies in a past narrative, a back-story, which is inaccessible to both Leonard and the audience. Anxious that the simulacrum of his mind will consume the reality of his world without him even knowing it, Leonard has to reassert his grasp on reality constantly, and concomitantly reassure himself of his sanity, even if it may mean blocking out the truth of the past. He assures himself, 'I have to believe in the world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world's still there'.<sup>92</sup> The constant need to take his bearings and re-orientate himself informs us that the question with which the movie begins and ends — 'Where are you?/Where was I?' — is not just a geographical question, but an ontological one.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

Both Sir Hugo and Leonard are 'trapped in a false world of shadows and phantoms [where] the borders and boundaries of the real and the fantastic have become blurred, unreliable, faulty [and] order is crumbling'.<sup>94</sup> Their narratives are in an 'interstitial [...] in-between' state between words and thoughts, fact and imagination, and truth and deception.<sup>95</sup> As Sir Hugo says, 'It thus becomes my task to *allow for* this tendency [...] to doubt the possibility of constructing any version of reality that is not skewed in advance by the projections, denials, and impostures of the mind' [emphasis in original].<sup>96</sup>

Signs and language are subject to context, misinterpretation, indefiniteness, and slippage. The false resolutions of the texts open the narratives themselves to scrutiny. Is Fledge having an affair with Harriet in his bid to usurp Crook? Did he attack Sir Hugo? Who killed Sidney? Is George's accusation of Sir Hugo reliable? Was Fledge homosexual or is Sir Hugo repressed? The same irresolution plagues *Memento*. Is Teddy telling the truth? Was Leonard's wife killed in the assault? Is Sammy Jankis a projection of Leonard? Individual audience members may have pet theories but 'this is all conjectural'.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 200.

<sup>92</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, p. 225.

<sup>93</sup> Nolan, *Memento*, pp. 106, 149.

<sup>94</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 80.

<sup>95</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 144.

<sup>96</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 61.

<sup>97</sup> McGrath, *The Grotesque*, p. 69.

In *Memento*, ‘the colour narrative draws the viewer back through time with the misleading promise of arriving at a redemptive temporal and causal origin.’<sup>98</sup> Instead, the final scene problematises rather than solves the external trajectory of plot and the internal complication of character. A memento connotes loss, absence, and longing for an experience ‘which the object can only evoke and resonate to, and can never entirely recoup’.<sup>99</sup> Leonard’s entire body is a memento that exhibits how even tattooed text inscribed on the flesh of the human body is unreliable and unreadable. The irresolution of the text suggests that we will never know the answers. Rebecca Pope observes that ‘no matter how strong the appearance of closure, endings in gothic fiction rarely provide resolution; they are merely places where we begin to re-enter the text’.<sup>100</sup>

In the end, any logocentric reading of *Memento* and *The Grotesque* is misconceived if seen as definitive. Encumbered by illusion, delusion, and allusion, the viewer or reader is uncertain ‘whether there is a core reality of “what really happened” under the layers of spectacle and fabrication’.<sup>101</sup> Instead of revealing meaning, any interpretation of both *Memento* and *The Grotesque* is automatically undermined by the texts’ own problematisation of the notion of objectivity. Moreover, it reveals the reader/viewer’s own need for order and closure. In *Memento* and *The Grotesque*, the mindfreaks have divorced themselves from an unbearable reality, choosing instead to inhabit a reality which they have constructed. In creating a history that revolves around themselves, Leonard and Sir Hugo seek ultimately not to remember, but to forget.

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<sup>98</sup> Little, p. 71.

<sup>99</sup> Little, p. 70.

<sup>100</sup> Rebecca A. Pope, ‘Writing and Biting in *Dracula*’, *Literature Interpretation Theory* 1 (1990), 199–216 (p. 214).

<sup>101</sup> *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Will Brooker (New York: Arnold, 1997), p. 56.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Literary and Cultural Criticism

**Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror after Saw***  
(Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

Horror film's subgenre 'torture porn' denotes images of gory, gratuitous violence, and unbearable suffering. The mainstream press has vilified the subgenre, labelling the films as irredeemable, vacuous, repellent, vile, tasteless, gratuitous, and so forth. However, this type of negative criticism of horror films is not new, and in some sense is a continuation of the controversies and debates that originally produced the 'H' certificate in the 1930s. While the mainstream press continues to condemn horror films, it is ultimately the responsibility of scholars to unearth hidden meanings that lie behind the representations of blood and gore. As Jeffrey Sconce contends in his critical examination of *The Human Centipede 2* (2011), 'You know how this game is played. Anytime you see such a consensus of disgusted outrage [...], something very interesting must be going on'.<sup>1</sup>

Although academic scholarship in the field of torture porn has grown in recent years (not least in the work of James Aston and John Wallis, as well as Steven Allen), a scholarly investigation of the subgenre as a whole has been absent — until, that is, Steve Jones published *Torture Porn: Popular Horror After Saw*. This text is an important addition to the critical examination of the subgenre in academic scholarship as it broadens the scope of analysis, which has predominantly focused on political-allegorical interpretations, such as those offered by Adam Lowenstein, and Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller.

Jones's text examines the various debates circulating around the term 'torture porn'. He deftly handles the negative connotations that have been attached to the subgenre by providing innovative and significant suggestions. Jones's methodology not only includes the use of press, director, and fan responses, but also incorporates concise case studies that exemplify his point(s). His examination includes forty-five key films (*Hostel* [2005], *Captivity* [2007], and *Saw* [2004]), as well as numerous lesser-known ones (*Penance* [2009], *The Book of Revelation* [2006], *Madness* [2010]).

*Torture Porn* is divided into three parts. Part One, ““Torture Porn” (Category)”, examines how the label 'torture porn' has been attributed to a particular set of horror films,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, *Lucid Despair*, <<http://ludicdespair.blogspot.ie/2012/07/inhuman-centipede.html>> [accessed 18 July 2014]

particularly those that have been released in the multiplex. However, as Jones contends, the term ‘torture porn’ has prejudiced and narrowed meaningful debate due to the press’s propensity to castigate popular horror. This leads Jones to concentrate on press responses to torture porn that have formed the core tenets of the subgenre (excessive violence, torture, and imprisonment). He also observes how directors and fans of torture porn have contributed to the discourse surrounding the term in both negative and positive ways.

Part Two, “‘Torture’ (Morality)”, expands the critical discourse that has, to date, focused primarily on allegorical interpretations of torture porn, which Jones contends confine the subgenre ‘into a very specific politico-historical juncture’ (p. 4). Disputing the common and indeed pejorative assumptions that torture porn lacks narrative and therefore does not incite audience empathy, Jones examines how various devices, such as *mise en scène*, structure, sound, camerawork, and so forth, promote viewer empathy. Viewer empathy, Jones asserts, is addressed through the various ways the camera situates the audience in relation to the victim/protagonist. Furthermore, while many critics have accused torture porn of promoting misogyny, Jones observes how camerawork and narrative structure complicate viewer identification. Examining films such as *Penance*, *Manhunt [Rovdyr]* (2008), and *Wolf Creek* (2005), Jones argues that the narratives are ‘female-driven’; that they ‘illustrate how the subgenre’s lead female protagonists are typically demarcated as significant’ and that the ‘films encode [the female’s] plight as the narrative’s empathetic core’ (p. 137).

Part Three, “‘Porn’: (Extremity)”, examines torture porn’s multifaceted makeup, including the implications that arise due to labelling these horror films as ‘porn’. Taking issue with the term ‘porn’ used as a metaphor, Jones scrutinises the porn genre and breaks down the term in relation to representations of sexual violence and gender dynamics. By examining films that occupy a realm outside that defined by the multiplex and categorised as ‘extreme porn’, Jones exposes the limitations on the meanings equated with torture porn (which he asserts ‘implies generic hybridity’ [p. 5]) as a classification. In the book’s conclusions, Jones declares that the narrow discourse that has labelled ‘torture porn’ generalises the subgenre as a fixed static category. However, as shown throughout the text, torture porn’s content is a fluid, continuously evolving category. Further, as it illustrates, to generalise torture porn as “‘extreme”, “immoral”, or “trash”” (p. 191) underscores the lack of critical engagement with the narrative content of the films.

One of the more interesting points made here is Jones’s argument against detractors’ accusations that torture porn endorses misogyny. As he notes, these accusations ‘stem more from the label “porn” and its discursive history than from torture porn’s content’ (p. 130).

While those who object to torture porn limit their critical scope to categorising all films within the subgenre as pornographic and misogynistic, Jones undertakes a quantitative analysis of torture porn's content. The use of quantitative analysis underscores how critics misinterpret 'the quantity of sexual violence depicted' (p. 134) in torture-porn films. In the forty-five films surveyed, Jones's research convincingly demonstrates that a higher percentage of male characters are killed and/or severely injured in torture porn, but also that the scenes displaying sexual imagery do not dominate the content of the films. Even when misogyny is depicted, Jones contends that this behaviour, 'whether physically enacted or symbolic' (p. 135), is not glorified, nor is the audience ever aligned with the perpetrator's violence.

Overall, Jones's work is engaging and succinct. He provides a detailed, rich analysis of a genre that has been vilified in the press. *Torture Porn* challenges the oversimplification and superficial analysis that characterises and circulates within torture-porn discourse. In so doing, he opens up the debates about the nature and the significance of torture porn as a subgenre. Through the examination and the discussion of the way torture porn fits into the genealogy of horror film, the book provides a critical retrospection that is often overlooked by critics and scholars. Jones's detailed examination and conclusions about torture porn also open up the field of Horror Studies to new possibilities. Anyone with a serious interest in torture porn should read this book.

*Lee Baxter*

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**Tony Williams (ed.), *George A. Romero: Interviews***  
(Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011)

George A. Romero is primarily celebrated as the world's most intelligent populariser of zombie cinema, but this volume goes some way to expanding on the basis of that success. Taken as a whole, the interviews collected in this book substantiate the claim that Dan Yakir makes in his preface to a 1977 conversation with the director, that 'Romero is undoubtedly the most important regional filmmaker working in the U.S.' (p. 47). Although he now lives and works in Toronto — his most recent features, starting with *Bruiser* (2000) have all been filmed in Canada, even when set in the United States — Romero deserves attention for having carved out a space for himself in the film business via the road less travelled. Born in New York, Romero attended what is now Carnegie Mellon University and got involved in the

theatre. His most important career decision was to stick around in Pittsburgh. He founded a commercial film-production studio (The Latent Image) and made advertisements, promotional films, and took on freelance contracts before attempting a narrative feature. In a chronologically ordered selection of interviews, editor Tony Williams presents a vivid picture of a man whose career, while idiosyncratic and essential to the history of horror, has been anything but an unbroken string of successes.

The early interviews in this volume, particularly Sam Nicotero's from 1973, do a good job of explaining the long process of pitching, producing, shooting, and exhibiting *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), then conceived as a money-making venture for its funders (Image Ten, a group of Pittsburgh-area investors) but now regarded as a seminal intervention in the horror genre. These accounts of the struggle to make films outside of the auspices of the studios make for compulsive reading. One of the unexpected delights of this book is the chance to track a filmmaker's personal relationship to his work over a period of a few years. Between 1969 and 1973, Romero wavers and self-contradicts on a few points — the film's budget, for example, seems to change, as do some of the compromises made to get it to screen (shooting in black and white seems to have been both an artistic decision and a budgetary restriction) — but his enthusiasm and sense of retroactive self-awareness never seem to falter. As the book shows, Romero quickly loses his appreciation for some of his films, specifically *There's Always Vanilla* (1972), initially an attempt to look at what would happen to the burgeoning 60s youth culture a few years on, but realised on screen as a sloppy-but-quirky romance distinguished only by its location-based shooting (p. 42). But he likewise realises (rightly) that there is something special about the films he made between *Vanilla* and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). *Jack's Wife/Season of the Witch* (1972), *The Crazies* (1973) and *Martin* (1977) are premised on tropes that occupy the fringes of the horror genre (amateur occultism, inexplicable viral epidemic, and psychological disturbance leading to imagined vampirism, respectively), and as such their premises have remained fresh. While *The Crazies* was remade in 2010, Romero himself often claims that he would like to remake *Jack's Wife*, a film whose bored housewife and negligent husband could easily be adapted to the contemporary zeitgeist (p. 177). Speaking in 1973, Romero even claimed that 'I'm happier with *Jack's Wife* than I am with either *Living Dead* or *The Crazies*' (p. 22)!

More broadly, Williams's volume relates Romero's anxieties about his place in the film business, his duties as a politically aware filmmaker, and the precarious see-saw of fame and bankability. Both *Knightriders* (1981) and *Monkey Shines* (1988) are important to this book. In the former, Romero worked with a large budget while still maintaining autonomy, a

stock group of actors and co-conspirators, and the trust of production partner Richard Rubenstein. In the later film, he was working outside of his familiar idiom, making a film from an existing property for mini-major Orion Pictures. After *Knightriders*, Romero made his leap into the mainstream through his direction of *Creepshow* (1982), a collaboration with Stephen King. While Romero would maintain his relationship with King through his involvement in *Creepshow 2* (1987) and his eventual direction of the underrated adaptation *The Dark Half* (1993), several of these interviews allude to Romero's sense of missed opportunities throughout the long process of trying to make films of other works by Stephen King, specifically *Pet Sematary* and *The Stand*. Although both of these books were eventually brought to screen (*Pet Sematary* [1989 and 1992] as a two-film series directed by Mary Lambert, and *The Stand* [1994] as a TV miniseries directed by frequent King collaborator Mick Garris), we can't help but wonder what Romero would have done with the material.

The later part of this collection does a good job of updating our sense of where Romero stands today. While still a popular maestro for horror fans, he continues to make engaged (if sometimes uneven) films. In his discussions of *Diary of the Dead* (2007) (especially as related in an interview with Peter Keough), Romero comes across as a media watchdog — the decision to make the film in a largely confessional, *cinéma-vérité* style seems to have less to do with the massive profitability of phenomenal successes like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and more to do with his fear of the potential duplicity of the blogosphere (pp. 164–65).

Williams himself contributes two interviews, one from 2000 and one from 2010. While complementary in some respects to the largely journalistic style of the rest of the book, they are immediately recognisable as the work of a literary scholar. Williams asks Romero precise thematic and interpretive questions that occasionally yield hidden insights, but just as often result in confusion. For example, the 2000 interview asks about Romero's influences. In Williams's *The Cinema of George A. Romero: Knight of the Living Dead* (2003, Wallflower Press), a Romero-as-literary-naturalist thesis is used to frame an overall reading of Romero's work. While Romero is quick to acknowledge his debt to Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe, he is blunt in admitting that the American naturalist prose of the nineteenth century (specifically that of Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris) does not play into his ideas (p. 136). For good or ill, questions like these reveal the interpretive split between how an artist conceives their work, and how academic audiences (or audiences more generally) process such material.

Ultimately, however, *George A. Romero: Interviews* does a great service to scholars and fans interested in the thematic and intellectual depths of Romero's movies. The collected interviews do plenty to promote Romero's status as one of horror cinema's greatest living filmmakers, while at the same time redirect attention to his ambitions in other genres. On the whole, Williams has done valuable work for readers interested in Romero's ambivalent calling as the sometimes-reluctant paterfamilias of zombie culture.

Kevin M. Flanagan

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**Cynthia Sugars, *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History and the Spectre of Self-Invention***  
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014)

In the 1970s, Canadian broadcaster CBC Radio's *This Country in the Morning* held a competition, the goal of which was to complete the phrase: 'As Canadian as ...'. The winning entry read: '... possible, under the circumstances.' It is within these various circumstances that Sugars bases her arguments in *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History and the Spectre of Self-Invention*, presenting a contemporary reading of Canadian texts that places them firmly within the gothic tradition and style. Sugars's focus on uniquely Canadian circumstances is developed in each chapter, identifying the gothic form within themes ranging from indigenous Canadians, through the postcolonial settlers, to French-Canadian identity and culture, and beyond.

In both the Introduction, 'Settled Unsettlement; or, Familiarizing the Uncanny', and Chapter One, 'Here There Be Monsters: Wilderness Gothic and Psychic Projection', Sugars goes out of her way to convince her reader that there is a case for the gothic to be identified and mapped within Canadian literary history. While Canadian society and landscapes may lack the traditional gothic castles and villainous aristocrats, her opening arguments illustrate the genre's centrality to its literature by drawing on two of Canada's most famous poems: John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' (first published in 1915 and often referred to as Canada's national poem) and Robert Service's 'The Cremation of Sam McGee' (1907). In using these two notable works, Sugars eases her reader into the idea of reading Canadian gothic texts as a unique form that nonetheless follows the same rules as conventionally recognisable gothic literature. 'We are the Dead', declares the narrator of 'In Flanders Field', setting the tone for the rest of the book, as Sugars skilfully picks apart the text to argue that McCrae's is a poem 'that emblematizes Canadians' own conflicted relation to their ancestral dead, not only in the

context of war, but in the context more generally of generational haunting as they have played themselves out in Canadian culture from the beginning' (p. 2). Hauntings play a major role in Sugars's application of the gothic to Canadian texts, and she goes to great lengths to establish the Canadian gothic as a separate form from traditional European gothic. Specifically, in both Chapter One and Chapter Two, entitled 'Haunted by a Lack of Ghosts: Gothic Absence and Settler Melancholy', Sugars sets up the concept of 'wilderness gothic' for her readers. Taking the title from Al Purdy's poem of the same name, Sugars places Canada's unique wilderness gothic in opposition to European and American gothic through emphasis on the multiple Canadian cultural and ethnic influences present in the genre. While European gothic is associated with the landscape of the sublime, Canada's wilderness gothic is distinct in that its inhabitants are not indigenous, but rather French and English settlers, whose response, Sugars writes, is a 'psychic struggle in working through the re-evaluation of values that is necessitated by [the] transplantation to Canada' (p. 40). She differentiates Canadian gothic from the wide-reaching genre of American gothic, whose characters often share such circumstances of transplantation. This distinction is explored in particular in Chapters Four and Five of *Canadian Gothic*, in which she examines the use of contemporary Canadian gothic as a form of cultural reinforcement and authentication in the face of 'Canada's sense of inferiority to the United States' (p. 70).

