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## **Crack-Up: Psychological Realism, Generic Transformation and the Demise of the Paranoid Woman's Film**

*Mark Jancovich*

There is now a considerable body of work on what has become known as the paranoid woman's film of the 1940s (Doane(a); Doane(b); Fischer; Haskell; Hollinger; Modleski; Rosen; Waldman; Walsh(a); and Walsh(b)), a cycle that, as I have argued elsewhere was largely understood as a horror cycle during the period (Jancovich (a)). Like most examples of the woman's film, these films are claimed to be focused on a female lead but they are seen as paranoid due to the pervading sense of threat that these women experience, usually from a husband or lover. This focus on the feelings of terror experienced by the female protagonists, and on their persecution by men, often leads to these films being read as psychological narratives in which the perceptions of the central female are put under investigation. Narratively the woman herself is often uncertain whether to trust her own perceptions or not, and therefore often fears that she is going mad.

Many feminist critics have therefore taken issue with these films, which, it is claimed, not only place their female protagonists in the role of victim, but turn the problem back onto these female characters, so that it is *their* psychology that is pathological, whether or not their 'husbands are systematically trying to drive them insane.'<sup>(1)</sup> According to Doane, the 'violence associated with the attribution of a desire to see to the woman reaches its culmination in Gothic paranoid films, where the cinematic apparatus itself seems mobilized against the female spectator, disabling her gaze.'<sup>(2)</sup> In these films, she is driven to the brink of madness, it is argued, less by the diabolical behaviour of others than by her own psychological inferiority: she is 'revealed as impotent in terms of the actual ability to uncover the secret or attain the knowledge which she desires.'<sup>(3)</sup> Psychologically incapable of making sense of the world around her, and unable to trust her own perceptions, the heroine of these films, it is claimed, is unable to resolve her own problems, and can only be saved when a man 'comes to the rescue' and corrects or 'corroborates the heroine's experience.'<sup>(4)</sup>

Furthermore, given that her problems are largely psychological, it is often claimed that these films subject their female protagonist not simply to a controlling male gaze, but a medical gaze:

In the 'woman's film', the erotic gaze becomes the medical gaze. The female body is located not so much as spectacle but as an element in the discourse of medicine, a manuscript to be read for symptoms which betray her story, her identity. Hence the need, in these films, for the figure of the doctor as reader and interpreter, as the site of a knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity...<sup>(5)</sup>

For example, according to Janet Walker, a film such as *Whirlpool* overtly asks not so much "who killed Terry Randolph?" – the traditional enigma of a film noir-melodrama like *Mildred Pierce* – but "what is wrong with Ann Sutton?"<sup>(6)</sup> The mystery within the film is less about the identity of the killer than the psychological problems of its central female protagonist, a mystery that is eventually solved by her husband, who uses his skills as a psychoanalyst to correct his wife's mental state.

There are numerous problems with these claims, and while some films certainly do feature an authenticating male figure, who exists to prove or disprove the heroine's perceptions, many films lack such a figure or make him a marginal character who simply acts as a figure of support and encouragement. Furthermore, while reviews at the time overtly identified many of these films as 'psychological efforts' (7), this was almost always due to the character of the threat, which was usually identified as the product of male psychological pathology. While many reviewers acknowledged that these narratives often concerned women who were being driven mad by fiendish plots, they rarely, if ever, suggested that the problem lay with the woman, but almost always saw the psychological angle as being concerned with the motivations of the villain. Most importantly, in the present context, the films in which a medical gaze is directed at the female psyche are almost always from the late 1940s, after the phenomenal critical success of *The Lost Weekend* in 1945, a tale of alcoholism that was praised for its investigation of male psychological pathology.

This is significant for a number of reasons. Not only does it demonstrate that women were not singled out as the exclusive objects for psychological investigation, but it also suggests that our understandings of the historical nature of the paranoid woman's film needs some nuance and revision. The paranoid woman's film is often associated with the period of post-war reconstruction in which men issued a 'plea for the return of the passive, "pleasantly pliable and even appealingly incompetent" female', a figure who had existed 'carefully camouflaged on screen by tuneless period musicals and suspense shockers.' (8) If Rosen viewed these films as part of a wartime recidivism that proved conducive to postwar conditions, Walsh sees the cycle as directly tied to postwar conditions, and notes that it 'reached its peak in 1944-48' (9), a period in which the 'dominant culture supported female demobilization by stressing the importance of traditional femininity.' (10) She therefore suggests that these portraits of 'women in jeopardy' would have 'clashed with popular images of a competent and resourceful Rosie the Riveter', even if they also 'expressed strong (and often confirmed) feelings of suspicion and distrust towards men.' (11)

However, not only does the cycle start even before the war, with *Rebecca* in 1940, but it actually went into decline after the war due to changes in the reception context. As I have argued elsewhere, *The Lost Weekend* was not only understood as a horror film within the period but also consolidated a shift in the critical agenda. (12) Up until *The Lost Weekend*, psychological themes had been largely associated with fantasy but, after *The Lost Weekend*, they increasingly became associated with realism. In other words, while the psychological themes of earlier films had been associated with 'escapist' entertainment, or 'artistic' imagination, the psychological concerns of *The Lost Weekend* were understood as a brave and frank confrontation with pressing social problems. As a result, the paranoid woman's film began to shift from an association with a Gothic fantasy world of literature and history and towards a contemporary world and a suggestion of tough social commentary. The following article will therefore examine these transformations in both the genre and its reception context during the post-war period through an analysis of film reviews published within the period.

As a result, the first section examines the medicalization of women's psychology within the period, which was less the result of a demonization of female psychology than a shift in the meaning of psychology within the period from an association with Gothic fantasy to an association with realism and contemporary social commentary. The next section then moves on to examine the shifting generic definitions used in relation to the paranoid woman's film, while the third section details the general dismissal of those paranoid woman's films with a period setting, a setting that had once implied a sense of

quality but now came to signify an archaic or outmoded 'melodrama' rather than a contemporary realism.<sup>(13)</sup> Finally, the last section examines those films which tried to modernise the setting for the paranoid woman's film, films that were usually more highly regarded than the period dramas, but which also demonstrate that the shift in cultural tastes had led to a loss of interest in this type of film, and that these films were increasingly disassociating themselves from notions of Gothic horror and identifying themselves with hardboiled crime fiction. <sup>(14)</sup>

### **Psychological Realism: Melodrama, Social Criticism and Questions of Seriousness**

This shift is clearly acknowledged in a review of *Smash-Up: The Story of A Woman* (1947), in which the *New York Times* claimed that there 'isn't much doubt that [it] will be tagged as "the 'Lost Week-end' of a lady," since it has so fortuitously to do with a female alcoholic.'<sup>(15)</sup> However, despite the association with the previous film, the review was hardly complementary about *Smash-Up*, and the audience was warned not to 'let this flattering parallel fool you'. If *The Lost Weekend* was 'the best film of 1945', it was also 'a hard and plausible binge, while the current booze drama ... is soggy and full of (figurative) corn.' Even the narrative, in which a female singer turns to the bottle as her husband's radio career 'skyrockets', which might make 'for a drama of a genuinely touching sort, as it did in that memorable picture of success and drunkenness, "A Star is Born"', is ultimately wrecked so that its central 'tension has been so weakly and unconvincingly drawn that the reasons for the ladies dipsomania seem completely arbitrary and contrived.' Worse still, the story is so 'muddled ... with motherlove' that it 'becomes a wallow less in liqueur than in mawkish sentiment.' The end result is an unconvincing narrative in which the mother 'saves the child from a burning house', which not only saves her marriage but 'apparently cures her of her passion for booze.'

Despite its clear attempts to shift the psychological tortured heroine of the paranoid woman's film into the setting of contemporary social realism, the film is ultimately accused of being 'Artificial and hackneyed' rather than 'realistic and modern', and ends up being described as 'little more than any old-fashioned barroom tear-jerker'. It is even claimed to 'assume the qualities of a radio daytime serial with the injection of several soapy songs.' However, as the reference to *A Star is Born* makes clear, the problem here is precisely the film's pretensions. The review seems to value entertainments like *A Star is Born*, but distinguishes *Smash-Up* from this kind of project exactly for lacking the honesty of the earlier film. For example, Susan Haywood performance as the alcoholic is attacked precisely for its 'solemn fastidiousness' and, in taking itself too seriously, it is claimed that the film ends up being ridiculous: it is her 'solemn fastidiousness which turns most of her scenes of drunken fumbling and heebie-jeebies into off-key burlesque.'

If *Smash-Up* was seen as a failed example of this shift, *The Snake Pit* (1947) was seen as the great success. It not only made the cover of *Time*, but it was even the subject of a whole article, rather than a simple review. Furthermore, this article was given the title, 'Shocker', which both associated the film with the 'psychological thrillers' that had come before it and also presented the film as a brave and important piece of social commentary.<sup>(16)</sup> It also received a glowing endorsement in the *New York Times*, which acknowledged that the 'powerful novel' on which the film was based 'is hardly one which Hollywood might have been expected to choose for transcription to the screen' <sup>(17)</sup>, but claimed that it is 'to the credit of Anatole Litvak and Twentieth Century-Fox (in the person of Darryl F. Zanuck) that they saw the special merit in this book and they had the imagination and temerity to buy and prepare it for the screen.'

The film is therefore seen as ‘trenchant revelation of a crying need for better facilities for mental care’ which has real social significance – ‘this subject is dynamite’.

Furthermore, rather than a simple case of artless propaganda, it is also claimed that the filmmakers had ‘approached this extraordinary job with the sense of responsibility to treat fairly a most delicate theme.’ However, if the theme is a delicate one, their bravery as filmmakers is that they are claimed to have told the story ‘fully and frankly’, while ‘shunning the temptation to melodramatize insanity.’ The result is a film that is distinguished by ‘fidelity’ and ‘faithful realism’, even if this made for a film that was ‘hard to take’ and ‘frankly quite disturbing’. However, while these features meant that the film was not for children (who would be ‘baffled’ or ‘terrifically disturbed’ by it), it was recommended as a ‘mature emotional drama on a rare and pregnant theme’ that will ‘enlighten our lucid minds’, and featured a ‘brilliant, heart-rending’ performance by its star, Olivia De Havilland.

*Possessed* (1947) is also discussed as one of these films, although it is not treated with the same seriousness as *The Snake Pit*. Certainly, this ‘tale of an unbalanced woman – a schizophrenic, as they point out – who develops a persecution complex when her lover refuses to marry her’ is not treated with contempt, but neither is it taken very seriously.<sup>(18)</sup> Not only is it claimed that its female lead (Joan Crawford) ‘goes completely batty’ but it is seen as a virtual remake of *Humoresque* (1946) (also starring Joan Crawford) that is only distinguished by its psychological pretensions: ‘the basic conflict in the story is so similar to “Humoresque” that the ghost aspect of the characterization seems almost studiously contrived.’ However, if the film is not taken very seriously, it is spared the ridicule directed at *Smash-Up* on the grounds that it took its psychological themes slightly more seriously: the woman’s ‘crack-up is fairly documented, within the frame of a primarily fictional film, and the efficiency and dispassion of science are suggested in a rather credible way.’

However, this ‘seriousness’ is also one of the film’s problems. If *The Snake Pit* was a serious social commentary on psychological issues, *Possessed* is implied to be a rather pretentious film that uses its psychological themes to imply quality, rather than from any deep commitment to their social implications: ‘it is wholly obvious that the writers and Director Curt Bernhardt were told to concentrate on the torments of Miss Crawford, Hollywood’s current Great Sufferer, Academy style.’ The film, it is claimed, is a bid for recognition at the Academy Awards, not a serious engagement with psychological issues. A similar criticism was also implied by *Time*, which noted the care and skill of most of those involved, but suggested that the film was ‘not quite top grade’ due to performance of its star: while Crawford is claimed to be ‘generally excellent’ in the role, she is also claimed to act ‘with the passion and intelligence of an actress who is not content with just one oscar’ (19), a comment that can be read as a very backhanded compliment. This tension between the star and the subject matter is also a feature of the *Variety* review, which claims: ‘Despite its overall superiority, *Possessed* is somewhat marred by an ambiguous approach in Curtis Bernhardt’s direction. Film vacillates between a cold clinical analysis of a mental crackup and a highly supercharged melodramatic vehicle for Crawford’s histrionics.’ (20)

## Paranoid Women, Generic Classification and the Shift from Gothic Fantasy

If these films began to shift the psychologically troubled heroine of the paranoid woman's film away from Gothic fantasy and into a more 'realist' context, films such as *Caught* (1949), *In A Lonely Place* (1950) and *Whirlpool* (1950) featured heroines who are seduced by men that may or may not be trying to destroy her, but also registered a similar shift from Gothic fantasy to contemporary social reality. However, each of these films were judged differently, and identified with different genres. *Caught* is dismissed as 'a silly film', in which a young woman (Barbara Bel Geddes) has 'the horrible misfortune of marrying a nasty millionaire.'<sup>(21)</sup> Distanced from an association with classic literature, its feminine concerns placed it in opposition to the more masculine values of tough, hard-hitting realism, and lead to its association with 'very low-grade dime-store romance' in which its production values are not associated with quality but rather an 'expensively rendered' gloss, in which the film's male hero 'is right out of the shiny magazine'.

While the male stars of the film are praised as actors, they are also seen as too good for this kind of film, so that it is James Mason's 'misfortune to be tangled in such a silly film', particularly given that the film is 'his Hollywood debut', and Robert Ryan, who plays the psychologically disturbed husband 'is dynamic as her arrogant, neurotic spouse' but 'cannot make this isolated character believable in his gauzy realms.' Again, however, the final insult is that the film takes itself far too seriously, and while it might have been acceptable as glossy romance, it is claimed that its director, Max Opuls, has taken its 'artificial elements' and 'whipped them up as though he were really working with a romance of death-less quality.'

If this film is generically identified as romance rather than horror, despite its debts to the paranoid woman's film, *In A Lonely Place* is presented as a realist crime drama rather than horror. The review even describes the story from the perspective of the menacing male rather than his victimized lover. Unlike his presence in an earlier paranoid woman's film, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947)<sup>(22)</sup>, the film's male lead, Humphrey Bogart is claimed to be 'in top form' in the film, which is described as 'a superior cut of melodrama' <sup>(23)</sup>, in which he plays Dixon Steele, 'a violent, quick-tempered Hollywood movie writer suspected of murder' by the police, who begins 'a hectic romance' with a young woman, Laurel Gray, played by Gloria Grahame. Bogart's character is described as 'an enigma, an explosive, contradictory force at loose ends when the film ends as when it starts', and given that 'the high-strung Steele' is given to 'flying into rages', his behaviour begins to 'frighten Laurel and lead her to believe that the police may not be so far wrong after all.' The film is praised for its rejection of Hollywood convention, particularly its script's refusal to 'fabricate a happy ending' and it is claimed that 'the climax packs both surprise and a punch.' Bogart is also argued to play 'the role for all its worth giving a maniacal fury to his rages and a hard edge to his expressions of sympathy.' It is therefore described as 'a dandy film', which is applauded for making 'no attempt to psychoanalyse' Dixon; for its 'realistic' refusal of Hollywood conventions and glamour; and for its general lack of 'compromise'.