Sugars's real strength in *Canadian Gothic* is her ability, first to define concepts of Canadianism clearly, and then to apply them both in terms of broad theory and specific textual readings. While this is standard fare, it is nonetheless much needed, particularly in relation to ideas of Canadian identity and culture, which has so many intricacies and facets that the average reader will benefit greatly from Sugars's often verbose, though immensely readable, prose, and her multiple explanations and applications. Her sensitivity to the presence of gothic tropes and iconography within a range of texts from early Canadian literature to postcolonial readings of contemporary texts makes *Canadian Gothic* an extremely accessible companion for the casual reader as well as the most interrogative scholar. The range of texts she studies, as well as the variety of topics covered in the seven comprehensive chapters, result in a thoroughly researched and deeply thought-out text that covers all available bases when discussing the gothic form in relation to Canada's unique cultural and transnational positions, as well as Canadian history and the identities borne out of it. While less well-read readers may struggle in parts with Sugars's digressions in the form of close textual readings and her sporadic use of extracts and quotations when discussing her chosen works in greater detail, this momentary confusion does not detract from Sugars's

arguments. Moreover, her writing style allows the reader to slip past the works with which he or she may be less familiar and instead focus on the concepts that she presents, with her transference of traditional gothic language to the Canadian literary tradition allowing them to be applied to a multitude of Canadian works as the reader chooses. For the well-read Canadaphile, however, Sugars's pairing of her original theory alongside established and contemporary literature creates a book in which the old is re-examined in a new light, and the new is presented in a separate sphere from the one in which it is placed by the transnational marketplace. While many readers and critics are all too hasty in their desire to place Canadian literature in tandem with American or British genres because of the previous colonial relationships between said nations, Sugars's interrogation of Canadian gothic as a form grounded in both the indigenous and settler traditions allows Canadian literature and identity to be repositioned within the gothic as much as within a postcolonial context.

It is rare to find a book of criticism and theory that works both for the casual reader and the scholar, but in *Canadian Gothic*, Sugars has created just that — a work that can be picked up and skimmed by those with a casual interest or pored over and cross-examined by those with a critical eye for both the gothic form and Canadian literature. Ultimately, Sugars's *Canadian Gothic* is very much a product of love's labour, and this transfers with great effect to her language and writing style — it's hard for the reader not to become engrossed in the prose, even when encountering unheard of works, and Sugars's new ideas and excavation of a traditional genre, from within an unexamined national literature. In *Canadian Gothic*, she has therefore created not just an engaging work, but one that successfully presents and argues an unprecedented case for a new frontier of Canadian gothic theory and criticism.

Eve Kearney

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**Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (eds), *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century***  
 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012)

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben have edited a formidable collection of essays, which establishes neo-Victorian gothic as a serious field of study in itself rather than a sub-genre of gothic. *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century* neatly side-steps merging the gargantuan gothic and the new

kid on the block, neo-Victorianism — despite the editors' protestations that the two were 'doomed to converge, if not to merge, their union almost predestined by their common revivalist premises' (p. 2). Instead, the essays collected here position neo-Victorianism as a twenty-first-century David slaying the Goliath that has become 'Gothic Culture' and retrieving the genre's original radical energies, as it emerged in the eighteenth century.

Whereas gothic used to be the domain of the marginalised, now, in the twenty-first century, it is the Absolute, 'omnipresent, diffused through literature, film and other visual media' (p. 1). But has it over-reached itself, becoming the thing it despised — 'homogenised' and 'mainstream'? Its 'hegemonic power' seems to have robbed it of its original alterity, with Dracula's teeth reduced, in Fred Botting's phrase, to 'candygothic'. As Kohle and Gutleben put it,

It is precisely by exploring the Gothic in relation to the nineteenth-century past and the period's specific cultural field that neo-Victorianism endeavours to circumvent the hypermodern, globalised and uniform presentation of the Gothic, in the process re-kindling an intensely disturbing desire that unsettles norms and redefines boundaries once more. (p. 2)

This is the third volume in Gutleben and Kohle's neo-Victorian series (Vol. 1, *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* [2010]; and Vol. 2, *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender and Sexual and Cultural Politics* [2011]). Split into three parts, 'Imperial Impostures and Improprieties', 'The Horrid and the Sexy', and 'Hybrid Forms', the eleven essays collected here uncover fresh conversations and interdisciplinary research into this relatively new field of study. Each essay, with its pertinent footnotes, provides a solid bibliography for students (both new-comers and the more informed). For instance, Cora Kaplan, Julian Wolfreys, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, Kate Mitchell, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, and Roger Luckhurst are all discussed. Most satisfactorily, the contributors suggest a who's-who of the latest neo-Victorian fiction, giving tempting critical insights and extracts from the works.

A gargantuan forty-eight pages, the introductory essay provides a comprehensive, and, in parts, dense definition and defence of neo-Victorianism. If anything, the editors play up the impurity of neo-Victorianism and its 'retrogressive innovation' (p. 4). It is 'by nature quintessentially Gothic' because it 'tries to understand the nineteenth-century [sic] as the contemporary self's uncanny *Doppelgänger*' [emphasis in original] (p. 4). A textual labyrinth, the introduction is repetitive in its focus on the “(self-) alienated subject of postmodernity — a subject radically 'othered' and 'other' even to itself” (p. 9, quoting from

their earlier work *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma* [2010]). It sometimes reads as if the editors are trying to convince themselves as well as their readers, bringing in repeated references to the ‘other’ and ‘hybridity’ with the rhythm of a sledge-hammer. The reader is not left with enough room to breathe and sit with one concept before another one is thrown at them. For example, an assertion that ‘The “other” in this construction, it should be noted, indicates not a singular alter-ego, but a fragmented *plurality* of versions of otherness’ [emphasis in original] (p. 9) is immediately followed by the notion that

In neo-Victorianism, Gothic is not so much ‘a language, often an a-historicising language, which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present’ (Sage and Smith 1996b: 1), as it allows them to transfer an idea of the (self-) otherness of the *present* into the *past*. [Emphasis in original] (p. 10).

In such jargon-heavy sections, the introduction reads like a literary equivalent to the wall of sound. But do not let this put you off. My criticism does not do justice to the intricacies of the points they make.

Within the collection itself, Kohle and Gutleben have brought together an impressive list of global experts who offer fresh perspectives. The weighty matters covered include history and ethics, cultural memory, the Bildungsroman, sexuality and degeneration, the uncanny or monstrous child, the neo-Victorian variant of imperial gothic which the editors term Eco-gothic and steampunk, as well as urban gothic and sensational crimes (Jack the Ripper appears a few times), and postmodern and postcolonial gothic. In Section I (‘Imperial Postures and Improprieties’), Andrew Smith interrogates historiography in ‘The Limits of Neo-Victorian History: Elizabeth Kostova’s *The Historian* and *The Swan Thieves*’. I enjoyed Cheryl D. Edelson’s ‘Reclaiming Plots: Albert Wendt’s “Prospecting” and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl’s *Ola Na Iwi* (the bones come alive) as Postcolonial Neo-Victorian Gothic’. She provides a salient criticism of Western museum culture and the Enlightenment from a Hawaiian perspective, and breaks down the distinction between graverobbers and scientists and the academy.

Another nugget in this section is Sebastian Domsch’s ‘Monsters against Empire: The Politics and Poetics of Neo-Victorian Metafiction in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*’. Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s hybrid, miscegenic graphic novels prove fascinating ‘examples of the artistic and political potential of the neo-Victorian Gothic, as they combine a visual and verbal steampunk re-imagination of the more monstrous side of the Victorian era with an almost excessive metafictional playfulness and thorough ideological

critique' (p. 98). Domsch explores how Moore and O'Neill blur the line between the monstrous and imperial ideology, as twentieth-century weapons of mass destruction are prefigured in steampunk's revision of late-Victorian technological warfare and idealism. Moving the discussion across continents, Jeanne Ellis discusses the South-African performance artist Leora Farber's *Dis-Location/Re-Location*, highlighting Farber's 'Bodily Metamorphics of Unsettlement'. At the heart of the work, Ellis argues, the doubled self of artist and Victorian settler are merged into a neo-Victorian gothic composite.

In Section II ('The Horrid and the Sexy'), Patricia Pulham revisits Colm Tóibín's 'biofiction' *The Master* (2004). She argues that the ambiguous, sexualised shadow plot of Henry James's novella, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), is spectrally mirrored in *The Master*, with its 'covert and haunting expressions of homoerotic desire' that play with James's 'afterlife' (p. 149). Max Duperry and Sarah E. Maiar both discuss, in different fashions, the *fin-de-siècle*'s shadowy, sensational 'Everyman', Jack the Ripper. They provide historical and literary perspectives on the reality and the myth. The 1888 Whitechapel serial killer created a gothic space in public opinion, and gave 'degeneration' a cross-class (perhaps cross-gender) polymorphic substance. The unsolved murders of prostitutes fuelled the vogue for Sensation and detective fiction. This literary climate at the time linked Edgar Allan Poe with Arthur Conan Doyle. In quintessentially gothic mode, this climate is still with us today, keeping the myth and presence of Jack the Ripper alive at the start of the twenty-first century. Kohlke closes Section II with her anatomising of 'Fantasies of Self-Abjection' in both 'Female Gothic' and its neo-Victorian counterpart. Instead of emancipating female characters, she argues, gothic involves a 'voyeuristic re-victimisation' which 'seems at odds with neo-Victorianism's ethical and liberationist agenda of bearing after-witness to unrecorded traumas of the socially disempowered and marginalised' (p. 222). Kohlke examines these tensions in three, 'as yet critically neglected', novels that she suggests are 'stopping-off points in the evolution of neo-Victorian Female Gothic: Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise-longue* (1953), Maggie Power's *Lily* (1994), and Kate Williams's *The Pleasures of Men* (2012)' (p. 222).

The final three essays in Section III ('Hybrid Forms') focus on the metafictional playfulness and postmodernist, interactive possibilities of neo-Victorian gothic. Van Leavenworth's 'Epistemological Rupture and the Gothic Sublime in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*' examines the re-appropriation of Victorian gothic detective fiction in an 'interactively produced steampunk narrative' set in an insane asylum in a reimagined London in 1885 (p. 254). *Slouching Towards Bedlam* (2003) is an 'Interactive Fiction (IF)' — a

hybrid form of literary narrative and video game. The player/reader uses text commands to control the characters. Focusing on the gothic effects of the sublime, Leavenworth discusses the interface between the character/player (in the fiction) and the player/reader (in solving the puzzle). The race is on in this game/text to contain a mysterious epidemic, the ‘Logos’, that threatens to disrupt both the Victorian and contemporary twenty-first-century systems of classification. The gothic sublime here is the ‘recognition of something incomprehensible which drastically undermines the coherence of one’s self’ (p. 264). The reader becomes infected with the sense of epistemological breakdown and fears that contemporary culture may be haunted by Victorian anxieties. Kym Brindle’s ‘Dead Words and Fatal Secrets: Rediscovering the Sensational Document in Neo-Victorian Gothic’ also plays with narrative unreliability. Drawing on Beryl Bainbridge’s *Watson’s Apology* (1984) and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996) (which fictionalise two real-life murder cases), Brindle interrogates the ‘provenance and transmission of documented events’ (p. 283). As she puts it, rather than unearthing the ‘truth’, neo-Victorian writers ‘revisit infamous crimes to orchestrate an unstable narrative mix of citation and invention that exploits inconsistencies, gaps, and secrets in historical documents that claim to evidence the “awful truths of human existence”’ (p. 280, quoting from Bainbridge). Christian Gutleben fittingly closes the collection with his ‘Reflexion on Humour in Neo-Victorian Gothic’. He suggests that neo-Victorianism is characterised by ‘an intertextual form of irony typical of postmodernism’ (p. 302). This sets up a critical distance between gothic and neo-Victorianism, one which privileges the latter. Neo-Victorian revision, he asserts, allows ‘an ontological reconsideration of the concepts of otherness [...] precisely because humour encourages a reflexive attitude’ (p. 302). The resulting neo-Victorian text becomes a ‘playful hybridisation’ that signifies a ‘new novelistic species’ – fundamentally open-ended and fun (pp. 302, 324).

Overall, I have to admit that Kohlke and Gutleben’s *Neo-Victorian Gothic* is a thorough piece of scholarship which enhances and opens up the fields of gothic, Victorianism, and neo-Victorianism.

*Edwina Keown*

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**David Simmons (ed.), *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft***  
 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

Is H. P. Lovecraft an ‘Outsider No More?’, David Simmons asks in his introduction, so titled to reflect the unease with which the ‘respectable’ academic approaches a writer who has been treated with little more than derision for most of his posthumous career. Simmons’s inquiry sensibly acknowledges that those taking Lovecraft’s work seriously are still on the back foot, while the anthology itself makes a further contribution to the gradual yet steady repositioning of Lovecraft’s work from paraliterary curiosity to canonical credibility: his writing is now to be found on the shelf of your local Waterstones in Oxford University Press, Penguin Classics, and Vintage Classics editions.

The essays contained in this anthology ably demonstrate why this shift in his reputation has occurred in the first place: Lovecraft’s weird tales are an amazingly fecund resource for scholarship, reflecting as they do a squirming, tentacular mess of twentieth-century neuroses, modernist angst, and philosophical shock. Those ignoring Lovecraft’s *oeuvre* based on the unexamined claim that he is a ‘bad writer’ are missing out on an author whose unique take on the weird tale not only precipitated a paradigm shift in genre fiction, but contorted into numerous fantastical and compelling shapes the many anxieties of his age.

The book is divided into two sections, each containing six articles contributed by a variety of authors. Simmons opens Section One, ‘Lovecraft and His Fiction’, with an examination of ‘abject hybridity’ in Lovecraft, especially as applicable to Lovecraft’s racism, which Simmons suggests is a valence of his more fundamental nihilism. Simmons identifies manifold negotiations operating in tales including ‘Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family’ and ‘Under the Pyramids’. These evidence his assertion that when Lovecraft’s indifferentist philosophy, or ‘Cosmicism’, is ‘considered alongside the abject, it becomes an interesting means of suggesting that the ostensibly prejudicial elements of Lovecraft’s fiction warrant a decidedly more complex analysis than to merely be labelled racist’ (p. 19). In the subsequent essay, ‘Lovecraft’s Liminal Women’, Gina Wisker takes a similarly non-reductive look at representations of the female in Lovecraft’s stories, asserting that while there is a ‘fascination with women as a source of disruption and disorder’ in Lovecraft’s work, his focus is (typically) miscegenation rather than simple misogyny (p. 31). As she asserts, female figures consorting with ‘the alien Other’ represent the potentiality for ‘degeneracy and the end of humanity as we know it’ (p. 51). In ‘The Hysterical Female Gothic’, Sara Williams narrows the focus to one tale, ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’, and

thoroughly mines the rich Oedipal seams running through that text's delirious body horror. This opening triptych of essays demonstrates a far more productive engagement with Lovecraft than a mere kneejerk dismissal of his work based on political squeamishness.

In 'Slime and the Western Man', Gerry Carlin and Nicola Allen situate Lovecraft within wider modernism. The justification they use is a suggestive one: 'the dissolution of time' associated with both modernism and with Lovecraft is 'a great leveller, reducing man to imagined or actual oblivion at the turn of the page, and rendering barriers between high and low art, modernist literature and popular genre fiction, the greatest inconsequence of all' (pp. 73, 88). The next two essays are close readings of two of Lovecraft's most celebrated tales. In 'Lovecraft's Mirages', Robert Waugh takes a fine-tooth comb to *At the Mountains of Madness*. He investigates Lovecraft's use of optical hallucination and the phenomenon of 'looming', which disorients polar explorers with darkly foreboding misperceptions of indistinct and exaggerated land masses on the horizon. Donald R. Burleson has an impressive track record in producing perspicacious structural readings of Lovecraft, and here, he takes on 'The Dunwich Horror' with typical ease, accommodating monomyth, cryptography, and category pollution in his discussion, concluding a section that gives a fair indication of the many valences of Lovecraft's fiction.

The second section of the book, 'Lovecraft and His Influence', begins with J. S. Mackey's account of the much-maligned August Derleth's (mis)handling of Lovecraft's immediate posthumous legacy. Derleth — who contorted Lovecraft's rigorously atheistic vision into a cosier, morally centred battle between good and evil — is a bad enough writer to throw Lovecraft's achievements into sharp relief. Having said that, Mackey's close analysis of Derleth's deviations and failures conveys a keen sense that, although Lovecraft he ain't, reading Derleth can still be a great deal of fun. Derleth's efforts precipitated a subsequent cottage industry of 'Mythos' cultural production. In 'Recent Discourse on H. P. Lovecraft', Steffen Hantke identifies some of the ensuing tensions between Lovecraft as 'the product of a community of readers and fans'; Lovecraft as a candidate for academic canonicity (within 'a more broadly emerging valorisation of pulp fiction'); and Lovecraft as the subject of cinematic adaptation (p. 139). Discussing Guillermo del Toro's ill-fated project to translate *At the Mountains of Madness* into a Hollywood blockbuster, Hantke speculates that, had that film been made, the cultural capital of Lovecraft's legacy would once again have been called into question, and that his admirers may have once again been bifurcated between two cultural camps: 'readers of the Library of America on one side, lines of fans at the multiplex box office on the other' (p. 153).

Lovecraft has received far happier treatment in the pages of comic books than at the cinema, as Chris Murray and Kevin Corstophine detail in an audit that ranges from the 1940s to the present day and has an international reach — the Argentinian artist Alberto Breccia's expressionist take on Cthulhu is especially striking (p. 171). Although Lovecraft's interest in music amounted to little more than a fondness for Gilbert and Sullivan, Joseph Norman takes a productive survey of the various Lovecraftian manifestations to be found in the recondite subcultures of extreme metal, while Martyn Colebrook teases out the 'tensions and convergences' apparent between weirds old and 'New' in 'H. P. Lovecraft and China Miéville' (p. 209). Mark Jones closes the volume with a more general discussion of the 'Lovecraftian Being in Popular Culture'. His identification of 'a bleak confirmation of Lovecraft's disdain and distaste for humanity' (p. 241) in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) almost made me want to watch it again — almost, but not quite.

Simmons has done valuable work in assembling and editing this timely collection, given a stamp of authority by veteran Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi's foreword. There are of course lacunae. For example, there is little acknowledgement of the recent philosophical engagement with Lovecraft's work by Graham Harman and others under the auspices of Speculative Realism, and scant evidence that Lovecraft was one of the most productive correspondents of the early twentieth century — an archive as yet largely untapped by the academy. However, such omissions are more evidence of the richness of the source material rather than any shortcomings of this impressively variegated collection. It will hopefully inspire much further, similarly engaged and engaging, analysis of Lovecraft and his work.

James Machin

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**Jim Kelly, *Charles Maturin: Authorship, Authenticity and the Nation***  
(Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011)

Jim Kelly's book on Charles Maturin is an important study, not just of the work of Charles Maturin, but also of gothic literature in general, not least because it is the first academic text to encompass all of Maturin's writings. The book begins with discussions of Maturin's first two novels, *Fatal Revenge* (1807) and *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808), moves into an engagement with his magnum opus, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and culminates with an examination of his final works, *The Albigenses* and *Five Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church* (both published in 1824). Kelly situates Maturin at the heart of the gothic genre,

while at the same time examining how Maturin's work engaged with issues deeply connected to European Romanticism, an area of Maturin scholarship that has been neglected up to this point.

Kelly clearly outlines what he regards as the key themes and issues within Maturin's writings in his introduction to his book: 'Maturin's work returned obsessively to questions regarding the relationship of affective literature to political agency, artistic integrity to commercial gain, and the gendered status of genres — issues that preoccupied writers in Britain, Ireland and Europe in his time' (p. 9). These concerns are highlighted by Kelly throughout his study of Maturin's texts, enabling him to make interesting points about the connections between Gothicism and Romanticism. In particular, Kelly highlights how both artistic movements advocated fluidity in terms of subject formation and rejected notions of fixed or stable identity categories, whether they are national, racial, or sexual (among others).

One of the important influences on Maturin's work was certainly Edmund Burke, and Kelly effectively argues that Maturin's use of affective literature was modelled on Burke's writing style, particularly in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) where the death of Marie Antoinette is described in a highly emotive, almost gothic way. As Kelly argues, 'The modern post-Revolutionary age [...] is one in which aesthetic affect is met with hostility, incomprehension, or banal indifference. Maturin's fiction and drama transposes the Burkean view to Ireland after the Act of Union — for Maturin the post-Revolutionary modern world was inimical to the kind of aristocratic sensibility embodied in his characters' (p. 31). In Kelly's view, Maturin's work plays out the clash between tradition and modernity as one between an aesthetic sensibility and a banal, consumer-driven modern world. Moreover, the book argues that affective, gothic writing can be used as an agent for political change, a contention that marks Maturin out as being an important precursor to Revival writers such as Yeats and Synge.

In addition to placing Maturin very clearly in the literary and political contexts of his time, the text also demonstrates how Maturin's work anticipates and accommodates many of the postmodern theories (primarily, but not exclusively articulated by Judith Butler) concerning how identity is a performative construct. Kelly notes how many of Maturin's characters are martyrs to performance and their sense of self is articulated through theatricality. The disturbing question that is raised by these acts of identity construction is whether they are masks that are being put on willingly or whether the people wearing them feel compelled to do so by the society in which they live. If the latter is the case, then those characters are living what Martin Heidegger would later term 'inauthentic lives'. By

privileging nurture over nature in texts, Maturin is, according to Kelly, portraying both tradition and modernity as being primarily matters of style. Although the book never mentions Oscar Wilde, these arguments implicitly link Maturin to his fellow Anglo-Irishman since Wilde is well known for creating characters who regard any notions of ‘natural’ behaviour as being abhorrent.

Possibly the most compelling chapter in Kelly’s book is the one dealing with *Melmoth the Wanderer*. The arguments concerning how the interdependence of oral and written forms of representation is a major theme in that novel are extremely rich and convincing. Through an examination of the storytelling style of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Kelly demonstrates how the endurance of an oral tradition is only guaranteed through the process of writing down those tales. As he argues, ‘The oral tradition [...] can be seen as not so much outside of a textual, public domain, as relying on that domain to grant its symbolic capital in the national sphere. An amorphous body of stories, songs and practices can only become an “oral tradition”, that is something somehow uncontaminated by a commercial modernity, through its definition in print’ (p. 155). The process of giving validation to oral culture, as outlined by Kelly in this chapter, is exactly what occurs in Maturin’s magnum opus in which verbally delivered narratives are given structure in the form of a novel.

With *Charles Maturin: Authorship, Authenticity and the Nation*, Jim Kelly has provided a very important study of Charles Maturin and also of the period in which he lived and wrote. The broad scope of research and the perceptiveness of critical insight that is evident in this text makes it of value to established Irish Studies scholars and also useful for newcomers to the field. The Charles Maturin that emerges from this text is a major literary figure who powerfully represented in his writings an Ireland that, because of its irrevocable loss of tradition, is in fact one of the ‘only truly “modern” countries in post-Napoleonic Europe’ (p. 193).

Graham Price

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**Matthew J. A. Green (ed.) *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition***  
(Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013)

Alan Moore is the *grande dame* of the graphic novel, shooting to fame in the mid-1980s with his radical reworkings of mainstream comics. Among the most acclaimed of these are his eco-warrior take on DC’s *Swamp Thing* (1984–87), his bold deconstruction of the superhero

genre as a whole in *Watchmen* (1986), and his ultra-violent interpretation of Batman's nemesis the Joker in *The Killing Joke* (1988). Yet despite having made his name taking apart and reassembling superheroes, Moore has subsequently disavowed the genre, criticising it in an interview in *The Guardian* in November 2013 as adolescent and banal. In the last few decades, his work has shifted away from trademarked men in tights to creator-owned properties. The most prominent of these works are those influenced by Victorian history and culture, such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–present), which resurrects a group of characters culled from the annals of nineteenth-century adventure and horror fiction (including Allan Quatermain, Mina Murray, Captain Nemo, and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde) in the service of further supernatural adventure. In the meticulously researched *From Hell* (1989–96), Moore takes on another monster of the Victorian psyche, Jack the Ripper, here imagining the murderer as a man who both embodies and is driven by his culture's fears concerning sexuality and modernity. An eccentric and polarising figure both within and outside of his own creative sphere, Moore is famous for his copious facial hair, avowed anarchism, and claim to be a ceremonial magician and devotee of the Roman snake-god Glycon.

A number of studies have already been published on specific works within Moore's *oeuvre*, including Jess Nevins's series of companions to *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003–04) and the essays edited by Mark D. White in *Watchmen and Philosophy* (2009). *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* is to my knowledge the first broad-ranging study of the author's works, covering not only his graphic novels but also prose fiction such as the novel *Voice of the Fire* (2009), and spoken-word and performance pieces. Its unifying theme of 'the gothic' is one that is naturally prevalent in the work of an author so well-versed in both horror and nineteenth-century literature: even works we might not immediately think of as 'gothic', such as *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* (1982–89), are shown here to be laden with allusions to the genre's tropes and *topoi*.

Although 'gothic' is a usefully broad term, and perhaps one which in contemporary scholarship resists any narrow definition, its flexibility and ideological capaciousness also present a problem. The editor's introductory essay on 'Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition' provides little in the way of firm guidance as to what the term means for the volume and its contributors. A number of key gothic concepts are indeed flagged here in relation to Moore, such as 'unwavering belief in the intercourse between the fictional and the real', the 'occult dimension of writing', 'representations of the sublime and of the abject', and 'unsettling boundaries and destabilising hierarchies' (pp. 4–5). However, the lack of even a basic literary

and critical history of the gothic in this preface means the ensuing collection is made to seem diffuse and decontextualised.

Many of the contributors approach Moorean gothic by highlighting its complex intertextuality and homage to Victorian texts. In his essay, Jochen Ecke considers the writer's evocation of doubleness and *doppelgängers* as part of a tradition going back to J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871), while Michael Bradshaw outlines the complex allusions to medieval and classical legend, as well as Romantic poetry and the American gothic that are threaded through *Swamp Thing*. However, this approach is not always compelling or conclusive. This is especially evident in Brad Ricca's comparison of the thematic and architectural ideas of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) with Moore's early Superman story 'For the Man Who Has Everything' (1985). Similarly, Clare Sheridan positions Moore's *Watchmen* as part of a tradition of 'the philosophical gothic' (p. 179), evoked particularly by Godwin's *St Leon* (1799) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). While there seems little reason to doubt Moore's familiarity with these texts, neither essay fully persuades the reader that these connections are sustained, intentional, or significant.

There is an overall trend in many of the essays towards open-ended discursiveness, and the lack of robust argument makes the volume as a whole feel hesitant and curiously muted. Moore is thanked in the acknowledgements by the editor for his input into discussions concerning the book and its ideas, and perhaps his over-seeing (however distant) proved an inhibiting factor — there is an overwhelming support for his self-image as magisterial, magical auteur and a reluctance to delve into the more contentious issues relating to his writing. Thus Laura Hilton's comparison of the Mina Murray character in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Volumes I and II of Moore and artist Kevin O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–2003), and its 2003 film adaptation, broadly concludes that Moore's version of the character has the most power and agency. Nonetheless, neither in this essay nor elsewhere in the volume is there any more critical engagement with or problematising of gender in Moore's work: for example, his frequent depictions of rape and violence against women, which were the subject of a Twitterstorm and defensive rebuttal from Moore earlier this year (in an interview in the 'Slovobooks' blog), and the eroticisation of adolescents in *Lost Girls* (1991–92).

The essays which are most successful are those which take account of the visual elements of the author's primary medium and consider its multimodality; the ways in which the comic's constituting elements of text and image intersect and combine to generate meaning. As Christian W. Schneider forcefully argues in his essay, the comic page has the

unique ability to represent time and space simultaneously; thus the formally rigid nine-panel layout of *Watchmen* imposes a truly gothic air of claustrophobia and impending doom. Though there are no gargoyle-adorned towers or labyrinthine edifices to be found in 1980s New York, ‘the protagonists are trapped within the more abstract dungeons of history’ (p. 91). Continuing in this vein, Chris Murray provides incisive analysis of the subversive nature of panel fixity and distortion in *From Hell*, relating it to Moore’s interest in psychogeography and the text’s disruption of time within space: here, juxtapositions between past and future within the regular and (seemingly) linear panels evoke how ‘madness becomes mapped onto the environment, distorting it forever’ (p. 224). These two essays drive home the vital point that the comics of Moore and his collaborators do not merely reproduce the nineteenth-century gothic novel in a different format, but utilise the unique visual, textual, and sequential properties of the comic-book narrative to innovate the gothic genre as a whole.

The volume will be of interest to both scholars and fans seeking to inform their understanding of Moore’s work with knowledge of its literary heritage, as well as those invested in the links between writing and magic. There is much of value here: the essays are thoughtful and well-nuanced in their analysis; however, a note of hesitancy and inconclusiveness remains. The overall reluctance of the essayists to state a definitive thesis or to engage with some of the more contentious and problematic elements of Moore’s work is perhaps not surprising — the living author is famously derisive of what he feels to be unlicensed criticism or adaptation of his work. Consequently, a reader who is seeking forthright analysis of the elements of violence and sexuality which so prevail in the Moorean gothic may find themselves wishing the volume had a little more of its bearded icon’s defiant and uncompromising spirit.

*Kate Roddy*

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## FICTION REVIEWS

**Kenneth Oppel, *This Dark Endeavour* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2011)**  
and  
***Such Wicked Intent* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2012)**

‘No human being could have passed a happier childhood than myself. [...] My temper was sometimes violent, and my passions vehement; but by some law in my temperature they were

turned not towards childish pursuits but to an eager desire to learn'.<sup>1</sup> In so few words, Mary Shelley describes the childhood of one of the most influential 'mad scientists' in literature, Victor Frankenstein, in her 1818 novel. But the question of how such a past, spent largely on the bucolic shores of Lake Neuchatel, could lead a man to pursue obsessively the re-animation of an eight-foot-tall<sup>2</sup> body assembled from the parts of several corpses, might understandably give one pause. It certainly gave young-adult novelist Kenneth Oppel food for thought; as he explains on his website:

Now, remember that this is a kid who goes on to dig up corpses, chop them up, sew the body parts back together, jolt them with electricity in the hopes of revivifying them, and creating life from death. Doesn't sound like a very happy youth to me. What might have happened to Victor to lead him to become the 'mad scientist' we all know?<sup>3</sup>

Oppel's duet of prequels to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* attempts to answer this question, by unravelling Victor Frankenstein's youth and the path by which the young man originally becomes interested in alchemy and resurrecting the dead. Oppel's Victor is obsessive, curious, and incurably love-struck, and both *This Dark Endeavour* and *Such Wicked Intent* are fine additions to the contemporary practice of reimagining canonical nineteenth-century literature for young-adult readers. However, as a response to the admittedly modern question of what Dr Frankenstein's psychological motivation is in his fanatical scientific experimentation, Oppel neglects Shelley's complex intersections between scientific rationalism and passionate idealism.<sup>4</sup> In the process, he replaces Shelley's literary homages — to the myths of Prometheus and Pandora, and to the Book of Genesis and Milton's *Paradise Lost* — with his own, occasionally laborious, mythos.

In Oppel's novels, Victor Frankenstein is born with an identical twin brother, Konrad. Konrad is a better dueller than Victor, and much more charming; charming enough, in fact, to win the heart of the twins' childhood playmate, Elizabeth Lavenza (Victor's betrothed and a pseudo-maternal figure in Shelley's text), without Victor's knowledge. Even as Konrad falls ill, Victor believes he has long come to terms with Konrad's superiority, and desperately hunts for a cure for his brother's mysterious illness. He rarely hesitates to embark on

<sup>1</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. by Martin Hindle (New York: Penguin Deluxe Editions, 2007), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Shelley, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Oppel, 'Discussion Guide: This Dark Endeavour', *Kenneth Oppel Official Website*, 2011, <[http://www.kennethoppel.ca/images/This\\_Dark\\_Endeavour\\_Discussion\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.kennethoppel.ca/images/This_Dark_Endeavour_Discussion_Guide.pdf)> [accessed 4 May 2014].

<sup>4</sup> Roslyn D. Haynes, *From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 95.

whatever dangerous expedition is required to find the ingredients of the alchemical cure for Konrad's illness, despite his own partially unrequited love for Elizabeth; Victor repeatedly considers the idea that, if Konrad were to die, he himself would certainly be able to take Konrad's place in Elizabeth's heart. Joined on this hunt by Elizabeth and a surprisingly timorous Henry Clerval, Victor journeys from a secret library deep in the bowels of the Frankenstein château to the laboratory of a nefarious alchemist in Geneva; from the top of an enormous tree growing deep in the Alpine forests to primeval (and watery) tunnels underneath Lake Neuchatel. Oppel pays homage to *Frankenstein*'s gothic tropes through these unearthly, almost abject environments: Victor and his friends repeatedly journey along dark and dusty passageways and secret rooms in which depraved knowledge resides, whether of an alchemical cast or the primordial and dank tunnels carved by nature.

Victor's perilous journeys are all for naught, however: Konrad, despite beginning to recover after being treated with Victor's potion, suddenly dies at the end of *This Dark Endeavour*. Victor, wracked with guilt, vows to 'unlock [...] every secret law of this earth'<sup>5</sup> and bring Konrad back to life. *Such Wicked Intent* follows Victor in his efforts to do so, as he unlocks a secret portal into the spirit world, originally discovered (or perhaps constructed) by his ancestor, Wilhelm Frankenstein. Here, Victor, Elizabeth, and Henry find instructions for creating an artificial body out of mud which Konrad may inhabit upon his resurrection. In their pursuance of the occult, Victor and Elizabeth's respective demeanours change, influenced by the malevolent machinations left behind by Wilhelm to guide the young cousins into the spirit world, and they become consumed by anger and lust. It is not until Victor, Elizabeth, and Henry nearly kill each other that Victor discovers Wilhelm Frankenstein's evil intentions in creating the portal. Victor finally destroys the artificial body and resigns himself to the loss of Konrad — that is, until he witnesses the 'astonishing power' of a lightning blast and learns of electricity, at which point Oppel's narrative ends.

One of Shelley's great strengths in *Frankenstein* was in conjuring a truly ambiguous character in Frankenstein's monster, one who desperately yearns for companionship and love while leaving a swath of violence, sometimes intentional, sometimes quite impulsive, in his wake. Neither Shelley's Frankenstein nor his creation is fully cognisant of the consequences of their actions until it is far too late and the damage has been done. Oppel, drawing inspiration for Victor's character from Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, similarly

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<sup>5</sup> Oppel, *This Dark Endeavour*, p. 298.

creates an ambiguous hero in his texts.<sup>6</sup> Victor bears a deep but complicated love for his brother, and a sexual desire for Elizabeth that he cannot always contain, nor does he wish to. In the character of Victor, Oppel skilfully combines a desperate desire for recognition and independence with an amorous nature and an insatiable curiosity, creating a character who is simultaneously attractive and repellent, an impulsive obsessive with mostly pure intentions.