However, although generic categories were changing, the woman's film, crime drama and horror film were still not seen as mutually exclusive categories. As a result, although it is often seen as either a classic woman's film or as a film noir thriller today, *Whirlpool* was explicitly identified as a 'Mystery-Horror Picture' by the *New York Times* in 1950.<sup>(24)</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, the term 'mystery' was already heavily associated with horror in the period <sup>(25)</sup>, but it is also the case that the review places the emphasis on horror rather than mystery. For example, the review not only complains that the film makes no sense but also that it is 'so burdened with standard horrorisms that it wouldn't be gripping even if it did make

sense.’ As a result, the association with horror is not simply an arbitrary or marginal one, but the review criticises *Whirlpool* for being a conventional horror film, a film that conforms too closely to the horror conventions of the period.

Again the film features a ‘beautiful lady’ (Gene Tierney) who is suffering from a psychological condition – she is ‘a kleptomaniac’ – and ‘falls under the spell of a quack doctor who discovers her secret shame.’ Once ‘under his evil spell’, the quack then ‘hypnotizes her into performing certain acts which make her look like a murderer’, and it is up to her husband – ‘a famed psychiatrist’ – and a grizzled detective to clear her name. The film is also clearly presented as a ‘fancy production’ with ‘an accomplished cast’, featuring Jose Ferrer, ‘the Broadway champion’, as ‘the smooth and piercing villain of the piece who mouths Mr Hecht’s silken phrases with acid savor and burns folks with his eyes.’ However, despite the ‘handsome production’, its Ben Hecht script, and an impressive cast, all of whom ‘labor to cast a spell’, the film is ultimately dismissed as a fairly preposterous affair, in which the psychological themes are tied to fantasy rather than realism so that the whole narrative is dismissed as preposterous and unbelievable: ‘you don’t catch this fairly rational corner believing for one minute the hocus-pocus that goes on’.

As a result, the film is seen as an ‘obvious attempt to pull the wool over the eyes of an unsuspecting audience’, through techniques such as ‘the sloppy police practices that have been slipped into this mystery-horror picture in order to make the story jell.’ Rather than realism the film is therefore seen as not simply fantasy but an outright fake. It is described as a ‘thoroughly fabricated tale’ and despite the quality of those involved in the production it is claimed that ‘their efforts are bleakly artificial.’

### **Museum Pieces: The Problem of Period Drama**

The Gothic fantasy did not entirely disappear during this period, but it did undergo a major critical re-evaluation, so that films of this type were generally dismissed as outmoded and archaic. It was largely those films Gothic fantasies that assumed a lighter tone that proved critical successes. The *New York Times* was therefore generally enthusiastic about *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* (1947) in which a young widow played by Gene Tierney, the star of numerous horror films of the period (26), is haunted by the ghost of a sea captain. Rather than a menace, this captain is described as ‘a most engaging spirit’, and the film as a whole is described as ‘a jolly caper.’(27) Although the captain initially tries to scare the widow from his house, he learns to respect her independence and the two fall in love.

The film is therefore not identified as a horror film but as ‘a romantic fantasy’, which provides ‘sparkling good entertainment’, at least up until the captain’s immateriality proves a barrier to their relationship and the heroine chooses a weak man of flesh and blood over the more challenging but rewarding relationship with the captain. At this point, it is claimed, the film ‘falls to pieces’ and the audience is presented with ‘the insipid, maddeningly sentimental account of a lonely, aging lady and her last, empty days’. However, despite the critic’s distaste at this section of the film, the film is generally praised, and Rex Harrison, who plays the ghostly captain, is claimed to have ‘an ingratiating personality’ that makes up for deficiencies elsewhere so that *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* ‘remains a pleasurable film’ with ‘some saucy dialogue’. The *New Republic* also liked the film, and claimed it was ‘a happy exception’ to ‘Hollywood’s resistance to the idea’ that ‘characters can stay sympathetic and still be cross and difficult and talk like people.’(28)



If the Gothic was valued in the guise of 'romantic fantasy', it was viewed as outmoded in the form of Gothic horror. As a result, *The Woman in White* (1948) was claimed to be 'as counter to evolution as William Jennings Bryan.'<sup>(29)</sup> A film version of Wilkie Collins' literary classic, this 'hearts-and-horrors tale' was claimed to have caused 'a great deal of excitements among the early Victorian "thriller" fans', but a 'vast lot of horror fiction has gone over the dam since then and some notable evolutions in melodramatic style have occurred.' The story is described as one in which 'a suave Italian con-man' tries to 'fleece' his female victims 'by driving them mad'. The reviewer therefore claims that while 'hissing by villains has become obsolete', Sidney Greenstreet, who plays the Italian may not 'actually hiss through his teeth' but 'he definitely hisses with his eyes'. Similarly, Eleanor Parker who plays a dual role as his victims is claimed to be 'old fashioned, too, going crazy and hearing the birdies singing in about as quaint a way as our grandmothers would allow.' As a result, there is a failure in 'the mood of horror and anxiety that the film presumably intends', and it is a failure that is due to the fact that such Gothic horrors were now seen as antiquated.

Even Alfred Hitchcock and Ingrid Bergman were not immune from this change in the critical climate, and *Under Capricorn* (1949) did not fare well with critics. The film is described as a 'melodramatic tale', in which a 'wronged and wretched lady', whose spouse is 'hugely gruff and sullen', is gradually being driven into madness and alcoholism by some fiendish plot.<sup>(30)</sup> It also claimed to display many of the hallmarks of a quality production with its 'capable and richly costumed cast', which are 'beautifully filmed in Technicolor'. However, these marks of quality are at odds with the film, which maybe filmed in Technicolor 'but [is] pointed in glaring blacks and whites.' It is therefore material that is not 'any better than penny-dreadful substance' and it is dismissed as 'superficial'. As a result, while this is material to which 'Alfred Hitchcock has chosen to put his hand', given that it is a project made for his own production company, Transatlantic, and one that 'Ingrid Bergman has purposely chosen to play', it is claimed that 'neither artist has chosen exceedingly well.'<sup>(31)</sup> While the teaming of director and star was clearly supposed to invoke memories of their two great collaborations in the mid 1940s, *Spellbound* (1945) and *Notorious* (1946), both of which had made Crowther's list of the top ten films of their year, the film is seen as inferior material which is both old fashioned and predictable. Not only is this implied by the reference to the penny-dreadfuls, but also through the complaints about the predictability of the plot, particularly the film's 'easily perceived villainess.' For the director, it is therefore claimed to provide little 'with which to stoke up steam' and, for its star, the 'stuff for a solid characterization is simply not put her way.'