Set against Shelley's work, however, Oppel's Victor seems remarkably foolish, if not obtuse. Despite all the many, many signs (truly, almost to an absurd degree) warning him against his pursuits — nearly murdering Elizabeth and Henry, nearly losing his own life several times, the catastrophic failure of the artificial body he creates, and even his realisation that all his creations are infused with a spirit of evil — Victor is still intent on his unnatural quest to bring Konrad back to life at the end of the text. Where Shelley's Dr Frankenstein is driven by an all-consuming quest for knowledge without consideration for the moral and physical consequences of his experimentation, Oppel's Victor is guided simultaneously by an unmistakable thirst for adventure and by his obsessive, often manic love for Konrad and Elizabeth. Victor's interest in science is therefore effectively subordinate to his teenage fixations, which often read like an awkward concession to contemporary trends in pseudo-erotic young adult romance literature and are a clumsy imposition when read in the context of the very novel which Oppel aims to illuminate.

Where Shelley infuses both Frankenstein and his monster with a sense of nobility, complicating her critique of scientific knowledge and intellectualism, Oppel's criticism of unrestrained scientific experimentation through Victor is heavy-handed, and too muddled with supernaturalism and the occult to be truly resonant. *This Dark Endeavour* is the more cohesive and successful of the two novels, presenting young-adult readers with a challenging and atypical main character. For young-adult readers transitioning from other texts such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, and dipping their toes into the gothic for the first time, Oppel's texts are a tempting prelude to Shelley's classic work. For both long-time fans and critical readers of *Frankenstein* and other nineteenth-century science fiction, however, the varnish of contemporary psychology, teenagehood, and ill-defined mysticism that are made to coat Shelley's tale in both *This Dark Endeavour* and *Such Wicked Intent* are pleasant diversions, but ultimately fail to elucidate Dr Frankenstein's fascinating character.

Margot Blankier

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<sup>6</sup> Oppel, 'Discussion Guide'.

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**Shirley Jackson, 'The Man in the Woods'**  
*(The New Yorker, 28 April 2014)*

Recently excavated from 'among twenty-six unsorted cartons of her work sent to the Library of Congress' by her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Shirley Jackson's latest posthumous short story, 'The Man in the Woods', is a fitting continuation of her legacy.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, its publication in *The New Yorker* in April is a useful reminder of the role played by magazines and periodicals in the development of the uncanny, gothic, or horrific short story more generally. For much of the twentieth century, writers like Ray Bradbury, Margaret Atwood, Stephen King, and Joyce Carol Oates contributed stories to literary publications like *Collier's* and *Harper's*, and to 'women's' magazines such as *Mademoiselle*, as much as to *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Science Fiction*. Indeed, as attested to by the *Guardian Weekend* 'Winter Fiction Special' (21 December 2013), which featured eerie tales by Lionel Shriver and Jeanette Winterson (among others), as well as by *The New Yorker*'s own back catalogue, the tradition is by no means obsolete. Jackson, a once-famous American writer of dark fiction, whose work was critically and commercially neglected during the latter half of the twentieth century (following her untimely death in 1965), was a major figure in this magazine culture, publishing the bulk of her short fiction (both gothic and realist) in everything from *The New Yorker* and *Playboy* to *Cosmopolitan* and *Women's Home Companion*.

*The New Yorker*'s decision to publish 'The Man in the Woods' (less than a year after they featured the less overtly supernatural 'Paranoia' [5 July 2013], also previously unpublished) therefore effectively recreates the environment in which mid-century readers would originally have encountered Jackson's short fiction. Her surviving family members have worked diligently to gather many of her unpublished and uncollected stories into anthologies: *The Magic of Shirley Jackson* (1966) and *Come Along With Me* (1968), both edited by her husband Stanley Edgar Hyman, and *Just an Ordinary Day* (1996), edited by two of her children, Sarah and Laurence. Doing so opens up the unsettling world of her fiction to a new generation of book-buying readers who might never have come across her work otherwise. At the same time, *The New Yorker*'s miniature Jackson revival acknowledges and extends the platform which, as her biographer Judy Oppenheimer details at some length, paid enough for her writing to allow her to be the primary breadwinner of the

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Jackson Hyman, interviewed by Cressida Leyshon, *The New Yorker*, 26 July 2013, <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-shirley-jackson-2>> [accessed 4 August 2014].

Jackson-Hyman household.<sup>2</sup> I dwell on this publishing tradition at length because, in many ways, ‘the medium is the message’, as Jackson’s contemporary Marshall McLuhan put it in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964); I would argue that the shock value of Jackson’s fiction is heightened by the fragmented, multifarious nature of a magazine’s content. A collection undeniably immerses the reader in the apparently inescapable world of panic and uncertainty conjured up by her writing. However, to come unexpectedly across something like ‘The Lottery’ (Jackson’s infamous tale of small-town ritual sacrifice) in the midst of reviews, non-fiction pieces, and rather more realist tales, is to be plunged into this unpredictable, hostile and alienating world almost without warning, just as her characters so often are.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is Christopher, the male protagonist of ‘The Man in the Woods’, an exception in this regard. We first meet him walking along a path that soon tangles itself in dense woodlands, where a stray cat begins to follow him. Until he comes across a small cottage at the end of the road he’s been following, this is the extent of the information we are given about him, except that he has travelled far, but is unsure about where he has come from, where he is, or where he hopes to go. Two strong, taciturn, rustically clad women unhesitatingly invite Christopher into the house, a stone construction the interior walls of which are covered in strange markings. They introduce him to the ‘host’, who is rather more chatty but equally mysterious, and considerably more welcoming than the protagonist had expected. I won’t spoil the ending, but there are distinct echoes here of the fourteenth-century Middle-English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and of other mythological traditions that are older still.<sup>4</sup> Greek mythology is directly evoked in the form of the women’s names: Aunt Cissy, short for Circe, famous for turning Odysseus’s men into pigs; and Phyllis, which is also the name of a young mythological woman who transforms into a nut tree following her suicide.

As these names seem to imply, the themes of metamorphosis and the preternatural qualities of the natural world are central to the story, which is suggestive rather than explicit in its use of such imagery. The host is called Mr Oakes; the house is surrounded by trees that press ominously against the windows; and all three inhabitants wear green belted robes and go barefoot. These details may alert readers familiar with the central premise of James

<sup>2</sup> See Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> First published in *The New Yorker* on 26 June 1948, the story generated an unprecedented number of complaint letters to the magazine in the weeks that followed.

<sup>4</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) is a useful reference point in this regard.

Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922), or indeed with the Fisher-King motif in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published the same year, as to where the story is going (and that the young man won't be going anywhere else in hurry). Matters come to a head when the protagonist's feline companion wins a battle against the house cat, Grimalkin, prompting an exchange between the women that implies that more is going on here than simply territorial rivalry. Nevertheless, Jackson's narrative voice is unobtrusive, stating facts without overtly directing the reader's interpretation of them. As Laurence Jackson Hyman, Jackson's son, mentions in an interview with Cressida Leyshon in the 21 April 2014 issue of *The New Yorker*, his mother wished her readers to work things out for themselves, rather than holding their hands and explaining what is going on — an authorial stance which demands considerable readerly effort and attention, while augmenting the sense of confusion and unease that permeates her stories.<sup>5</sup>

This effect is produced primarily by means of a notably economical style, and it is through this sparse narration that the fear both described and evoked by the story first emerges. We are told, in a sentence that calls to mind Robert Frost's perennially evocative poem 'The Road Not Taken' (1920), that 'Christopher had come into the forest at a crossroads, turning onto the forest road as though he had a choice, looking back once to see the other road, the one he had not chosen, going peacefully on through fields' (p. 65). We later learn that he had been attending college (presumably a perfectly ordinary mid-twentieth-century American one), but, as he tries to recall why he left, he can only state, 'frankly', '"I don't know *why*." [...] "I don't know *why*," he repeated. "One day I was there, in college, like everyone else, and then the next day I just left, without any reason except that I did"' [emphasis in original] (p. 67). What is especially chilling about this detail is that it suggests that slipping out of the 'everyday' world and into the strange, threatening realm of myth and ritual is something we could find ourselves doing without realising it, and with an ease that is horrifying. At the same time, here, like so many of Jackson's characters, Christopher makes little effort to struggle against either his amnesia or the oddness of his current situation, while the narrative voice itself remains flat, almost affectless, and unnervingly matter-of-fact in the presentation of increasingly frightening events.

Indeed, Christopher's hosts participate actively in maintaining the dearth of background information or explanation that characterises the story, though we are left unsure as to whether this is because they think that their guest already knows exactly what's going

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Jackson Hyman, interviewed by Cressida Leyshon, *The New Yorker*, 21 April 2014, <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-shirley-jackson>> [accessed 4 August 2014].

on. Phyllis ushers Christopher into the house, saying simply, ‘Come along, please. I shouldn’t keep you waiting’ (p. 65). Treating him more like an anticipated guest (and indeed a distinguished one at that) than a random traveller seeking shelter, Phyllis behaves here in a manner that is sufficiently ‘off’ to set alarm bells ringing, but also potentially banal enough to leave us in the same situation as Christopher — doubting our own unease. After he is fed and stays the night, the host shows him around the house, keeping up a patter which extends rather than allays these fears. When Christopher remarks ‘It’s a very old house, isn’t it?’ Mr Oakes responds “‘Very old,’ [...] as though surprised by the question.’ He continues, confusingly, ‘A house was found to be vital, of course’ (p. 68). This is but one example of the way in which the host and the women talk as if Christopher understands completely the situation and the house he finds himself in (they say ‘of course’ with an incantatory frequency), and in his puzzlement and politeness, ‘helplessly’, Christopher never corrects them (pp. 66, 68). It would therefore be misleading to say that he is their prisoner; it is more that he is somehow manoeuvred into imprisoning himself.

For exactly this reason, warmth and welcome are always to be treated with suspicion throughout Jackson’s work: ‘The Lovely House/A Visit’, ‘The Rock’, and ‘The Story We Used to Tell’ all imply this strongly; Eleanor Vance’s seduction by the eponymous Hill House (in *The Haunting of Hill House* [1959]) is perhaps the most familiar example of this trope. The fear is not so much that the warm, welcoming home will turn out to be just the opposite, but that it might be dangerous precisely because it never wants to let you go — because its embrace is forever — and because the very cosy invitingness of Jackson’s haunting houses tricks those who stumble into them into feeling that they belong there. A visit paid to an unknown house is always the most perilous of activities in Jackson’s *oeuvre*. Those who already live in a house are part of its darkness and therefore apparently impervious to it; but those who intrude upon it from without are liable to become victims of its acquisitive nature. Merging this smothering-house motif with the mythic resonances of ‘The Lottery’, this newly unearthed story crystallises many of the concerns central to Jackson’s writing, as Christopher becomes embroiled in an age-old ritual that is indifferent to his status as an individual, seeking only to draw him into its endlessly repeating cycles of death and renewal, violence and shelter, magic and domesticity.

The fact that ‘The Man in the Woods’ pivots around images and narrative patterns familiar both from mythology and from Jackson’s own work does not, however, detract in any way from the pleasure of reading it, nor from the freshness and power of the ways in which she employs her materials. Laurence Jackson Hyman notes in the interview mentioned

above that ‘[Kenneth] Burke often pointed out that, while Stanley was a serious scholar of myth and ritual, Shirley’s work embodied it’.<sup>6</sup> In other words, and as ‘The Man in the Woods’ amply demonstrates, to read her work is to catch a privileged glimpse of what a modern myth might look like.

*Dara Downey*

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence Jackson Hyman, April 2014 interview.

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Jason V. Brock, *Disorders of Magnitude: A Survey of Dark Fantasy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014)

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## FILM REVIEWS

***The Conjuring* (Dir. James Wan) USA 2013**  
 New Line Cinema/The Safran Company

We all have days when we just don't seem to be able to get out of the house. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that at a time when soaring rents and house prices somehow coexist with the continued negative-equity reign of terror, the haunted-house film should be enjoying yet another of its periodic revivals. In James Wan's *The Conjuring*, released in 2013, Roger and Carolyn Perron (Ron Livingstone (a.k.a. 'Burger' from *Sex and the City*) and Lili Taylor) insist that they can't leave the beautiful if ramshackle home that is terrorising and potentially seriously endangering their family of five daughters, because they have too much money tied up in it, a plaint familiar to those who have seen more than one cinematic domestic haunting. Not least because it is allegedly based on a 'true' story, the film directly evokes the iconic *Amityville Horror* (1979), which was based on Jay Anson's 1977 book of the same name, and inspired a string of sequels, along with a remake in 2005, directed by Andrew Douglas.

The dates of the *Amityville* phenomenon are instructive here. The original film formed part of what was arguably the Golden Age of haunted-house films, running from Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961) and Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963) (remade by Jan de Bont in 1999), to Dan Curtis's *Burnt Offerings* (1976), Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), and Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982). After something of a lull in the 1980s and 90s, the decades on either side of the millennium have seen a slow-burning resurgence in such films. The remake of *The Haunting* (also starring Taylor) was followed by *The Others* in 2001, but it wasn't until 2005 that things really began to kick off, with both *The Skeleton Key* and *Hide and Seek* being released in quick succession, while two years later *The Orphanage* (2007, also the year in which the first *Paranormal Activity* film appeared, of which more below) made it clear that this was not simply a trend confined to Hollywood or even to the United States. 2009 saw the release of *The Haunting in Connecticut*, which spawned an awkwardly titled sequel, *The Haunting in Connecticut: Ghosts of Georgia* (2013), both of which are based on a 2002 made-for-TV movie documentary double-bill of more or less the same name. Finally, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* (based on a 1973 made-for-TV film) and *Insidious* came out in 2010; while the latter's sequel, *Insidious: Chapter 2*, appeared in 2013 (both directed by James Wan); and *Chapter 3*, directed by Leigh Whannell, is due out in 2015.

What is striking about this recent revival of haunted-house narratives is that little seems to have changed since the late 1970s. Apart from the token (though undeveloped) nod to financial difficulties (which has been well analysed by critic Dale Bailey in *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* [1999]), *The Conjuring* is, in many ways, closer to homage than a genuine updating of older material.<sup>1</sup> The film is centred around the interactions between the beleaguered Perron family, victims of violent and frightening poltergeist activity in their own home, and Ed and Lorraine Warren, a real-life husband-and-wife psychic-investigating duo played by a rather wooden Patrick Wilson and an uncharacteristically vulnerable Vera Farmiga. The Warrens battle their own inner demons and the byzantine bureaucracy of the Catholic Church to help the family against what they rapidly (so rapidly that one doubts their analytical methods) come to believe is not a haunting as such, but a case of demonic possession. This familiar plot is matched by familiar iconography. The way in which the Perron house is shot almost fetishistically from the front, the focus on the vulnerable family dog, a horrifying swarm of birds, and scenes including vomiting all strongly recall some of the most iconic imagery from *Amityville*, while a TV spewing white noise and a sequence in which one of the young girls vanishes into thin air both function as visual cues, alerting us (if we needed alerting) to the heavy debt that *The Conjuring* owes to *Poltergeist*.

To a certain extent, the film's uncanny (or perhaps simply lazy) reiteration of the plots and visual style of the 1970s haunted-house movie can be attributed to the fact that the 'real-life' events on which it is based took place in 1971. This is indicated via small, easily-missed captions announcing times and places, and a proliferation of long, sharp-finned cars, shaggy men's hair-cuts, and frilly, high-necked blouses. Apart from these vehicular and sartorial details, however, the 1970s iconography is a little vague and easy to overlook; it seems to exist more in order to foster a sort of stylistic prettiness than to produce any kind of carefully detailed realism. The girls' ankle-grazing, quasi-Victorian nighties are particularly noteworthy here; it was difficult not to feel that these were employed opportunistically to make some of the creepier scenes set at night in the girls' bedrooms even more atmospheric and otherworldly. This is not to say that pre-pubescent middle-class girls in early 1970s America *didn't* wear long, white, lacy things to bed, but rather that the film's visual register is designed to evoke a generalised sense of 'spookiness' that it draws from its generic predecessors – from the nineteenth as much as the late twentieth century. Far from being a

<sup>1</sup> See Dale Bailey *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999).

costume drama, then, *The Conjuring* makes use of historical detail so as to create a set of pleasing images. At the same time, this impressionistic exploitation of the past suggests that the film is striving to be more universal, rather than firmly anchored to a specific point in time, and therefore easier for twenty-first-century audiences to relate to and identify with. Yes, fine, this may be 1971, but really, it could be anytime — or anywhere — it could be YOU! This, at any rate, seems to be the general idea, one that is cemented by a certain visual consonance with a rather more recent manifestation of the haunted-house subgenre — the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. Static shots of empty rooms leave us in little doubt as to what is being referenced, while many of the more effective scares in *The Conjuring* come from tiny details relating to material objects and structural elements, as doors, windows, and furniture move, rattle, and creak, small objects fall over, wind chimes tinkle ominously, and so on.

It is in relation to the iconic status of the house itself, however, that the film begins to disintegrate. The visual weight carried by the house as a material and affective space is strangely undermined by the Warrens' insistence that the 'haunting' has nothing to do with it — that people are haunted rather than places, and that the demon will follow the Perrons wherever they go. Similarly difficult to square is the notion that the actual spirits haunting the house are the victims of the demon's evil dominion. We may feel sorry for the little boy named Rory (who becomes the youngest daughter's invisible playmate), and for the spectres of various women in period costumes who have harmed themselves and committed suicide in or near the house, but we are also encouraged to be frightened of them, and to acknowledge that they are dangerous. While this does make some sense, it is by no means clearly explained, an issue which seems to dog the film as a whole. In particular, a creepy Victorian china doll, named Annabelle, plays a major part in the film's initial exposition, and shows up again later at a key moment, without the audience ever being told exactly how the doll fits in to the events taking place in the Perron house. Of course, what's happening here is that material for a sequel is being set up, and lo and behold, *The Conjuring 2: The Enfield Poltergeist* is in production and due to be released in 2015, while a spin-off, called *Annabelle* and centring around the doll, is due out later this year. I would not want to imply that including 'teasers' for future films isn't a legitimate storytelling technique, but it leaves this film feeling rather truncated. Rather than fostering a sense of mystery and of phenomena too vast to fit comfortably within a single text, it is as if *The Conjuring* has been so ruthlessly edited that its coherence has suffered, or indeed that these elements were simply forgotten about by the filmmakers, who never bothered explaining them in a satisfactory manner.

This is not to say, however, that the film is without any redeeming qualities. There are some generally effective scares; it's quite entertaining, if not especially profound or groundbreaking; and it really does look quite lovely. However, while I for one will certainly be watching the sequels and spin-offs, even just the knowledge that these loom ominously in the not-too-distant future serves to heighten the overwhelming sense that we've seen it all before.

*Dara Downey*

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***Only Lovers Left Alive* (Dir. Jim Jarmusch)** UK/Germany 2013  
 Recorded Pictures Company/Pandora Film/Sony Pictures Classics  
 (This review contains spoilers)

*Only Lovers Left Alive* is Jim Jarmusch's latest foray into genre filmmaking, after the equally idiosyncratic 'psychedelic Western' *Dead Man* (1995) and urban Samurai thriller *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), and casts the vampire as a typically offbeat, world-weary Jarmuschian outsider. In its twin protagonists Eve (Tilda Swinton) and Adam (Tom Hiddleston), the film also manages to revitalise the trope of the vampire lover, so often of late dominated by the saccharine and sanitised legacy of the *Twilight* school. Centuries-old and still in love, the duo make for the most memorable vampire couple in recent cinema, and it's well worth spending two meandering hours in their company.

The film opens with the pair worlds apart, Eve in Tangiers, where she spends her time reminiscing with fellow vampire Christopher Marlowe (John Hurt), and Adam in Detroit, holed up in the decaying house in which he records the music (analogue, naturally) that has brought him unwanted fame and prompted him to retreat from a wider world that he regards as being populated by 'zombies'. Variously disguised as Dr Faustus or Dr Caligari, he makes nocturnal trips to purchase blood from Dr Watson (Jeffrey Wright), but otherwise his only communication is with Ian (Anton Yelchin), who helps procure the precious vintage guitars and recording equipment with which Adam surrounds himself. Ian also proves to be adept at sourcing more hard-to-get items, such as the wooden bullet with which Adam plans to shoot himself, having fallen into one of his (frequent) spells of existential despair. One video-chat later, Eve has packed some essential reading material (including David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Beckett's *Endgame*, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) and is on the first night-plane out of Tangiers to Detroit in an effort to restore her depressed lover to more sanguine spirits. Once reunited, the pair talk about all sorts of things, from the fate of humanity to the

mysteries of the mushroom ('we don't know shit about fungi'), amuse themselves with music and ice-pops made of blood, and wander the post-industrial wastelands of Detroit.

All of this transpires at a pace that may admittedly prove frustrating for some viewers, but for me *Only Lovers Left Alive* it is at its best during such sequences; in fact, it enters far more problematic territory precisely when it deviates from this rhythm. This is especially evident in the introduction of a third vampire Ava (Mia Wasikowska), who demands more obvious entertainment than Adam and Eve have sought thus far. Her arrival precipitates a predictable turn of events, when she seduces and kills the unfortunate Ian, and inadvertently risks drawing attention to the wafer-thin nature of the plot. Yet the film ultimately finds its way out of this potential pitfall, when Ava's actions force Adam and Eve to flee back to Tangiers, where they resume their wanderings, albeit faced with the added difficulty that they have now lost all access to a reliable supply of blood to sustain them. The more Hiddleston and Swinton share the screen, the better, because the film lives and breathes through their elegant interactions with one another, and in many ways it presents a portrait of a relationship that is as intimate and low-key as Richard Linklater's triptych of films *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013) — just with more blood-drinking.

Swinton's Eve in particular is a delight, humouring Adam out of his doldrums, and revitalising him in the most mundane of ways, such as when she encourages him to join her in a dance to Denise LaSalle's 'Trapped by a Thing Called Love', a sequence that is both effortlessly cool and genuinely charming. It also points to another significant aspect of the film, which is its use of music; this includes original contributions from Jarmusch's own band SQÜRL, and a diverse list of other artists and tracks (including Charlie Feathers's rockabilly classic 'Can't Hardly Stand It'). The music within the film functions as a soundtrack to persistent musings about the nature of art and the artist, and their resilience (or otherwise) with the passing of time; significantly, the Christopher Marlowe with whom Eve ruminates in Tangiers is ultimately revealed as the 'true author' of Shakespeare's plays, and Adam has chosen to settle in the original hometown of Motown, the record label that was previously as prominent a feature of Detroit as the city's once-thriving automotive industry.

The version of Detroit that is featured in the film is shot through a lens that implies it is the ideal landscape both to engender and reflect Adam's ennui. In this, it clearly recalls the work of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre in their hauntingly beautiful photography series 'The Ruins of Detroit', and the film as a whole boasts similarly striking cinematography by Yorick Le Saux (collaborating with Jarmusch for the first time; it's also worth noting that this is Jarmusch's first experiment with digital film-making). Adam and Eve make their way

through spaces that provide visible monuments to the kind of urban decay associated with the city's economic downturn, including a visit to the Michigan Theatre, once an ornate movie-house in the Renaissance Revival style, now (among other things) a car park. Shot for shot, *Only Lovers Left Alive* is visually stunning, and nothing embodies this more than the sight of Adam and Eve standing back-to-back, his black hair and clothes contrasting with her platinum hair and white clothing, as they gaze up at the former glory of the Michigan Theatre.

In the end, *Only Lovers Left Alive* is exactly what you'd expect from a Jim Jarmusch vampire film: meditative and unhurried, wryly humorous and culturally allusive — and utterly beguiling. In fact, it turns out that the vampire makes for a curiously appropriate Jarmuschian figure, isolated and out-of-time. Its pair of undead lovers may have (quite literally) seen it all before, but they've ultimately provided a fresh take on the vampire genre.

*Jenny McDonnell*

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***Evil Dead (Dir. Fede Alvarez)* USA 2013**  
Studiocanal/Ghost House Pictures

Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* franchise, which until last year comprised three films and a musical, was recently expanded to include a modern-day remake of the very first film, released originally in 1981. Though produced by Raimi, along with Bruce Campbell (who starred in all the original films), this modern retelling is directed by up-and-coming sensation Fede Alvarez, who came to the attention of the producers after releasing a short film entitled *Ataque de Pánico! (Panic Attack!)* on YouTube in 2009. Although this trend to remake horror films can often seem pointless at best (as in another remake from last year, for example, Kimberly Pierce's widely panned *Carrie*), *Evil Dead* is a rare exception. This is due primarily to the fact that it is not so much a simplistic retelling, as it is a brave reimaging. In the words of its lead actress, Jane Levy, 'it's the same intention, but with a different story'.<sup>1</sup>

The basic premise of this film is much the same as its infamous predecessor: a group of young, attractive adults leave the city to stay in a remote cabin in the woods, and horror ensues. There they find a cursed grimoire and accidentally awaken an ancient, demonic force,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Erik Piepenburg, 'New Ugliness in a Little Cabin of Horrors', in *The New York Times*, 27 March 2013, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/movies/the-evil-dead-is-reimagined.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/movies/the-evil-dead-is-reimagined.html?_r=0)> [accessed 1 November 2013].

which gradually possesses and kills them, one by one. The most immediate difference in the remake is that the hero of the original trilogy, Ash (Bruce Campbell), has been replaced by a woman named Mia (Jane Levy). As a recovering heroin addict who requires isolation to overcome her addiction, she provides an unusually credible reason for their continued stay in the woods. Interestingly, while she embodies elements of the first female victim of the 1981 film, Cheryl (Ellen Sandweiss), she is additionally cast as Carol J. Clover's Final Girl. The first in the group to come to harm, she is placed in the same ghastly scenario as her ill-fated predecessor in what *The Hollywood Reporter* has termed 'that infamous tree rape'<sup>2</sup> — a scene that has by now become synonymous with the franchise due to its shocking nature (or indeed Nature). There was some discussion during preproduction as to whether this scene was entirely necessary, but in the end it was deemed essential to the remake. Indeed, at the 2012 New York Comic Con, fans were described as 'rabid' in their enthusiasm upon hearing of its inclusion.<sup>3</sup> (Such voraciousness is keenly — if indirectly — addressed in Drew Goddard's film of the previous year, *The Cabin in the Woods*, which starkly underlines the questionable nature of a bloodthirsty audience.) The scene, as it is restaged here, is crucially altered by the fact that Mia goes on to become the Final Girl. She is endowed with an agency denied to the putative heroine of the original film, therein transforming the narrative into one of rape revenge. This reimagining of arboreal molestation, although arguably more explicit (Alvarez makes much of the branch as a squirming phallus), is in fact made less gratuitous: the woman goes on not only to survive, but to enact revenge. The inclusion of this violent scene can further be justified by the fact that it engages with the precarious and often rapacious relationship between Nature and humanity. In John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), the character Lewis portentously declares 'we're gonna rape this whole god-damned landscape', thereby setting up the subsequent assault of a member of his party by 'wild' locals as somehow the revenge of Nature itself. *Evil Dead* may be seen as a literalisation of this retributive assailment by a vengeful environment — and surely such an idea is considerably more frightening today (in light of the widespread awareness of environmental crisis) than it was even thirty years ago. 'That infamous tree rape', therefore, is indeed wholly essential and serves as an aggressive precursor to the ensuing violence.

<sup>2</sup> J. D., 'Evil Dead: Film 2013', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 11, 22 March 2013, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Kelsea Stahler, 'Evil Dead Remake Softens Tree Rape Scene, but does that Make it Okay?', <http://www.hollywood.com/news/movies/55006938/evil-dead-tree-rape-scene-remake-vs-original?page=all> [accessed 7 August 2014].

The violence in this film will certainly not disappoint those looking for a gore-fest: we have split tongues, scalding showers, and at one point it quite literally rains blood.<sup>4</sup> We are given more of an explanation here than in the earlier films for the origin of these grotesqueries, as they are cast as explicitly satanic. The film therefore is more plainly rendered as one dealing with demonic possession. Primarily, however, it falls (along with the originals) under the heading of 'backwoods horror'. The 1981 film, argues Erik Piepenburg, was a 'prototype' for this subgenre and so its modern reimagining, over thirty years later, affords us an intriguing insight into its evolution.<sup>5</sup> According to Bernice M. Murphy, backwoods horror films — along with slasher movies — are the most 'formulaic' in horror, and with the likes of *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Cabin Fever* (2002), and *Antichrist* (2009) to name a few, it is clear that these repetitive narratives enjoy a continuing popularity.<sup>6</sup> In contrasting the *Evil Dead* of 2013 with the film made back in 1981, it becomes clear that the core elements intended to frighten and entertain remain largely the same. What *has* changed is that now we are asked to question exactly *why* we are so frightened and amused by what is essentially the same story, told again and again. With the increasing popularity of postmodern meta-horror, it would seem that such questions are rather in vogue. It is significant therefore that *Evil Dead* was released within a year of *The Cabin in the Woods* — a film that openly acknowledges its debt to the franchise and plainly interrogates this persistent appetite for backwoods violence. While *Evil Dead* is less explicitly self-conscious than *The Cabin in the Woods* and more conventionally coherent, it nonetheless encourages audiences to question the treatment of gender, violence and Nature in these backwoods nasties. As with any film that is remade, we must consider the cause for its resurgence; we must interrogate the climate in which it again becomes relevant. Jennifer Brown, for example, has argued that remakes of 'hillbilly' horrors have coincided significantly with the ascension of George W. Bush.<sup>7</sup> While we can only begin to speculate on the rise of the ecoGothic as we are caught in its midst, it would seem reasonable to presume that its prevalence is due to an increasingly nervous understanding of Nature. As we knowingly destroy our natural environment, it seems only fitting that subgenres such as backwoods horror should continue to fascinate the popular imagination: in short, we need to *see* this nightmare. In remaking *The Evil Dead*, Alvarez allows us to do just that, and ultimately provides us with an innovative take on a very old tale,

<sup>4</sup> Indeed *Evil Dead* now holds the record for the most fake blood used in the making of a feature film, overtaking that held by *Dead Alive* (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Piepenburg, 'New Ugliness in a Little Cabin of Horrors'.

<sup>6</sup> Bernice M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 12.

which confirms that this story is just as frightening now as it ever was — and perhaps even moreso.

*Elizabeth Parker*

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***Jug Face* (Dir. Chad Crawford Kinkle) USA 2013**

Modernciné

(This review contains spoilers)

*Jug Face* (2013) is an indie reimagining of the well-trodden ‘hillbilly horror’ genre (for example, *The Hills Have Eyes* [1977/2006]), and marks the feature-length screenwriting and directorial debut of Chad Crawford Kinkle. It features a unique concept together with a surprisingly cohesive visual narrative and introduces themes of ritualism, sex, and morality, all of which sets the stage for one of the most original pieces of contemporary horror in recent memory. It takes place in the isolated woods of Tennessee, and is centred on a group of people who are governed over by the forces residing in a surreptitious pit, located in the centre of the rural community. Simply referred to as ‘The Pit’, this murky hole grants the remote populace the power to heal disease, in exchange for ritualistic human sacrifices. Villagers are selected arbitrarily by the spirits (dubbed ‘The Shined’) who reside within the pit and travel throughout the surrounding forest. The wanton bloodlust of these malevolent forces is foretold by a pre-determined oracle, Dawai (Sean Bridgers), who is ordained by the pit and falls into a trance when it calls for blood. The oracle unconsciously crafts the likeness of the proposed sacrifice into a clay ‘Jug Face’, thus deciding the fate of the villager who will be offered to the pit in a graphic blood-letting ritual (in which the victim’s jugular vein is severed). If this ritual is not completed, the indiscernible forces that reside in the pit threaten to exact their revenge by slaughtering villagers at random.

The film commences with saucer-eyed protagonist Ada (Lauren Ashley Carter) embroiled in an incestuous act with her brother, juxtaposed against brief glimpses of the ominous pit, alongside the portentous sculpting of a clay visage. We are thereafter introduced to Ada’s fellow villagers and thus given a glimpse into the far-right Southern moral compass by which they live. Village politics demand virginity in order to facilitate the arranged marriages of younger townsfolk, at the risk of severe punishment if a woman is found to be sullied upon being ‘joined’. We soon learn that Ada has become pregnant due to her

incestuous affair, when we witness her staining her underwear with red pottery glaze in order to hide the pregnancy from her mother (who routinely checks for signs of her daughter's menstrual cycle). During a trip to her companion Dawai's shack, Ada discovers a newly crafted jug face with a stark resemblance to her own visage. Realising that she is pre-ordained to be the next sacrifice, Ada promptly conceals the jug face in the forest to protect her unborn child, thus creating the catalyst for the ensuing series of events and the subsequent awakening of the pit's murderous tendencies.

As 'The Shined' emerge from the depths of the pit in order to seek revenge against Ada's family and fellow townsfolk for tampering with their design, random slaughter ensues at the hands of the spirits. Now able to see through the eyes of 'The Shined', Ada falls into a trance-like state and witnesses them as they rove through the forest and wreak murderous havoc upon her peers. The blame for this massacre eventually falls upon Dawai, targeted by the now frenzied villagers, for failing to predict the correct sacrifice and crafting a fake replacement jug face in place of Ada's (who has not yet disclosed to him that she has been chosen by the pit).

The actions of the inhabitants of the village prove to be the most petrifying circumstances that Ada faces, with supernatural elements only further accentuating the stereotypical conservative value system of Bible-Belt America. The conservative nature of the villagers is made more obvious by their obeisance to the supernatural authority of an all-seeing omniscient antagonist — that is, 'The Shined'. The paranormal leanings of the plot, however, appear somewhat problematic and dependent on flourishes of low-budget CGI. This is specifically evident during a scene involving an extended dialogue between Ada and one of 'The Shined', where it is revealed that her grandfather previously committed a similar act of resistance, when he hid his wife's jug face in order to prevent her own sacrifice. The depiction of the physical form taken by 'The Shined' is far less striking than the looming shots of the pit itself, or of its vengeance on the villagers, when it revokes its healing powers and instead begins flaying those who submerge themselves in its waters in search of respite from illness.

As circumstances gradually worsen for Ada and Dawai, they face violent persecution, forcing them to flee from their disintegrating community, and leaving Ada conflicted about accepting her fate. Will she flee the village, with the blessing of a member of 'The Shined', or agree to the pit's demands and sacrifice herself in order to save Dawai from a ghastly death in her stead? Although she had earlier attempted to rebel against the destiny that the pit had pre-determined for her, she ultimately chooses to conform to that fate in order to rescue

her friend, and the conclusion of the film stresses Ada's decision to honour the traditions of her ill-informed society. In this way, Ada is harshly punished for defying her designated role, at the expense of the oppressors, who she once considered her equals. The film (which bears comparison in some respects with British films such as *The Wicker Man* [1973]) depicts a fictitious ritualistic belief system in order to critique conservative moralism in ways that seem like a very relevant assessment of certain regions of America, which have often appeared wholeheartedly resistant to modernity and change. It urges us to condemn this mentality, while emphasising that people caught in its confines are unable to escape from it.