The only paranoid woman's film with a period setting that did receive strong critical reviews from the *New York Times* in the late 1940s was *The Heiress* (1949) and, even then, the paper acknowledges its surprise at its response to the film. In this film the conflict is 'between a timid daughter and her wilful father', rather than between a wife and husband, and the father is 'not quite the sadist that he was – nor as nebulously psychopathic – on the stage', and is therefore not so 'diabolic', while his daughter is 'less shatterable by shock.'<sup>(32)</sup> None the less, the film is presented as a distinguished quality production that features a 'rich and sleek performance' from Ralph Richardson, while Olivia de Havilland's 'portrayal of the poor girl has dignity and strength.' The quality of the production, however, comes as quite a surprise to its reviewer, who claims that its director, William Wyler, 'has taken this drama, which is essentially of the drawing-room and of an era of stilted manners and rigid attitudes, and has made it into a motion picture that crackles with allusive life and fire in its telling of an extraordinarily characterful tale.' In other words, the period details, which had been associated with quality in the early and mid 1940s, were now

seen as unlikely material for a successful drama, and *Variety* went so far as to dismiss the film as a 'museum piece'.<sup>(33)</sup>

However, others were more positive. While the *New York Times* praised Wyler for his ability to inspire this material with 'crackles' and 'fire' (34), the *New Republic* described the film as 'sensationally good' (35), even though it complains that the film is not an authentic adaptation of Henry James's *Washington Square*, but only an excellent adaptation of 'a dubious [Broadway] adaptation'. For the *New Republic*, the fault of the Broadway play was precisely its conversion of the story into a paranoid woman's narrative: 'Emotional violence was introduced to provide action, and the characters, particularly Catherine Sloper, were forced into implausible gestures to provide good curtains.' As a result, while the film is described as 'superior entertainment', it is also reproached for being 'an imitation of an approximation of an acknowledged work of art'.

### **Qualified Success: Paranoia, Modernity and the Last Gasps of the Quality Woman's Horror Film**

Interestingly, the films that gain critical acceptance, despite looking very much like the earlier Gothic fantasies, were those that shifted their action to contemporary settings, even if it had little effect on the overall treatment of their material. Earlier in the 1940s, the exact opposite had been the case with films, such as *Experiment Perilous* (1945) and *Hangover Square* (1945), which set their stories within a vaguely imagined Victorian era, despite the fact that the original novels on which they were based had been set in the contemporary period. By the late 1940s, filmmakers were explicitly trying to modernise the paranoid woman's film. *Lured*, for example, is the story of 'a taxi-dancer in London who is drafted by Scotland Yard to be the bait in trapping a character who specializes in killing pretty girls.'<sup>(36)</sup> This serial killer 'advertises for them in the personal columns of newspapers', and is a deranged madman with fondness for Baudelaire. However, despite its 'good cast' and 'lavish backgrounds', it is claimed that these are 'not warranted by some of the aspects of the story', which is less 'inspired' than its production values. None the less, while there seems to be little interest in the story, the film is not dismissed out of hand, and it is generally seen as a competent, if 'rather routine piece', which features 'a sturdy performance' from its star, Lucille Ball, even if the film as a whole 'is about an hour too long and a number of extraneous and rather absurd sequences could have been omitted.'

Similarly, *Sleep, My Love* (1948) is referred to 'a sleek entry' with an 'intelligent script about 'a young matron being slowly driven mad by her husband', who uses a hypnotism and psychoanalysis to unbalance her. (37) Claudette Colbert is also claimed to give 'a convincing portrayal of the terrified and mystified lady', and the film 'can be marked down as a generally competent job, which has its absorbing moments', even if it hasn't 'strayed much from the norm.' The film itself is therefore positively assessed as one that 'manages to run its course without coming a cropper', but it is also seen as 'the latest arrival on an extremely long line of psychological dramas'. In other words, the film is therefore seen as having a 'familiar plot', which ultimately results in 'a general lack of suspense'. *Time* was similarly dismissive: although it claimed that it was 'pretty well filmed' and 'amusingly played' (38), the film was seen as a flimsy affair in which the 'story scarcely matters except as an excuse for some scare scenes.'

If these two films were nominally set in the contemporary period, *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) actively announces its modernity through its focus on the telephone, a focus that is mocked by the reviewer who suggest that while it is a film in which the heroine gradually realises that her husband is planning to have

her killed, she doesn't need to be driven mad by her husband because 'she can drive herself mad by excessive utilization of that innocent little machine.' (39) In the film, Leona (Barbara Stanwyck) is confined to her bed with only the telephone as her contact to the outside world and, over the course of one night, she begins to piece together her husband's murderous intentions from a series of phone calls. There are some complaints that, as her 'cold fear increases' until her 'terror is titanic', the 'narrative structure' is too 'involved' with 'flashbacks occurring within flashbacks and extraneities popping up here and there' until it all becomes 'quite bewildering and therefore tedious in the lengthy middle phase.' There is also a complaint that 'coincidence plays almost as big a part in the story as does Barbara Stanwyck' which 'weakens its credibility'. However, while the critic claims that, during the film, 'we squirmed – and not from dread', it is conceded that as 'a sheer exercise in melodrama and in cumulative suspense, this film has some highly vivid episodes and a grimly exciting final reel' in which its director, Anatole Litvak, 'has whipped it up hotly towards the end.' *Time* also praised Litvak who, it is claimed, 'keeps his camera relentlessly on the prowl, soaking up the creepy mood that surrounds' the film's 'terrified leading character' (40), while *Variety* described the film as a 'real chiller' in which direction, music and camera work all have the effect of 'sharpening the building terror.' (41)

## Conclusion

As we have seen, then, the cycle of women's horror films went through a shift in the mid to late 1940s as there was a transformation in the reception context. Earlier in the decade, as I have argued elsewhere, Gothic fantasy had considerable prestige with critics, who valued its association with classic literature and the historical past (42), but by the late 1940s, this prestige began to wane and was replaced by a new enthusiasm for films that were seen as frank and realistic social commentaries. It was within this context that many examples of the paranoid woman's film subjected their mentally disturbed heroines to a medical gaze but it was not due to a specific pathologization of female psychology itself but was part of a larger cycle of films, which was at least as concerned with masculinity as femininity.

Within this context, there was also a shift in the generic categorization of these films, and while some films continued to be explicitly associated with horror, there was an increasing tendency to distance these materials from the horror genre. Not only was the prestige associated with the period settings devalued so that they were increasingly seen as old fashioned, but even the association with classic literature was devalued. It was therefore generally films that featured contemporary settings, and which could present themselves as serious social commentaries, that were most highly valued by critics during the period.

By 1950, the cycle of female centred quality horror films that had started with *Rebecca* in 1940 was all but finished, although the following year a new cycle would start with the release of Howard Hawks' *The Thing* (1951).

1. Waldman, Diane, "'At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!'" Female Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s', *Cinema Journal*, 23: 2, (Winter, 1984), 34.
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4. Waldman, "'At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!'" Female Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s', 33.
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6. Walker, Janet, 'Hollywood, Freud and the Representation of Women: Regulation and Contradiction, 1945-early 1960s', in Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart is*, (London: BFI, 1987), 205.
7. Stanley, Fred, 'Hollywood Shivers', *New York Times*, (28 May, 1944), X3.
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12. Jancovich, Mark, 'Thrills and Chills: Horror, the Woman's Film and the Origins of Film Noir', forthcoming.
13. It is also be noted that this opposition did not imply that melodrama was a necessarily feminine form, but was rather associated with tales of sensationalism and excitement, rather than seriousness social commentary.
14. Of course, the link between hard boiled crime fiction and horror was never one of simple generic difference, and many films that we would not identify as thrillers were explicitly defined as horror earlier in the decade. However, with the shift in critical tastes, the shift from horror to thriller was an important one as it enabled various elements and materials to be more strongly associated with the taste for contemporary realists' social criticism.
15. Crowther, Bosley, "'Smash-Up, Story of a Woman,'" in Which Susan Hayward is seen as an Alcoholic, Makes its Bow at Capitol Theatre', *New York Times*, (11 April, 1947), 31.