Overall, *Jug Face* makes a highly successful commentary upon the hillbilly horror subgenre that it clearly sets out to redefine. The isolated wilderness of *Deliverance* (1972) is successfully merged with the more visceral elements of the contemporary version of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) to extremely successful effect. However, *Jug Face* defies the norms of its genre in its introduction of moral gray areas — the hillbillies it depicts are victims of the pit that governs over their existence, as opposed to being cast as the clear antagonists (as in the aforementioned films). This original take by Crawford Kinkle sets the film apart from its predecessors in the subgenre: it is wholly innovative in terms of narrative and its robust characterisations.

*Oisin Vink*

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**Would You Rather (Dir. David Guy Levy) USA 2012**  
IFC Films

For most, the short-lived commercial success of torture porn in the mid-Noughties had tapered off when the *Saw* series was finally put out to pasture following the release of *Saw 3D* in 2010. However, if recent reports come to fruition that Lionsgate are developing an eighth instalment, this genre mainstay could well be called out of retirement for one more blood-soaked payday. So, while the release of *Would You Rather* in 2013 arrives somewhat too late to the torture-porn party to be considered a legitimate genre cornerstone like *Saw* (2004) or the *Hostel* series (2005, 2007, and 2011), it suggests that for some, the torture-porn flame still burns brightly (or at least flickers in a limited release/straight-to-DVD kind of way), and acts as a stopgap measure to sate audiences' gleefully sadistic appetites in the intervening period. *Would You Rather* is something of a genre offspring, as it approaches torture through a combination of the 'game' narrative of *Saw* with the gratification of the elite

of *Hostel*, centring around a contest in which players must decide between two equally undesirable and possibly lethal choices for the entertainment of a wealthy aristocrat.

The plot focuses on Iris (Brittany Snow), who, finding herself in financial desperation, accepts an invitation from the affluent stranger Shepard Lambrick (Jeffrey Combs), to attend a dinner-party at which she will play a game against seven other guests, potentially to win medical care for her sick brother. Upon arrival, the group are joined by the flamboyant Lambrick and his obnoxious son Julian (Robin Lord Taylor), and are served a lavish meal of foie gras and rib-eye steak by butler Bevans (Jonny Coyne). It is here that the sinister intentions of what is to come begin to unfold, when Lambrick offers and successfully secures a number of morally bankrupt deals with several of his guests. First, he persuades vegetarian Iris into eating meat for ten thousand dollars, before goading Conway (John Heard), a recovering alcoholic of sixteen years, off the wagon with an enticing bounty of fifty thousand dollars. When Conway questions Lambrick's motivation for acting in this way, his response is, 'Because I want to help you.' These exchanges of tense, faux-moral dialogue, coupled with Lambrick's modus operandi of character assassination, are arguably the most uncomfortable in the film. He exploits his position of power as leverage over the players to uncover their weaknesses and publicly humiliate them, in scenes that linger in the memory more than any of the film's depictions of physical harm, as the audience must endure the spectacle of a person selling their integrity for a price — however high it may be.

Following the meal, Lambrick outlines the rules of 'would you rather' before giving one final chance for people to withdraw from playing. Thus begins a game involving assorted methods of injury infliction, with Lambrick acting as master of ceremonies. The structure of the competition provides increasingly problematic ethical dilemmas, such as when high-stakes gambler Peter (Robb Wells) must choose between lashing Iraq veteran Travis (Charlie Hofheimer) with an African whipping staff, or potentially fatally stabbing paralysed Linda (June Squibb) in the thigh with an ice pick. The characterisations of Travis as a serviceman and Bevans as a former MI5 interrogator are especially revealing, as they tap into the cultural anxiety surrounding supposedly permissible torture which contextualised the genre's rise during the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay scandals in the early to mid-2000s. This is most evident when Julian thanks Travis for his courageous service, but then exacts his revenge for daring to question him. What follows is Travis's prolonged torture as he sacrifices himself repeatedly by bearing any potential pain meant for other players. Without clear motivation for his overall participation, Travis becomes a literal whipping boy, evoking sympathy as a shell-shocked soldier now punished by those he protects.

While certain indications signal the dinner party to be an annual occurrence, such as the presence of Dr Barden (Lawrence Gilliard Jr.) who is a former winner and now supplies the game with new contenders, Lambrick's original reason for hosting these gatherings is unclear, a thread of the plot that would have benefited from further exposition. A number of possible clues are offered through Lambrick's son Julian, who is presented as a passive apprentice being inducted through observation. We learn that not only has Julian lost his mother but that he has acted out in some undisclosed manner at the previous year's game. Apart from these intriguing hints, however, we receive scant information which might help the audience further to situate this character within the loosely outlined backstory, rendering the film's premise vague to an extent that is distracting and redundant.

Conversely, the film's highlight is undoubtedly Combs's portrayal of Lambrick's villainous grandiosity, which is complimented by Bevans's dry English wit and Julian's spoiled smugness. These personalities serve the high-class, extravagant atmosphere of *Would You Rather*, primarily created through the luxurious mansion setting — a far cry from the grimy bathroom, or later industrial warehouse locations of *Saw* for example. This sophisticated tone, juxtaposed against the despair of the underprivileged characters, resonates particularly well in the recessionary culture within which this film appeared, accentuating the grotesque excess of the seemingly 'untouchable' upper classes alongside the less wealthy, who are merely their playthings. This climate of hardship is initially introduced by the tantalisingly hypnotic musical motif accompanying Iris's job interview, which is especially powerful and effective through the melody's subtle ambiguity. It is first heard in this opening scene, connoting a sense of cautious optimism in her attempt to secure employment, but later returns in a moment of bleak reflection for Iris, and so provides menacing foreshadowing in a film which emphasises the psychological experience of torture over the sometimes outlandishly intricate traps featured in its generic predecessors.

It might be easy to dismiss *Would You Rather* as a late attempt to cash in on the financial success that torture porn enjoyed during its heyday. Nonetheless, its comparatively restrained depictions of torture may leave some gorehounds (particularly those accustomed to the elaborate traps of the *Saw* variety) somewhat unsatisfied. Yet it is precisely here that the film distinguishes itself, by providing a fascinating alternative, one which expands the genre by downplaying the level of explicit on-screen physical cruelty in order to expose the ethical predicaments faced when an individual is forced, under coercion, to choose the lesser of two evils. *Would You Rather* acts as an exploration of compliance and how people assimilate themselves into the lexicon, rules, and parameters of their own captivity, becoming agents of,

and actors in, the performance of their own torture. Thematically, *Would You Rather*'s idea of 'decision-making in its rawest form' may not resurrect torture porn; however, in fusing the iconography of its antecedents with such heavy-hitting moral concerns, the film certainly makes a thought-provoking contribution to an ailing sub-genre.

Gavin Wilkinson

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## TELEVISION REVIEWS

### *Lost Girl: Season 3* (Syfy 2013)

'My love carries a death sentence.'  
—Bo in *Lost Girl*

*Lost Girl* is a female-led Canadian supernatural television series, created by Michelle Lovretta, which was first broadcast by Showcase on 12 September 2010. The show became the highest-rated Canadian-scripted series premiere of all time on Showcase and, following its consistent delivery of stellar ratings, following its consistent delivery of stellar ratings, further seasons are in the works. The show revolves around a succubus named Bo, who feeds (during sexual encounters) on the energy of humans, sometimes with fatal results. Loath to embrace the harsh hierarchy of the Fae, the supernatural clan system into which she has been born, Bo is a fiercely independent renegade who takes up the fight for the underdog (usually humans) while searching for the truth about her own mysterious origins. Ultimately, because of her succubi abilities, she cannot escape the fact that she *is* one of the Fae, a group made up of multiple races of supernatural entities who align themselves either with the Light or the Dark. Bo struggles to remain neutral, a choice which allows her to vacillate from one side to the other at will, particularly when in search of information, though doing so often places her in grave danger. With leather-clad ferocity, Bo therefore explores a world teeming with sex, death, swordplay, and mythical creatures, rendering *Lost Girl* a satisfying concoction of dark romanticism, urban terror, and gleeful gothicism, of suspense, horror, humour, and eroticism.

Set in downtown Toronto (although not explicitly), the show is largely focused on a deeply divided society (somewhat similar to that depicted in *True Blood* [2008–present]) and on the horrors that pervade the show's supernatural reimaging of the city, lingering as it does on abandoned urban lofts and post-industrial wastelands. Anna Silk gives an impressive and meaningful performance as Bo, while well supported by the consistently spirited sidekick

Kenzi (Ksenia Solo); the ever-sensitive rogue detective Dyson (Kris Holden-Reid); and her intermittent love interest, scientist Dr Lauren Lewis (Zoie Palmer). What's more, beneath the superficial playfulness that permeates much (but by no means all) of the screen time, the show actively confronts issues of racism (by exploring the tensions between different supernatural races), slavery (some humans are owned by the Fae), and class struggle (several species are subjected to discrimination due to an inflexible class system).

In typical gothic fashion, *Lost Girl* is about family, albeit not the nuclear-family togetherness of blood relatives, but the messy, dysfunctional, incestual dynasty that occurs between friends and acquaintances. Steeped in Celtic iconography, the 'Dál Riata', a Fae-exclusive Irish pub, frequently functions as a welcoming and neutral ground, where the Fae on both sides come to escape the cannibalism, curses, insanity, and mind control of everyday life. Indeed, the Fae society is on the brink of upheaval in Season 3, as new alliances forged between the Light and Dark are broken. While the wicked Morrígan (leader of the Dark Fae) attempts to execute Bo, Kenzi is abducted by a crazed Kitsune (a homicidal human-fox hybrid). All the while, scientist Lauren is being exploited by selfish humans who seek to harness her research on Fae genetics for evil. Brilliantly paced and with a killer cliffhanger, one horrific highlight of the penultimate episode sees Dyson forced to cage-fight to the death with a ravenous wolf-man to the delight of a blood-thirsty audience. While Bo must prepare to endure an evolutionary Fae rite of passage, which finally enables her to explore her past, she alternates between feelings for both Dyson and Lauren as, despite being a murderous succubus, she has a penchant for monogamy, albeit a fleeting one.

*Lost Girl* builds on elements of fantasy and horror, covering some well-trodden territory in the process, situating itself as it does as part of the supernatural crime-drama subgenre, alongside *Angel* (1999–2004), *Medium* (2005–2011), *The Ghost Whisperer* (2005–10), and *Tru Calling* (2003–05). Bo's own murderous tendencies, as well as the horrifying manifestations of the overarching mythology, which includes The Norn (an ancient and powerful Fae capable of granting supplicants their innermost desires, but for a heavy cost), renders the show weighty. Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) or *Supernatural* (2005–present), *Lost Girl* explores the burden of knowing that the supernatural exists and the responsibility that comes with it. The first three seasons offer original narratives, intriguing mythology, multifaceted character development, moral ambiguity, and an array of endangered languages (particularly Goidelic). The show also emphasises the diversity of sexuality and gender (advancing LGBT themes), yet refrains from demonising and/or fetishising any particular group. Sexual orientation, such as Bo's bisexuality, is rendered a

non-issue within the programme's digetic frame, as is the gender identity of other characters, such as the pansexual, cross-dressing Dark Fae Vex.

For viewers who enjoy teetering on the edge between the playful elements of urban fantasy and the sombre, seedy cityscapes of the urban gothic, who have a keen interest in mythology, and a penchant for leather and/or shades of steampunk style, *Lost Girl* is remarkably enjoyable. It is an edgy, witty, adult, and female-centred urban fantasy series, which extracts its horrors from a dangerous dance of supernatural politics. Bo's steadfast stance — to reject the obligatory choice between the Dark and the Light Fae — results in her remaining unaligned as she falls prey to the heavy consequences of a Manichean political system in which the majority rules. It may not be groundbreaking television, but it could function as sufficient padding for those with a Buffy-shaped hole in their hearts.

*Victoria McCollum*

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***True Detective: Season One* (HBO, 2014)**  
(This review contains spoilers)

Right at the end of the twentieth century, the start of a new so-called 'Golden Age' of television coincided with the arrival of Tony Soprano, the first in a long line of anti-heroes that have often dominated the 'quality television' of the last fifteen years. From *Mad Men*'s Don Draper to *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, these conflicted and morally dubious male characters have shot, slept, and swindled their way to widespread critical acclaim and plaudits, and can now count among their ranks two new members in the protagonists of *True Detective*. Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson) prove to be very 'difficult men' indeed as they undertake a murder investigation in Louisiana in this slice of southern gothic.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of eight episodes (each written by Nic Pizzolatto and directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga) the story of the case and the pair's lives are unravelled in a narrative that flashes back and forward across several timelines. Rust philosophises and Marty philanders, and both men are forced to take a good long look at themselves as they stare into a Nietzschean abyss, but eventually the case gets solved (if not entirely resolved, ultimately).

<sup>1</sup> The term is borrowed from Brett Martin's 2013 book about the brand of anti-hero that has characterised such shows as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*, as well as the creative minds behind them.

It is in its narrative structure that the initial strength of *True Detective* lies, allowing it to reveal its various secrets by degrees in the course of its (re)telling. The first episode establishes the format that most of the series will follow, in which Rust and Marty are interviewed (separately) by two new detectives, who are tasked with solving a murder that bears a marked similarity to an earlier case. Back in 1995, the younger Rust and Marty had investigated the case of murdered prostitute Dora Lange, found naked in a field (apart from a pair of antlers perched atop her head) in a crime scene that suggested possible occult shenanigans were afoot. Since that time, the two men have become estranged, after an inexplicable falling out in 2002 set them on very different routes out of the police force. Now separated from his long-suffering wife Maggie (Michelle Monaghan), Marty has set himself up as a private investigator, while an alcoholic and worse-for-wear Rust has recently resurfaced in Louisiana and is determined to solve the Dora Lange case once and for all. The case has absorbed Cohle in the years following the initial discovery of Lange's body, as he (and Hart) uncover clues that point to a serial killer who has a penchant for iconography borrowed from Robert W. Chambers's 1895 collection *The King in Yellow*, and possibly a broader conspiracy that reaches into the upper echelons of Louisianan society itself. By the end of the final episode, not all of these loose ends will be tied up, but this is in keeping with the tone of the show — after all, 'This is a world where nothing is solved', as Rust tells his interviewers.

The interview and flashback structure of these initial episodes allows for some nice narrative touches about the ambiguity of storytelling itself — most memorably, when the official story of the two men's 'hero moment' when they apparently closed the case in 1995 is described in voiceover, while the visuals reveal the way in which that partially resolved but ultimately botched investigation actually unfolded. It also allows the show to take its time with the development of the plot. The story (and backstory) are gradually layered and pushed slowly forward episode by episode, with occasional bursts of greater urgency (such as the conclusion to the fourth episode, with its already fabled six-minute tracking shot as an undercover Rust escorts a confidential informant away from the elaborate shootout taking place around them). This languid structure, with so much emphasis placed on the spoken word, is particularly in keeping with Cohle's introspective tendencies throughout, characterised at times by his hallucinatory synaesthesia, but more often by his frequent and extended bouts of philosophising about time and the individual's place within the universe. Having taken its time for seven episodes, though, it all unravels in the final instalment, when an unfeasibly tenuous and conveniently verifiable hunch finally leads Cohle and Hart to the

homestead of their southern-gothic-by-numbers bogeyman, an incestuous murderer with severe daddy issues and poor housekeeping skills, who has evidently taken some tips from David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) in keeping some of the more pungent stenches at bay.

To be fair, it's not just in the final episode that the show descends into clichés as broad as this. Cohle's self-professed pessimism manifests itself in a solitary home-life that is straight out of the rulebook that dictates that cops with troubled pasts must live in under-furnished apartments and own poorly stocked refrigerators; and, like Don Draper and Michael Fassbender's Brandon in *Shame* (2011), he generally demonstrates the depth of his existential angst by staring out of windows (though at least Cohle chooses to do most of his staring out the window of a moving car, so the view's a bit more varied). Hart deals with his own set of anxieties as a family man in a different way, by distracting himself with a string of extra-marital affairs, while trying to maintain an inconsistent sense of morality. Thus, Hart is the kind of man who will give a gift of money to a teenage prostitute to encourage her to get out of the game, and then begin an affair with her seven years later when he runs into her again while out shopping (for tampons for his wife and daughters, suggesting the extent to which he feels 'emasculated' within his all-female family).

As this implies, the show's depiction of women remains its main stumbling block, as Emily Nussbaum (writing in *The New Yorker*) and others have suggested, and it is a problem that it never manages to escape, amassing a collection of tired female stereotypes, from the now-ubiquitous interview with a witness in a strip-club, to the shrewish mistresses, to the put-upon, nagging wife. It's the characterisation of Maggie (as the show's only major female character) that proves the most troubling, though, in particular in the sixth episode, which finally reveals the reason for Hart and Cohle's mysterious bust-up in 2002. Tired of her husband's repeated infidelities, Maggie takes action by doing the one thing she knows will hurt him — sleeping with his partner and best friend, who is a helpless slave to his sexual urges in the moment, incapable of resisting her charms, but who viciously turns on her once the deed is done. In truth, it's a scene that is problematic in its depiction of both its male and female characters, but when viewed in the context of the show as a whole, it serves finally to emphasise just how badly female characters tend to be treated throughout *True Detective*.

Maggie's seduction of Cohle marks a turning point in *True Detective* as a whole, a point-of-no-return in my own growing sense of discomfort with the show's gender politics, but also in its narrative structure. Once the mystery of Cohle and Hart's mutual hostility is solved, the narrative abandons its multiple timelines and, having reunited the pair in the present day, it begins hurtling towards its disappointing (and uncharacteristically optimistic)

conclusion. It's a shame, because there remains a lot to like about *True Detective* — its understated, suggestive creepiness (up until the final episode, at least); its striking visuals; its score and soundtrack (which finally gives The Handsome Family in particular their due). But in the end, these highlights are not quite enough to make the show an undisputed classic. It remains to be seen how the second season will fare, with a new set of detectives, location, and investigation; but let's just hope it proves Rust wrong in his belief that 'everything we've ever done or will do, we're gonna do over and over and over again', and at least manages not to repeat the tired clichés and gender stereotypes that are so prevalent in Season One.

*Jenny McDonnell*

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***Penny Dreadful: Season 1*** (Showtime, 2014)

(This review contains spoilers)

It must be admitted that this reviewer came to Showtime's new eight-part series *Penny Dreadful* with a certain degree of scepticism. The show posits a London-set late-Victorian 'Demi Monde' simultaneously inhabited by Dracula, Victor Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, the Wolfman, Egyptian gods, and (most terrifyingly of all) a demonically possessed Eva Green. It's a concept which for many viewers will bring back traumatic memories of the monumentally inept 2003 film adaptation of Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999). Happily, however, *Penny Dreadful*, created and written by *Gladiator* (2000) screenwriter John Logan, has turned out to be a beautifully crafted slab of hokum which easily ranks as one of my favourite new television shows, despite some not inconsiderable problems.

The pilot opens as some unfortunate but disposable tenement folk are bloodily ripped apart by an unknown attacker, prompting fears that Jack the Ripper may be up to his old tricks again. Token American Ethan Chandler (played by token American Josh Hartnett, who is better here than he has been in years) is a womanising, hard-drinking performer in a Wild West show, who may or may not be connected to the murders (a plot thread that runs throughout the series). His gun-slinging talents bring him to the attention of Vanessa Ives (Green), a mysterious gentlewoman who has a talent for showy tarot readings and is in need of some professional muscle to help her investigate the murders. Ives lives in a sumptuous mansion owned by the decidedly Allan Quatermain-like explorer Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton), who needs Chandler's assistance in order to help save his daughter Mina

(Olivia Llewellyn). We later discover that Mina's marriage into the middle classes has inevitably resulted in her being kidnapped by a nest of particularly bloodthirsty vampires, and Murray is determined to rescue her, whatever it takes. (The search for Mina is one of the major narrative elements connecting each episode.) Sir Malcolm soon adds to their ranks the reclusive, socially awkward young medical genius Dr Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadwell), whose ease with the undead makes him an obvious recruit for our sombre band of misfits. Also tagging along is Sir Malcolm's African man-servant Sembene (Danny Sapani), who (like every other major character) clearly has 'Terrible Things to Hide', although we don't actually find out what they are in this series. In addition to the very solid main cast, the series also features a number of well-known British character actors in minor roles, among them Simon Russell Beale as an endearingly camp Egyptologist, genre stalwart David Warner as a (criminally underused) Professor Abraham Van Helsing, and Helen McCrory as a spiritualist who may or may not be the real thing.

From the outset, *Penny Dreadful* looks so strikingly beautiful that it can't help but impress even the most sceptical viewer. Both the interior and exterior set designs are by turns grubbily and grandly atmospheric, with the cramped streets of central Dublin proving a creditable stand-in for the slums of Victorian London. The pilot, directed by Juan Antonio Bayona (best known for helming Spanish horror classic *The Orphanage* [2007]) sets the scene nicely. It juxtaposes powerfully eerie interludes (such as a sequence involving Green's character, a tormented Catholic, at prayer, which the more arachnophobic viewer may want to watch out for) with violence so extreme that even a hardened gorehound like myself was surprised that they'd gotten away with it. Yet for all of the action set-pieces and bloody murders on offer here, the show also displays a kind of languid confidence which may either enthrall or infuriate, depending on one's televisual inclinations. In short, the pace may be far too slow for the more impatient viewer. As in Brian Fuller's masterpiece-in-progress *Hannibal* (2013 — reviewed in Issue 12), *Penny Dreadful* features a great many scenes in which, on the surface, nothing more exciting happens than a lengthy conversation between two very messed-up people. It often makes for genuinely compelling viewing, precisely because there's room here for both the characters and the story to breathe. One (perhaps inevitable) consequence of the leisurely pacing, however, is that it does sometimes feels as if the story is taking rather too long to get to the point.

It must also be admitted, though, that *Penny Dreadful* rarely errs on the side of subtlety in its evocation of the Victorian age. It comes as little surprise when the seemingly heroic Sir Malcolm is revealed to be an exploitative sexual adventurer whose explorations

have more to do with ego than with the desire for scientific discovery; nor is it entirely surprising that his arrogance has had a devastating effect on his doomed biological children as well as his surrogate daughter Vanessa. (Who knew that British colonialism and the Victorian patriarchy had their downsides?) Equally unsubtle is the depiction of Dorian Gray's (Reeve Carney) omnivorous sexual appetites and scandalous inclinations, which are emphasised by his penchant for silk dressing gowns, orgies, leather trousers, and S&M. In fact, Dorian's main job is to have sex with a sizable proportion of the cast, including one character whose attraction to him is actually particularly surprising (and revealing). Similarly, Victor Frankenstein's strong discomfort with (living) women, and immediate and intense bond with his needy male 'creations', are obviously intended to reflect modern readings of *Frankenstein* as a kind of proto-gay text.

There is one potentially intriguing aspect of the show's representation of Frankenstein's creation (played by Rory Kinnear, and dubbed 'Caliban'); unlike many of his on-screen predecessors, this Creature is as eloquent and well-read as Shelley's original. What's more, his truly startling first appearance provides one of the best moments in the entire series. However, Caliban rapidly outlives his welcome, mostly skulking around London like a melancholy teenager, popping up every now and then to murder whomever Victor happens to be chatting to at the time, glare through windows like a reject from *Wuthering Heights*, and ineffectually stalk silly young actresses. Ultimately, then, although Treadwell's nervy, pallid depiction of Frankenstein as a repressed young nerd is an interesting one, his relationship with the Creature quickly becomes one of the more tiresome elements of the show.

The show's other major problem lies with Chandler's love interest, Brona Croft. While she is a likable actress who shows winning flashes of vulnerability, Billie Piper is sorely miscast as the consumption-ridden young prostitute who quickly enters into a relationship with fellow heavy-drinker Chandler. The main difficulty lies with her Northern-Irish accent, which represents the worst disservice to the Belfast brogue since Julia Roberts tried one on for size in *Mary Reilly* (1996). Piper's accent is all the more unfortunate given the fact that, as noted, the show is filmed in Dublin, and has many Irish off-screen personnel. One would have thought that finding an actress who could realistically portray the only Irish character in the entire cast would not be inordinately difficult. It's a painfully distracting facet of her performance and, most egregiously, it makes almost every scene in which she appears cringe-worthy, a feeling compounded by the fact that Brona must also cough blood into a handkerchief every thirty seconds or so in order to highlight that her days are numbered. In

addition, in what is only one of the most obvious examples of the show's propensity for ham-fistedly telegraphing twists several miles in advance, even the most dim-witted of viewer will rapidly make a connection between her terminally ill state and Caliban's longing for a 'bride'.

Having said that, one of the series' most interesting (and potentially problematic) characteristics is that it so explicitly dramatises the male fear of 'unrestrained' female sexuality and power that informs so many classic horror tropes. There are moments here when it genuinely feels as though Logan has just finished working his way through a beginner's guide to the female gothic, and is eager to demonstrate this fact on screen, principally by channelling his responses through the character of Vanessa Ives. Green has a compellingly eccentric on-screen presence, and has already depicted any number of witches, femme fatales, psychos, and deranged warrior-princess types on the big screen. *Penny Dreadful* may well represent her finest hour in this regard, though. As the series progresses, Vanessa's propensity for dramatic eye-rolling, convulsive fits, levitation, and speaking in tongues increasingly comes to the fore. It's hard to imagine many actresses (literally) throwing themselves into the action in the way that Green does in the remarkable séance scene that provides the climax of the second episode. Her intense physicality is also highlighted in the season's two most Vanessa-centric episodes, 'Closer than Sisters', and 'Possession' (essentially a late-Victorian re-hash of *The Exorcist*), in which we find out just why it is that she feels so very guilty about her friend Mina's terrible fate, and discover the true nature of her unique religious burden. Once again, originality isn't one of the episode's (or the series') strong points, but Green does get to recite a particularly pointed yet compelling monologue in which she discusses the psychosexual reasons behind the Victorian male fascination with dead and dying women. It's a moment that not only underlines Logan's undoubtedly heavy-handed approach to the material, as well as Green's absolute ease with it, but it also explicitly links Vanessa's arc with that of Brona, the show's other major female character. Of course, it could be argued that Logan is trying to have his cake and eat it by acknowledging the horror genre's reliance upon graphic depictions of female suffering, while graphically depicting female physical and psychological torment throughout the series. Certainly, none of the male characters are put through the wringer in the way that Vanessa is. And yet, the fact that she is by far the most intriguing (in part because of her compelling back-story, and in part because of Green's unique performance) and potentially all-powerful member of the group means that, unlike Brona or Mina, Vanessa is ultimately much more than a victim.

*Penny Dreadful* can be undeniably uneven, illogical, and even rather silly at times. There are quite a few moments where characters suddenly change their minds about an issue for no other apparent reason than it says so in the script (Sir Malcolm's vacillating relationship with Vanessa is a particular offender here). The much-anticipated final showdown between our heroes and the vampires is a definite disappointment, while hints about intriguing storylines (in particular, a plot thread involving Egyptian gods) are dropped into the first couple of episodes only to be apparently forgotten about by season's end. It's also difficult to see what shallow fop Dorian Gray or love-sick bore Caliban add to the proceedings either: they're both catalysts for the dreadful actions of others rather than fully developed characters in their own right. And yet, for all that, I'll certainly be tuning in again next year. The question posed by the final moment of the series, 'Do you really want to be normal?' is one that raises all kinds of intriguing opportunities for *Penny Dreadful*'s future. Every major character in the show is 'monstrous' in some sense or another, and yet Logan's script manages to invest Chandler, Ives, Frankenstein, and Sir Malcolm with a degree of psychological complexity that renders their stories, and their relationships with each other, truly absorbing. For those reasons, I'll tactfully ignore the fact that none of the classic texts that the show has plundered for inspiration — *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* — were, technically speaking, penny dreadfuls at all. It's a good title, and a little creative licence never did anyone any harm — except, perhaps, the unfortunate Victor Frankenstein.

Bernice M. Murphy

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***American Horror Story: Coven* (FX 2013)**  
(This review contains spoilers)

*American Horror Story: Coven* is the third iteration of the *American Horror Story* universe, devising another completely new plot and timeline (interchanging between the present day, the 1970s and 1834), while keeping the series' regular cast list intact (although each plays an entirely new character). With the dawn of each season, *American Horror Story* has been lauded for constantly redefining itself in terms of screenwriting, tone, and cinematography. After criticism of the previous season's (*Asylum*) darker and more ominous tone, *Coven* departs from these overtly macabre tendencies in favour of a far more whimsical tenor. Season Three of the franchise endeavours to tell the tale of a coven of witches, descended

from their Salem counterparts. The addition of eccentric camerawork, often captured through a fish-eye lens, immediately establishes a distinctive visual style, reminiscent of films such as *Suspiria* (1977). Despite this exceptionally commendable visual flair, *Coven* suffers from bouts of uneven scriptwriting and fails to flesh out the characterisations of its large supporting cast. The show as a whole has tended to opt for sprawling plot-lines, with numerous tangents, but in this season that tendency is even more prevalent and the plot is far denser. As a television show that prides itself on horror-oriented narrative, *American Horror Story: Coven* is indeed the most controversial incarnation of the programme thus far.

The season commences by introducing us to the main timeline (which more or less corresponds to the present day) and setting in which events take place: Miss Robichaux's Academy, an academy that is disguised as a boarding school, but is actually a school for fledgling witches, gifted with supernatural powers. Cordelia Foxx (Sarah Paulson), who presides over the institute, takes the young witches under her wing and attempts to nurture their often-unrestrained powers (which include telekinesis, telepathy, and pyromancy, among others). Cordelia's stringent scholastic system for her protégées is soon thrown into turmoil after her estranged mother and 'supreme' of the coven, Fiona (Jessica Lange), arrives at her doorstep. The supreme is gifted with the power to command 'The Seven Wonders of Witchcraft', the complete spectrum of powers that a witch may possess. Students at the academy all have individual powers; however, some of these are more relevant in terms of plot progression than others, while some are included for sensational effect. Zoe (Taissa Farmiga), a young witch under the care of Cordelia, arrives at Miss Robichaux's due to her ability to exterminate men who happen to engage in sexual intercourse with her. This capability is never fully expanded upon and is not even presented as one of 'The Seven Wonders' once the various cast members' powers are properly accounted for later in the season. Misty Day (Lily Rabe), a witch thought to have been burnt at the stake, is granted the more compelling power of necromancy ('resurgence'), but that raises a further problem by allowing the rather arbitrary plot structure to resurrect any deceased cast members. This constant revival of characters means that *American Horror Story: Coven* lacks any significant or meaningful deaths, marring any true sense of horror or foreboding that previous seasons have utilised to a far greater extent. Plot points such as the aforementioned examples prove especially problematic in terms of heightening suspense, and make it difficult for the audience to engage fully with the narrative.

The coven's often-flamboyant powers fail to generate any real sense of horror, then, and instead, the mainstay of the season focuses on a wholly comedic element, which it

executes to varying degrees of success. Series newcomer Kathy Bates, cast as Madame LaLaurie (based on a real historical socialite/serial killer) features in many of *Coven*'s highlights. During the season's retrospective 1834 timeline, LaLaurie is cursed with immortality and buried by the voodoo witch Marie Laveau (Angela Bassett), in revenge for the murderous blood-letting rituals that she practiced upon her slaves in New Orleans in order to create a youth-bestowing wrinkle cream. In the present day, Fiona releases the Madame from her burial site in a quest to even the score with the opposing voodoo faction that plagues the coven with violence, fronted by the similarly immortal Marie Laveau. Once LaLaurie becomes a maid at the academy, African-American witch Queenie (Gabourey Sidibe) soon entraps the inherently racist torturer, forcing her to watch the mini-series *Roots*, which results in her renouncement of her bigoted past. Other realisations about the way in which society has developed during her entombment produce equally comical results, such as LaLaurie's reaction to the news that an African-American president now resides in the White House. Cameos from Fleetwood Mac singer Stevie Nicks similarly provide amusement, but quickly become overcooked, only adding to the assortment of incongruous plot devices employed throughout the serial.

Despite its endearing comical quirks, *Coven* ultimately fails to sustain its overly ambitious plot, presenting a particularly lacklustre conclusion. Cordelia, for example, is blinded by acid during a dispute with the voodoo faction that is warring with the academy. She eventually regains her sight but consequently gouges out her own eyes, finally regaining her vision for a second time during the final episode, in just one example of the season's tendency to pursue over-the-top and over-involved plotlines. Fortunately, sensational performances by Jessica Lange and Lily Rabe manage to offset the at-times farcical whims of the screenwriting, thoroughly captivating the viewer. Lange's depiction of a youth-obsessed, abusive mother lies at the true core of the production, counter-balancing the comedic aspects of the show with enthralling dramatic devices. After her arrival at the academy, we learn of her deteriorating health as she is diagnosed with cancer, forcing the selection of the new supreme of the coven from among Cordelia's students. Rather than the lengthy process of the student witches sparring to become the next supreme, though, the main merit of *Coven* lies in Lange's depiction of a woman who is haunted by her lost youth and the quest to retain her supremacy. This is the one true power that the script truly possesses.

Overall, the strength of *American Horror Story*, as a show, lies within its depiction of the human emotions of its characters, in the face of the horrific circumstances which are portrayed on-screen. Sadly, in this instance the opposite is true, with *Coven* deviating too far

towards clichéd comedic devices, resulting in the de-humanisation of many of the characters it sought to bring to life. The preceding and more successful season *Asylum* humanised its characters to far greater effect, suggesting that it is more appropriate for a horror serial to take a more solemn tone. With this in mind, it's good to hear that the forthcoming season *Freakshow* will purportedly return to the formula that made earlier seasons of *American Horror Story* so much more successful than this one.

Oisin Vink

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## EVENT REVIEWS

### Report from 'Remarkable Reynolds: Dickens's Radical Rival' symposium, Westminster City Archives, London, 26 July 2014

This symposium, presented by the University of Roehampton and the Westminster City Archives, was put together by Mary L. Shannon to commemorate the bicentenary of the birth of the novelist, journalist, and radical George William Macarthur Reynolds (1814–79). Now no longer a household name, Reynolds was perhaps 'bigger than Dickens' in his day. He wrote fifty-eight novels, eleven works of translation, several political tracts, and edited eight journals (four of which he had also founded); it has been estimated that he wrote between thirty-five and forty *million* words over a twelve-year period.<sup>1</sup> Reynolds's serial fiction *The Mysteries of London* was 'almost certainly the most widely read single work of fiction in mid-nineteenth century Britain', attracting more readers than the novels of Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, or Trollope.<sup>2</sup>

After some opening remarks from Mary Shannon, the first talk was given by Adrian Autton, Head Archivist at the Westminster Archives. Autton outlined the vast resources available in the Archives (dating from 1256 onwards) by showing a selection of images: everything from West End theatre ephemera and archives of the Liberty department store to some great gothic representations of the 'Devil's Acre' slum and one or two of the Archive's numerous images of Wilkie Collins.

<sup>1</sup> Anne Humpherys, 'The Geometry of the Modern City: G. W. M. Reynolds and *The Mysteries of London*', in *Browning Institute Studies*, 11 (1983), 69–80 (pp. 80, 81).