16. Anon, 'Shocker', *Time*, (December 20, 1948), [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).
17. Crowther, Bosley, "'Snake Pit,' Study of Mental Ills Based on Mary Jane Ward's Novel, Opens at Rivoli', *New York Times*, (5 November, 1948), 29.
18. Crowther, Bosley, "'Possessed,' Psychological Film With Joan Crawford as the Star, Opens at Hollywood', *New York Times*, (30 May, 1947), 25.
19. Anon, 'The New Pictures', *Time*, (June 16, 1947), [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).
20. Anon, 'Film Reviews', *Variety*, (1947), [www.variety.com](http://www.variety.com).
21. Crowther, Bosley, "'Caught,' Starring James Mason, Barbara Bel Geddes, Robert Ryan, Opens at Capitol', *New York Times*, 18 Feb, 1949, 26.
22. See Jancovich, Mark, 'Bluebeard's Wives: Horror, Quality and the Paranoid Woman's Film of the 1940s', forthcoming.
23. Crowther, Bosley, 'Humphrey Bogart Movie, "In a Lonely Place," at Paramount-Import at Trans-Lux', *New York Times*, (18 May, 1950), 46.
24. Crowther, Bosley, 'Incredible Goings-On Feature "Whirlpool," Mystery-Horror Picture at Roxy', *New York Times*, (14 January, 1950), 9.
25. Jancovich, Mark, 'The Meaning of Mystery: Genre, Marketing and the Universal Sherlock Holmes Series of the 1940', *Film International*, 17 (2005), 24-45.
26. These films include *Laura* (1944), *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *Dragonwyck* (1946), and *Whirlpool* (1950).
27. T.M.P., "'Ghost and Mrs. Muir," With Rex Harrison, Gene Tierney and George Sanders, Opens at Radio City Music Hall', *New York Times*, (27 June 1947), 17.
28. O'Hara, Shirley, 'Ghost Story', *New Republic*, (26 May 1947), 36.
29. Crowther, Bosley, "'Woman in White," Starring Eleanor Parker and Sidney Greenstreet, at Strand', *New York Times*, (8 May 1948), 12.
30. Crowther (g), Bosley, "'Under Capricorn," With Ingrid Bergman at Music Hall – Directed by Hitchcock', *New York Times*, (9 September 1949), 28.
31. The *New Republic* also found it 'remarkable' that Hitchcock and Bergman had associated themselves with the project, which it dismissed as 'the purest example of window dressing that has come along in some time.' (Hatch, 27-8)

32. Crowther, Bosley, “‘The Heiress,’ With Olivia De Havilland in Leading Role, Arrived at Music Hall’, *New York Times*, (7 October, 1949), 35.
33. Anon, ‘Film Reviews’, *Variety*, (1948), [www.variety.com](http://www.variety.com).
34. Crowther, “‘The Heiress,’ With Olivia De Havilland in Leading Role, Arrived at Music Hall’, 35.
35. Hatch, Robert, ‘Movies: The Imitative Muse’, *New Republic*, (31 October 1949), 22.
36. E.J.B., ‘Lured’, *New York Times*, (29 August, 1947), 14.
37. A.W., ‘At Loew’s Criterion’, *New York Times*, (19 February, 1948), 29.
38. Anon, ‘Also Showing’, *Time*, (16 February, 1948), [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).
39. Crowther, Bosley, “‘Sorry, Wrong Number,’ Based on Radio Play, At Paramount – Barbara Stanwyck Stars’, *New York Times*, (2 September 1948), 18.
40. Anon, ‘The New Pictures’, *Time*, (20 September, 1948), [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).
41. Anon, ‘Film Reviews’, *Variety*, (1948), [www.variety.com](http://www.variety.com).
42. Jancovich (a), Mark, ‘Bluebeard’s Wives: Horror, Quality and the Paranoid Woman’s Film of the 1940s’, forthcoming.

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## Anamorphic allegory in *The Ring*, or, seven ways of looking at a horror video

*Brian Jarvis*

Any point on a ring is both before and after any other point, depending on the arbitrary choice of the starting point.

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (1)

Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2002) begins *in media res*. In a suburban bedroom, two teenage girls discuss a cursed video tape:

'Becca: Have you heard about this videotape that kills you when you watch it? You start to play it and it's like somebody's nightmare... and as soon as it's over your phone rings. Someone knows you've watched it and what they say is: 'You will die in seven days'. And exactly seven days later...

Katy: Who told you that? I've watched it! (2)

In terms of Genette's narratology, this exposition offers both a completing analepsis (a flashback that tells us what has just happened) and a repeating prolepsis (advance notice of what is just about to happen). (3) It is not certain how many victims the video has already claimed, but shortly after her confession Katy is murdered and 'Becca severely traumatized. The video kills again at the film's climax and denouement is deferred by a proleptic promise that it will kill again (a pledge delivered in the sequel, *The Ring Two* (2005)). The opening point of *The Ring* simultaneously narrates what has happened and what will happen and is thus both *before* and *after*. Whilst recycling the *mise-en-scène* of teen horror, the prologue also permits a fast-forward subliminal glimpse of key images from the cursed video (a well, a barn, a horse's eye, a burning tree) that will be replayed and reviewed repeatedly in the scenes that follow. And where do these rotary movements begin? The genealogy of the tape is traced to an originary trauma. Anna Morgan pushes her eleven-year old daughter, Samara, into a well which she then covers. The young girl survives the fall and spends seven days looking up at a ring of light before dying. After her death, Samara's spirit is transferred to video tape. Should someone watch this video they will receive a telephone call and the cryptic message 'seven days'. Exactly seven days later Samara returns as an electric ghost that emerges first from the image of the well onscreen and then from the television itself. Samara's victims are petrified. The shock of seeing this spectre is so intense that the spectator's face is transfigured into its own grisly death mask.(4)

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), Walter Benjamin contended that film, by virtue of its continual and sudden changes, produced a 'physical shock effect' in the spectator.(5) For Benjamin, cinema was a privileged medium that crystallized the phenomenology of a traumatic modernity. Whilst cinema constituted a key component in the technological infrastructure, allegory embodied the aesthetic logic of modernity. Benjamin intuited a deep structural affinity between film, allegory and the historical crises of modernity. In *The Arcades Project* he asserted that 'allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century'.(6) The allegorical mode appeared to mirror the fragmentation and fetishisation promoted both by commodity capitalism and cinema. However, in a deft dialectical manoeuvre, Benjamin insisted that allegory's flaws might



themselves be redemptive. As a discontinuous montage of historical fragments torn from their normal setting and thrust into violent collisions, allegory might spark defamiliarising jolts that illuminated social and spiritual relations. Rather than simply reflecting alienated experience, allegory possessed the potential for critique by forging, in a flash, previously unseen and unsuspected connections. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, writing in that characteristically condensed and evocative style which Susan Sontag described as ‘freeze-frame baroque’, Benjamin juxtaposed the illusory unities and transcendence of the romantic symbol and the transparent failings of allegories which are enmeshed, eternally, in the contingencies of history and ruin: whereas in the Symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* [death mask] of history, as a petrified, primordial landscape.(7)

The observer of *The Ring* is confronted with death masks, petrification and primordial landscapes. Might these be seen, in Benjaminian terms, as dialectical images haunted by historical allegory? This essay will suggest they can. *The Ring* will be read as an anamorphic allegory which manufactures a charged circuit of connections between ghosts, young women and numinous optical technologies. Rather than being petrified by the image of an image crawling from underground and across the screen, the observer can unearth the death masks of history here: the history of a necrophile genre, the history of ghosts emerging from various machines, the post-war history of technological exchange between the US and Japan and at ground zero in *The Ring*, the tale of a little girl and Little Boy.

## GHOST MACHINES

First suggestion: haunting is historical, to be sure.

Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (8)

Perhaps the least speculative but most circular allegorical interpretation of Verbinski's *The Ring* would read it as a horror film that encompasses the history of horror film itself. Since it revolves around a scary video, *The Ring* is an auto-reflexive text which is haunted by its own ghost. In this regard the content is an allegory of the form, or, to be more exact, the content is an allegory of the viewer's consumption of the film. This qualification seems necessary since the production of images in *The Ring* is purely of secondary significance. Although Samara is clearly the source of the video, the means of its manufacture is shrouded in mystery and this ellipsis is itself allegorical of a postindustrial age in which, for some, production has become an increasingly remote, invisible and even spectral activity. Whilst the means of the video's production are vague, the consequences of visual consumption are clear and devastating. Here, looks really can kill. Since its birth, horror film has been the subject of urban legends and conservative censure insisting on the moral, psychological and on occasion physical threats posed by the genre. Screenings of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), for example, were allegedly attended by nausea, vomiting and fainting. Sanchez and Myrick's cult film, like *The Ring*, circles around mysterious video footage, a young woman and televisual technology whilst threatening to confuse the borders between image and reality. Reports of the damage caused by *The Blair Witch* themselves replayed folklore surrounding an earlier film that also centred on a young woman: *The Exorcist* (1973). Even before it reached the cinema, William Friedkin's film was associated with supernatural violence that included set fires and the deaths of nine members of the cast, crew and production team. Once it was released at the cinema, according to

media mythology, *The Exorcist* elicited so many instances of retching, hysteria and heart attacks that paramedics were routinely stationed in cinemas. A San Francisco newspaper headline proclaimed: ‘*The Exorcist* nearly killed me!’ In accidental anticipation of *The Ring*, the evangelist Billy Graham proposed that a demon had entered the very film stock of *The Exorcist*. The British Board of Film Censors may not have been persuaded that the film was cursed or possessed, but it refused to grant a certificate thus effectively banning the video version of *The Exorcist* from circulation for seventeen years (from 1981 to 1998).

Horror videos have also habitually been linked to violent crime. In the UK, for example, *Child's Play 3* (1991) was cited by the media as the inspiration for the murder of a three-year old boy, Jamie Bulger. Between 1996 and 2001 there were over twenty cases of murder and serious assault involving the iconic mask from the *Scream* trilogy.<sup>(9)</sup> The horror genre, of course, has been plagued by allegations of malign influence since long before films about copycat murder were being blamed for copycat murder. In the late eighteenth century an explosive proliferation in gothic novels, ‘bluebooks’, ‘chapbooks’ and ‘shilling shockers’ was met by accusations of threats to the social, political and religious order. Gothic fiction was charged with promoting superstition and Satanism, heresy and revolution. Young women were considered especially vulnerable to the threats posed by this deviant genre. Self-appointed guardians of female virtue warned that this imperilled cohort might swoon in terror, or, worse still, experience dangerous arousal. The critique of gothic literature and horror film, as has often been noted, typically indulges in hysterical tropes that are pivotal to the genre itself. These tropes can be found dead centre in *The Ring*: possession, infection, curse and the crossing of boundaries between fantasy and reality.

In the late eighteenth century, the boundaries between phantasmatic image and reality were being jeopardised not only by gothic fiction, but also by an array of new optical technologies. The roots of this development lay in seventeenth century ‘natural magic’ (*magiae naturalis*) and in particular the development of the magic lantern. In *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (1646), the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher documented the design of a ‘catatrophic lamp’ that could be used to project images onto a wall in a darkened room. Following Kircher’s pioneering work, a number of priests, scientists and performers used magic lanterns and camera obscura to project images of spirits, demons and devils. The period that saw the rise of gothic literature also witnessed a dramatic upsurge in these ‘ghost shows’. In Leipzig, in the late 1760s, Johann Schropfer converted the billiards room in his struggling coffee shop into a venue for gothic spectacles that soon acquired a cult audience. In addition to projecting images of ghosts and demons, Schropfer utilised eerie music, sound effects, electricity and incense in a sensory extravaganza. Commercial success encouraged Schropfer to take his ghost show to other European cities, but, whilst touring, he became increasingly unstable and started to believe his ghosts were real. Schropfer committed suicide in 1774, but his work lived on to inspire and influence performers and scientists at expositions and stage shows. In particular, Schropfer’s ghost haunted the popular horror shows known as ‘phantasmagoria’.

The phantasmagoria differed from the magic lantern ghost show in two key respects: the technology became more sophisticated and at the same time increasingly invisible to the audience. Whilst the traditional lanternist made his optical device a centerpiece of the spectacle, in the phantasmagoria the technical apparatus was concealed. The most successful ghost showman of the early phantasmagoria was Étienne-Gaspard Robertson. In post-revolutionary Paris, this Belgian professor of physics and accomplished magician staged hauntings in Capuchin crypts, crumbling catacombs and derelict convents.

Robertson's publicity proclaimed that the audience would see the dead raised from their graves and his shows caused such a sensation that the Parisian police temporarily closed them down due to rumours that the 'fantasmagorie' risked resurrecting Louis XVI. Robertson's intention was not merely to entertain, but to terrify by convincing the audience that his images were real: 'I am only satisfied if my spectators, shivering and shuddering, raise their hands or cover their eyes out of fear of ghosts and devils dashing towards them'.<sup>(10)</sup> To achieve this aim, Robertson positioned the projection technology, his 'Phantascope', behind a screen and placed it on brass rails. Incorporating state-of-the-art optical lenses, the Phantascope could be moved towards and away from the screen to produce a 'looming effect': sharply focused and apparently three-dimensional figures, distant ancestors of Samara Morgan, lunged towards a terrified spectator. Robertson's repertoire of 'ambulant phantoms' incorporated gothic tropes which Verbinski recycles in *The Ring*: female spirits, mad women in white and a Medusa's head which, according to contemporary newspapers, resulted in a petrification almost as potent as its classical source. Publicity for Robertson's ghost shows proclaimed that women fainted and men leapt from their seats to wave their canes and ward off the approaching phantom. In the course of the nineteenth century, the phantasmagoria employed progressively more intricate combinations of mobile lanterns and projectors, screens and glass, smoke and mirrors to produce effects that anticipated the camerawork and editing of twentieth century cinema: fades, dissolves, cuts, zooms and superimposed images.<sup>(11)</sup> The phenomenal success and lasting influence of the phantasmagoria, alongside its signature splicing of the specular with the spectral, encouraged Walter Benjamin to adopt it as his master trope for modernity.