<sup>2</sup> Louis James, foreword to G. W. M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, vol. 1 (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2013), pp. v–xi (p. v).

The next speaker was Louis James (Kent). Paying tribute to Dick Collins's research on Reynolds's biography, James sifted through the hard evidence available, pointing out where previously accepted 'facts' about Reynolds may actually be scurrilous rumours spread by detractors, or romantic misdirections supplied by Reynolds himself. James also situated Reynolds as a writer in the long nineteenth century, noting his echoing of Maturin and Radcliffe, his links with Thackeray and Dickens, and his influence on Braddon, Collins and Reade.

Following on from this, Ian Haywood (Roehampton) offered the audience fascinating glimpses of Reynolds as he appeared in newspaper court reports (often impecunious) and in political cartoons (often caricatured, for example as a cheeky child or a monkey). Perhaps most intriguing were the images in which a face in the crowd turns out to be Reynolds; his presence encourages us to look again at the image as a whole.

Mary Shannon spoke next, giving us a flavour of her book *Dickens, Reynolds, and Mayhew on Wellington Street*, due out in 2015. Both Reynolds and Dickens had offices on Wellington Street for a period in the mid-1800s; Shannon held out the tantalising possibilities that these bitter rivals may have passed one another on the street regularly, and that from his own office, Reynolds may have been able to watch The Inimitable at work on *Household Words* in his.

The relationship between Dickens and Reynolds was under discussion throughout the day, with Rowan McWilliam (Anglia Ruskin) memorably describing Reynolds as Dickens's 'evil twin'. Particularly at issue was Reynolds's use of Dickensian characters for his own purposes: was it plagiarism, or something closer to modern-day fan fiction?

Michael Slater (University of London) treated us to two sets of readings over the course of the day. The first compared seamstresses in Dickens's *The Chimes* and Reynolds's *Mysteries of London*, provoking some discussion (in my corner of the room, at least!) about which is actually the most effective piece of writing.

Next up was Anne Humphrys (CUNY), who gave us another glimpse of Reynolds the man by describing the staff dinners held at *Reynolds's Newspaper*. Humphrys contrasted these with better-known events such as the *Idler* tea parties and the *Punch* dinners: Reynolds's were styled 'festivals', and consisted of an annual two-day event held at various locations in the UK. All the workers on the publication, from the writers to the warehousemen, were invited; however, though female contributors were included, it remains unclear whether wives were also welcome. For those who attended, there was apparently good wine and plenty of singing.

Michael Slater's second reading came from Reynolds's *Wagner the Wehrwolf*, his spirited rendition of the transformation of Wagner, the cross-dressing of Nisida, and the murder of Agnes provoking much hilarity in the audience. It was a pleasure to experience Reynolds's work as so many of his first working-class consumers must have done, collectively as an audience rather than as solitary silent readers. When we finally finished laughing, the possible influence of this text on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was proposed.

I then gave my talk, comparing the graveyard in Reynolds's *Mysteries of London* with that in Dickens's *Bleak House*. I demonstrated that common details in the text and images of these fictional works corresponded with non-fiction writing on contemporary London graveyards, and proposed that a reading of Reynolds can enrich our experience of a familiar text like *Bleak House*.

The next speaker was Jessica Hindes (Royal Holloway), who is currently completing the first PhD thesis to focus solely on Reynolds's *Mysteries of London* – all twelve volumes of it! Responding to critics who dismiss Reynolds as a mere writer of potboilers, Hindes demonstrated that apparently pornographic episodes in *Mysteries* can be read as witty responses to the concepts of 'pornography' and the 'obscene' (as defined in relation to the risk presented to 'vulnerable' readerships: the poor, the young, and women).

Our final speaker was Rowan McWilliam, who proposed the term 'Chartist Gothic' to describe a structure of feeling in the 1840s (duly acknowledging the Anglocentrism of this title, and suggesting 'Radical Gothic' as an alternative). From its origins in Hogarth and Romanticism to its present-day incarnation in audiences' emotional response to the movie *Les Misérables* (2012), the Chartist Gothic directs the reader's gaze to the poverty of the streets, and proclaims that the reader does not have the right to avert his/her gaze.

The day was brought to a close in suitably celebratory fashion, with sparkling wine and birthday cake. The abiding impression left by the symposium was that there is much exciting work to be done on Reynolds; whether or not 'Reynolds Studies' ultimately becomes a recognised field, a closer study of his work as writer, journalist, and radical will illuminate our study of the current canon of nineteenth-century writing. A Reynolds Society has been proposed, and there are plans afoot to host a similar event in 2015 on publisher and newspaper proprietor Edward Lloyd (1815–90).

*Ruth Doherty*

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**National Theatre Live: *Frankenstein* Encore Screening**  
October 2013

There's something inherently uncanny about watching a theatrical production being screened in a cinema, but it's becoming a regular feature of my cinema-going with the evolution of *National Theatre Live* and other simulcasts. These events, in which a play is broadcast simultaneously to cinemas around the world from the theatre in which it is staged, have included some noteworthy productions within the field of gothic and horror studies — most famously in Danny Boyle's *Frankenstein* (2011), but also in the Shakespearean ghostliness of Nicholas Hytner's *Hamlet* (2010), for example. These simulcasts come complete with some of the trappings of both a regular trip to the movies (trailers and end credits) and an outing to the theatre (an interval and curtain call), but they ultimately provide quite a different kind of viewing experience that is neither entirely cinematic nor theatrical.

Although they are designed to capture a live theatrical show, there is a concerted effort to forestall any accusation of 'staginess' in the way that these productions are shot, employing multiple cameras and making use of such cinematic devices as the close-up to capture nuances that might not play as well in the back row of the theatre. The 'theatrical' experience is further interrupted by repeated (ill-advised) attempts to entertain the cinema-goers before the show, and during the interval, with a selection of short informative films about the production, or live interviews with the creative team that has staged it. These serve as repeated reminders that you're not actually sitting in the theatre along with the real-life punters who've paid a reduced rate for seats with obscured views to accommodate the various cameras that are allowing you to watch the production in the cinema in the first place. At the same time, though, they indicate that this is not an entirely cinematic event either. Intervals in the cinema weren't generally designed to remind you about the real people behind the smoke-and-mirrors onscreen. They were unlikely to feature an interview in which a director is prompted to describe their leading man as 'passing sexy' (as happened when Emma Freud interviewed Josie Rourke during the interval at January's live simulcast of *Coriolanus* from the Donmar Warehouse, just before Tom Hiddleston stepped back onstage in the title role). Despite these distractions, though, it seems that audiences at these events are determined to treat the performance as though it is taking place right before them, unmediated by the camera. Consequently, these have usually been the most reverentially silent cinema spaces

I've ever encountered; the actors may be onscreen, but it's as though the anxiety remains that they might hear us, were we accidentally to break the silence.

Of course, a live audience repeatedly contributes to the soundscape of any theatre space, in ways that have now become part of the soundtrack of these plays when they are granted encore screenings. These repeat screenings of the original live performances are also a key part of *NT Live's* repertoire; recorded for posterity, they remain thus far stubbornly averse to DVD or other home release, and can only be viewed on the big screen. They also feature aural traces of the original live audience: the sound of their pre-show murmurs that signals to the cinematic audience that the simulcast link has been established between cinema and theatre; stray coughs during quiet moments; laughter; applause; gasps; and even appalled silence at events on the stage. Enshrined as part of the original performance — and the record of the original theatrical space — these moments actually seem even more heightened at an encore screening, when the audience in the cinema can't help but be aware that the performance they're watching (and hearing) is a fundamentally haunted one, which bears within it the ghostly double of its own original broadcast.

Ghostliness abounds in these encore screenings, then, including some ghosts in the machine (*Hamlet*, for example, boasted an unexpected chorus in the form of a disembodied voice from the control room) but another kind of gothic bogeyman also looms large in *Frankenstein*: the double. Adapted for the stage by Nick Dear and directed by Danny Boyle, the production famously featured Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller in alternating roles as Victor Frankenstein and the Creature, and received an encore screening in October 2013 as part of the National Theatre's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations. I've now seen the production twice, first when it was broadcast live in March 2011, and again on Halloween last October. Since each of these versions featured the same line-up (Cumberbatch as the Creature, and Miller as Frankenstein), there remains an alternative version of the play that has as yet eluded me (though this may be rectified in the future, with further encore screenings planned for later this year). And of course, the original theatrical productions themselves are entirely lost to me, so this is a performance I can only judge through the mediated lens of the simulcast, which has captured the live show in a unique way. However, as far as I can gather, that camera's gaze did necessitate some concessions that the theatre space didn't require; for example, the audience in the cinema would likely have got much more intimately acquainted with Frankenstein's Monster in close-up, were it not for the decision to provide the actor with a modesty-preserving loincloth for the opening scene of the play on broadcast night.

Proceedings open with the tolling of a bell and the birth of the Creature, on an empty stage (save for the ‘womb’ from which he emerges) underneath a canopy of countless light bulbs, their flashes signifying the electrical charge that animates his flesh. This makes for a visually arresting opening, and the lengthy sequence that follows is equally engrossing, as the solitary Creature (Cumberbatch) gradually becomes aware of his surroundings, his limbs, and the noises that issue from his mouth. It’s an impressive physical and vocal performance, all the more so in its command of an empty stage (or screen?), interrupted only when Victor Frankenstein (Miller) arrives onstage to banish his creation. Things largely follow Shelley’s original from there (albeit with some key omissions, and a modified conclusion which sees both Creature and Frankenstein still locked in a seemingly unending pursuit of one another, each needing the other as an antagonist in order to justify their very existence). The Creature is the showier role by far, in the physicality of the opening scene, in his acquisition of language through his interactions with DeLacey (Karl Johnson), and in his menace in the latter stages of the play, but Miller’s Frankenstein was certainly better than I remembered this time round, and I remain curious to see just what he did with the less-thankless role of the Creature when given the chance. However, the rest of the main cast, including Naomie Harris as Elizabeth, are often overshadowed by the main event of the two male leads, with a very uncomfortable-looking George Harris proving especially disappointing as Frankenstein Senior. It’s perhaps inevitable that the two main roles will dominate a stage-show like this, but that said, some stronger characterisation and performances from the supporting cast might have made for a more balanced production overall.

The other real star of the production remains the staging itself, which makes great use of the Olivier Theatre’s ‘drum revolve’ stage and an eclectic score by regular Boyle collaborators Underworld; it also features some well-conceived stylised sequences, such as one involving the birth of the Female Creature (Andreea Padurariu). Most memorable, though, is probably the moment in which a ‘steampunk’ train makes its way onstage, heading for the auditorium. In hindsight, there are elements in this vision of industrial Britain that anticipated Boyle’s 2012 Opening Ceremony of the Olympics, which culminated in the unveiling of an Olympic cauldron (designed by Thomas Heatherwick) not dissimilar to the elaborate lighting fixture that oversees events in this production of *Frankenstein*.

In Boyle’s vision of *Frankenstein*, that light illuminated the stage and breathed life into the Creature on a nightly basis in 2011. The *NT Live* encore screenings revive his flesh once more, rebroadcasting a show that is no longer ‘live’ but which remains curiously invested with life, bearing within it ghosts of a performance and theatrical space that have

been captured in curious ways. In the end, these repeat screenings of the *NT Live* production of *Frankenstein* continue to provide a record of an ambitious production that was not entirely perfect, but which did boast some impressive performances (off-set by some decidedly mediocre ones), striking visuals, and a set that most likely looked incredible, from the right seat in the theatre itself. Ultimately, in its reanimation of that recorded performance and theatrical space, it makes for an intriguingly haunting (and at times haunted) viewing experience.

*Jenny McDonnell*

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## INTERVIEW

### ***Jug Face* (2013): An interview with writer/director Chad Crawford Kinkle and producer Andrew van den Houten**

*Jug Face*, released on DVD and Blu-ray last October, is an indie horror film and winner of Best Screenplay at Slamdance that has been widely acclaimed following its numerous screenings at film festivals last year. It tells the story of a cult-like community living in the woods of America's Deep South, in rural Tennessee. These people are bound by their fearful and devout worship of a naturally formed pit, to which they ritually sacrifice members of their own community, in return for their continued physical wellbeing. The victims are chosen by a selected 'seer', who is guided by the pit to create on clay jugs the physical likeness of the intended sacrifice. The film follows especially the story of Ada (Lauren Ashley Carter), who discovers that she is next to be killed, before hiding and burying her jug face, with devastating consequences.

Chad Crawford Kinkle, the writer and director of the film, is known also for the short film *Organ Grinder* (2011), while Andrew van den Houten, one of its producers, has worked on *The Woman* (2011) and *All Cheerleaders Die* (2013), and is president of the production company Modernciné. In an interview for the *IJGHS*, the pair discussed the film and some of its more gothic themes.

Speaking first on the arguable tendency for the most interesting and original works in the genre to emerge from indie filmmakers, rather than mainstream Hollywood, van den Houten suggests that this is due to the considerably greater 'creative freedom' allowed in indie productions. 'As far as the genre goes', he continues, 'it allows for so much more

envelope-pushing, and the indie world is a place where filmmakers can work regardless of budgetary constraints' — remaining focused on the fact that 'the star *is* the genre in many ways' [emphasis in original]. *Jug Face* falls into the tradition of 'backwoods' horror, which van den Houten sees as enduringly popular in an age where 'so much of our culture lives in the cities or suburbs': the backwoods represent the remaining 'unknown'. Interestingly, the inspiration for the title of the film (and the means in the narrative for selecting the victims) is based in fact. Kinkle states that 'face jugs were made in the southern states in the 1850s by slaves. They were used to hold moonshine and poisons for agriculture. Once glass containers became commonplace, they were used mainly for decoration, and the tradition continues to this day'. In its depiction of this backwoods community, the film is a far cry from texts such as *Deliverance* (1972), or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and its 2003 remake, in which 'yokels' are portrayed as soulless and degenerate. Here, Kinkle has consciously endeavoured to 'make these people feel more real', as opposed to portraying them as 'just stereotypical backwoods hillbillies'. Their religion, though crude, is one with which we can identify; it takes to the extreme Rudolf Otto's assertion that 'human religion finds its genesis in fear'.<sup>1</sup> When asked about his inspiration behind the faith of this community, Kinkle said, 'I grew up in a very small community in the southern part of the United States, which was extremely religious. I knew people who went to snake-handling churches and even smaller groups that put their own twist on fundamental Christianity. That definitely had an impact on the film.' Regarding the ritualistic sacrifice, Kinkle states that this may be seen as a comment on the fact that 'every community finds ways to avert our animalistic desires such as violence and murder' – 'some', he adds wryly, 'are just more successful than others.'

One element of the film that has provoked much discussion and disagreement is the inclusion of a ghostly child (Alex Maizus), listed only in the credits as 'emaciated boy'. He warns Ada that she must willingly sacrifice herself to the pit, so as to avoid a fate as one of 'the shunned ones'. Asked to expand on the thinking behind these characters and their purgatorial existence, Kinkle states, 'I felt like the community needed a punishment worse than death for disobeying the pit. They all want to be sacrificed so that they can go be with it in its realm. The shunned therefore are forced to walk the forest forever, and never get the chance to be with their God.' This 'deity', Kinkle suggests, predates the first Native Americans. 'For the back story', he continues, 'I had always imagined that the Indians left any settlers there alone, because they knew that the pit was in that area.'

<sup>1</sup> Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), p. 23.

Van den Houten is currently working on adapting Ty Drago's book series *The Undertakers* (2011–present) to film, while Kinkle is involved in several writing projects, which are yet to be announced. Along with the fact that their work stands to them, the two display eloquence in their understanding of the horror genre — these are certainly two names to look out for in the future.

*Elizabeth Parker*

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Margot Blankier** is a Ph.D candidate in the School of English at Trinity College Dublin. Her research interests include adaptation studies, fairy-tales, nineteenth-century popular and genre writing, children's literature and media, and romance studies. She has contributed writing on Victorian horror literature to feminist blog *The Toast*. She plans to defend her thesis project, “‘Cinderella’ in Popular American Literature and Film”, in September 2015.

**Marie Mulvey-Roberts** is Associate Professor in English Literature and Reader in Literary Studies at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Women's Writing*. She has produced over 30 books and is the editor of *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (rvd 2009) and *Gothic Fiction* (2002–03) and the author of *British Poets and Secret Societies* (rpt 2014), *Gothic Immortals* (1990) and the forthcoming *Dangerous Bodies: Corporeality and the Gothic*. She has edited a volume on Irish feminism and published on Irish writers Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker, Anna Wheeler and Rosina Bulwer Lytton.

**Solveig Ottmann** is a Teaching Assistant in Media Studies at Regensburg University, Germany. Her research includes radio and media history, radio and media theory as well as Sound Studies. She is the author of *Im Anfang war das Experiment. Das Weimarer Radio bei Hans Flesch und Ernst Schoen* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2013).

**Andrew Wenaus** is a part-time professor in the Department of English and Writing Studies at Western University and the School of Language and Liberal Studies at Fanshawe College in London, Canada. He has published articles in *Science Fiction Studies*, *Electronic Book Review*, *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, and *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. He has a forthcoming article on American composer Les Baxter in *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. His essay on British satirist Steve Aylett will be published in the volume, *To Unearth the Bruises Underground: The Fanatical Oeuvre of Steve Aylett*, by Anti-Oedipus Press, in 2015. He is currently completing a book on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*.

**Dennis Yeo** has taught at primary, secondary, junior college, and tertiary levels in a teaching career spanning more than two decades. His positions include Subject Head (Literature), Head of Department (Pastoral Care & Career Guidance), and Vice-Principal of Pioneer Junior College. He is currently with the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include gothic literature, film, popular culture, and literature pedagogy. He received the NIE Excellence in Teaching Award in 2013.