Although spectators of the phantasmagoria might have felt as though a ghost was crossing the screen towards them, they knew rationally, at least in retrospect, that the phantom was merely an optical illusion. The mid-nineteenth century in the US, however, witnessed the rise of a movement which claimed to traverse the boundaries between natural and supernatural. American Spiritualism was founded on the same triad which appears in *The Ring*: girls, ghosts and electrical technology. The birthplace of the movement was a family home in Hydesville, New York, where, in March 1848, two girls claimed to be communicating with the dead. Kate and Margaretta Fox, aged ten and twelve, confirmed (like the eleven-year old Samara in *The Ring*) the mythology which associates girls on the brink of puberty with sensitivity to psychic phenomena.<sup>(12)</sup> The Fox sisters deciphered a series of tapping and knocking sounds heard around their home as messages from 'Mr Split Foot'. Word spread of the 'Rochester Rappings' and hundreds of people flocked to Hydesville to see and hear the messages delivered by these prodigious young women. At precisely this moment, just twenty-six miles away in Seneca Falls, thousands more flocked to see and hear the messages delivered at the first ever women's rights convention. Spiritualism and US feminism were interlaced. Women typically took centre stage at séances and in psychic circles where they were permitted to say things that would have been deemed unorthodox or even unacceptable in different social contexts. The spirit world often seemed keen to draw the attention of the living to social injustice: the plight of slaves and prostitutes, the evils of liquor, the sufferings of the oppressed and abused.

Following the 'Rochester Rappings', the Fox sisters became celebrities. Whilst touring America and Europe, they received extensive support from those involved in women's rights, abolitionism, Quakerism and the temperance movement. Alongside these connections to contemporary progressive movements, US spiritualism sought legitimisation by association with cutting edge developments in science and communications technology. A synergy sprang up between mediumship and emerging media. In newspaper articles, pamphlets, books and speeches regarding the exploits of Kate Fox and other mediums,

it was claimed that a 'spiritual telegraph line' had been connected to the 'beyond'. Jeffrey Sconce notes pertinently that the tappings at Rochester took place just four years after the first public demonstration of the electromagnetic telegraph by Samuel Morse.<sup>(13)</sup> Soon after this event, ghosts began to communicate in Morse code and some spirit circles incorporated telegraphic technology into their séances. Whilst Morse's telecommunications device offered an uncanny abolition of geographical distance, psychic telegraphy claimed to cross the metaphysical divide between the living and the dead.

In *The Ring* Samara utilises a different medium – television – to traverse these spheres, but her manifestation as an electric ghost resonates with Spiritualist philosophy. In the nineteenth century, electricity was the main connector between ghosts and communications technology. Spiritualism sought to explain phantoms as paranormal electrical phenomena and saw the medium as a 'spirit battery'. At some séances the medium would attempt to improve her connection to the spirit world by asking each member of the circle to hold a rope whose ends were coiled in copper or zinc buckets of water. The vast majority of mediums were women in part because the female form was deemed more suited to the task of being entered by spectral-electrical energy. Victorian science sought to explicate this phenomenon. For example, in 1839, the German chemist Baron Karl von Reichenbach began experimenting with predominantly young female subjects to explore the links between neurasthenia, psychosomatic illnesses (including somnambulism, hysteria and night terrors), sensitivity to psychic phenomena and electromagnetism. A large battery was positioned on the roof of Castle Reichenbach and connected by wires to a darkroom below. In this makeshift laboratory, young female sensitives sat at a round table which could be rotated to place a variety of objects before them. The sensitives, positioned like Samara in pitch darkness, detected different types of aura surrounding these objects. Reichenbach proposed that his subjects were able to perceive a vital electromagnetic force, the 'Od', not within the spectrum of normal vision. Some branches of Victorian science sought to explain the particular sensitivity of young women to these unseen forces by linking them to electrical menstruums and pulses emanating from the womb. It is perhaps worth noting, in this regard, that the electrical ghost in *The Ring* is associated with birth imagery: after a symbolic water-breaking, Samara emerges from the uterine darkness of the well through a tunnel into the light and then, coated in a slimy decidua, slips through the aperture of the television.

In the early stages of Spiritualism, sensitives and mediums were conductors for intangible electrical energies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, ectoplasm started to emerge from mouths, ears, noses and vaginas. The imagery of ectoplasmic strings is conspicuous in *The Ring*. In one scene the heroine, Rachel Keller, retches a long cord of black hair that has an electrode attached to it.<sup>(14)</sup> Ectoplasmic events were often captured on camera and these visual records can be read as a sub-genre in the field of 'spirit photography'. The practice of capturing phantoms on film started in the US in the early 1860s and became an important part of the Spiritualist movement.<sup>(15)</sup> Some spirit photographs were revealed as hoaxes whilst others were accidents made almost inevitable by the rudimentary nature of the technology. Exposure times required sitters to remain immobile for protracted periods and even a slight movement could transform the subject into a wraith. In addition, for some, the term 'spirit photography' was practically tautological since images of ghosts merely offered a purified instance of the medium's inherent ghostliness. As Tom Gunning has observed, photography was initially experienced 'as an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating a world of phantasmatic doubles'.<sup>(16)</sup> The photograph, like the phantom, confronts the spectator with the presence of absence.<sup>(17)</sup> Verbinski's film is haunted by this uncanny conjunction in images that recall spirit photography. Those who have seen

Samara's image have their own image stolen and discover their face distorted on film. Samara transfers her image to film from the dark water of the well and this act might recall the process of photographic development itself: a virtual image emerging from a latent image in liquid darkness. The image of the ghostly Samara crawling through the screen towards a terrified spectator is itself ghosted by the image of the audience at the Lumière brothers inaugural moving picture presentation. In 1896, at the Grand Café in Paris, terrified spectators froze in horror believing that a train was coming through the screen towards them. Cinema is the heir to the phantasmagoria and spirit photography.

Moving pictures represented both an evolution in nineteenth-century optical technologies and an amplification of the ghostly de corporealization associated with sonic media such as telegraph, telephone, wireless radio, phonograph and gramophone. At approximately the same time that the Lumière brothers were exhibiting short films across Europe, Guglielmo Marconi was demonstrating the possibilities of wireless telegraphy. Marconi's wireless, along with the experiments of Tesla, Popov and Bose, established the technical infrastructure for the evolution of radio. Even more so than Morse's telegraph, radio produced an astounding and unsettling dislocation of body, thought and voice across time and space. The invention of radio was accompanied by a significant increase in reports of paranormal phenomenon. Houses began to be haunted not by spectral tapping but by weird electrical signals. The Spiritualist's assertion that ghosts were electromagnetic phenomena was thus sustained by twentieth-century technological advances. Ghosts were discovered in radio waves and captured on recording devices and since the 1950s, EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) has been a burgeoning field in parapsychology.

The invention of television, like radio and the telegraph, was the catalyst to new varieties of electrical haunting. Television transposed cinema's uncanny dematerialization to a domestic setting and since its inception, as Jeffrey Sconce has shown, this medium has repeatedly been experienced as a 'haunted apparatus'.<sup>(18)</sup> In the pre-digital era all televisions were haunted, at least in technical terms, by *ghosting*: eerie double images produced by distorted analogue signals. Alongside these technical issues, urban legends abound of sets that turn themselves on or refuse to be switched off and of voices and faces in the static. In 1954, the *Television Digest* reported that the Travers family were being haunted by the image of Mrs Travers' dead grandfather which refused to leave their television screen. Long Island police took the set into custody and over 500 people visited the station to witness this televisual phantom.<sup>(19)</sup> The concept of the dead communicating through television has subsequently been fictionalised in several horror films including *Poltergeist* (1982), *Videodrome* (1983), *Static* (1986) and *White Noise* (2005). Samara is part of this sub-genre which connects television to the spirit world, but she also belongs to a longer history, sketched above, of haunted machines. *The Ring* initiates a reverse projection which takes us back through television, cinema and radio, photographs and phantasmagoria, to nineteenth century relays between telegraphic communications, spiritualism and the electrification of ghosts and on into the cinematic pre-history of magic lanterns and camera obscura. At the same time, as we shall see in the next section, Samara looks forwards as well as backwards.

### **DIGITAL FEMME FATALE: IN HER BOLD GAZE HIS RUIN IS WRIT LARGE**

Hands that can grasp, eyes  
That can dilate, hair that can rise...  
'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'.  
Marianne Moore, 'Poetry' (20)

When crowds gathered at the Long Island police station to see Mrs Travers' dead grandfather, television was still a relative novelty. In 1954 there were approximately thirty-five million TVs in the US. By the time that *The Ring* was released in 2002 that figure had increased almost tenfold. The same period also witnessed a massive increase in other types of screen and gadget. According to a recent survey, in the average US household one would automatically find around three television sets, a VCR, a DVD player and a video game console.(21) Derrida has proposed that although ghosts are traditionally associated with the past, the spectral is in fact more pervasive within the contemporary telecommunications global network:

the experience of ghosts is not tied to a bygone historical period, like the landscape of Scottish manors [...] but, on the contrary, is accentuated, accelerated by modern technologies like film, television, the telephone. The technologies inhabit, as it were, a phantom structure [...] When the very first perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms.(22)

This realm of phantoms finds its allegorical incarnation in *The Ring* and an occult video that demands to be endlessly reproduced. In the postmodern era, perhaps as never before, the image appears to have a life of its own. Samara is the spectre of the electronic image as a magically self-referential and self-replicating phenomenon: the phantasmagoria of postmodernity embodied in the disembodied form of a ghost. As an allegorical sign, Samara signifies the power and apparent autonomy of the free-floating image. After Debord, it has become routine to ascribe unrivalled supremacy to the visual in the sensorium of late capitalism and to contend that the political economy of postmodernism revolves around the circulation and exchange of increasingly globalised visual signs, icons, logos, media spectacles and virtual imagery. Whilst the material practices associated with image-making technology (which, lest we forget, require phenomenal levels of production, distribution and maintenance) become increasingly spectral, the image undergoes transubstantiation. No longer the apparitional trace of an original object, the image has acquired its own heft and substance. According to a by now familiar postmodern sci-fi horror story, the dividing screen between reality and image has been crossed so that life is 'spectralised [...] the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV'.(23) Rather than a ghostly imitation of an a priori reality, the copy has usurped the original and replaced it with, in Baudrillard's phrase, the reign of simulacra. Whilst the modern era saw the conversion of land into private property, the postmodern era witnesses the refashioning of the very ground of the real as spectacle and simulation. History is replayed, we might say, 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.(24)

The act of watching actors watching in *The Ring* underscores the incestuous circle of simulation and recalls Debord's critical distinction that the society of the spectacle is 'not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images'.(25) Trapped inside the Möbius strip of the postmodern gaze, the subject looks less at images themselves so much as the practice of others' looking. The focal point of the horror in *The Ring* is Samara's stare. The visual exchange that takes place between the mobile image and her petrified subject confirms Baudrillard's gothic pronouncements on 'the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real'.(26) Samara may be dead, but the 'evil demon of images' is mobile and murderous and like the cult of dead celebrity, her ghost insists from beyond the grave that she be endlessly reproduced.(27) The title of W.J.T Mitchell's recent *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005) reflects a trend in visual studies towards greater recognition of the apparent agency and autonomy of the image.(28) In this context, Samara represents an allegorical personification of the image's

evolution from relatively inert object to animated subject possessed of its own desires and a drive towards viral self-replication.

Postmodern phantasmagoria appear as a ghost in Von Neumann's machine and it is crucial to recognize the extent to which this ghost is gendered. In contemporary critiques and celebrations of postmodern visual culture the image belongs to the world of fashion and consumerism, it is typically described as 'sensual' and 'seductive', 'narcissistic' and 'depthless', 'promiscuous' and 'chaotic' as it undermines the hegemony of reason and the printed word.(29) The image, in other words, is the feminine and Samara can be read as its allegorical embodiment. Samara, as the unbridled *femme fatale* of postmodern visuality, constitutes a high-tech upgrade of the monstrous feminine. According to Barbara Creed, cultural representations of the monstrous feminine from classical mythology to contemporary horror film are underpinned by gynophobia.(30) The concern with reproduction in *The Ring* is pronounced and assumes two distinct though interwoven forms. Firstly, as mentioned above, Samara is associated with extravagant birth imagery.(31) The channel for her spectral parturition is a television set and in *The Ring*'s climactic scene, Samara crawls from the virtual sphere and squeezes through the screen to murder Noah Clay. The victim's name alludes to creation myth and the film's water motif, but his profession is more apposite here. Clay works with but cannot control electronic technology. Alongside his failings as a father, Clay is shown struggling with cameras, television and VCRs. Samara's murder of this enfeebled patriarch underlines *The Ring*'s anxiety about and feminisation of those reproductive technologies which give birth to infinite serial images and sounds.

Just before Richard Morgan, Samara's foster father and the film's other enfeebled patriarch, commits suicide in a bathtub connected to a TV and VCR, he offers the following warning: 'those pictures... the things she'd show you... she'll never stop... she never sleeps'. Samara is the indefatigable image which demands to be copied and looked at over and over again. The auto-reflexive allegory in *The Ring* extends to the fact that this film about filmic mimesis is itself both the product and the source of extensive copying. Verbinski's film is a remake of Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) which was an adaptation of Koji Suzuki's cult novel of the same name. Following the success of *Ringu* (1990), Suzuki wrote three sequels - *Spiral* (1995), *Loop* (1998) and *The Birthday* (2000) - which inspired the Japanese films *Rasen* (1998), *Ringu 2* (1999) and *Ring O: Birthday* (2000). In addition, there has been a Japanese TV series and TV film, a Korean remake of *Ringu* and numerous cross-media spin-offs such as a Manga comic, a video game and mobile phone accessories. The Hollywood remake of *The Ring* started a cycle of J-Horror and Hong Kong horror adaptations that includes *FearDotCom* (2002), *The Grudge* (2004) and *The Grudge 2* (2006), *Dark Water* (2005), *The Pulse* (2006) and *The Eye* (2008). Hideo Nakata went to Hollywood to remake *The Ring 2* in 2005 and will also direct *The Ring 3* which is scheduled for release in 2008. In this context Samara appears as the shimmering spectre of seriality.

Seriality followed Samara from the cinema when *The Ring* was released for the home entertainment market. Film has been jointly marketed in analogue and digital format since 1997, but in 2002 sales of DVD players overtook sales of VCRs for the first time in the US. In that year, over two million DVD copies of *The Ring* were purchased in the first twenty-four hours of its release. Significantly, sales of the video version of this horror film about a video lagged behind. Indeed, watching *The Ring* just a few years after its initial release there is already something rather dated about this bulky video beset by tracking problems. *The Ring* was shot on celluloid but, in post-production, frame after frame was digitally enhanced. The key sequence - when Samara emerges from an analogue video tape - has been produced

with CGI software. Samara has been read as an allegorical emblem for the history of ghost machines and for contemporary optical technologies, but she also appears as a gothic premonition of an imminent digital zeitgeist: a sibylline spectre from the post-celluloid future. As this digital wraith crawls through the screen we could be witnessing the allegorical death of analogue, video and celluloid film alongside the figurative birth of next generation Virtual Reality (CGI, holography, cyberspace, multispectral sensors, telepresence technologies and haptics). The ghost is attended by an uncanny suturing of opposites: here and not here, past and present, dead and alive. Similarly, Samara splices together incongruent components. Postindustrial devices (TV, VCR and cameras) are linked to pre-industrial folklore (an ancient curse). Samara controls advanced electronic technology but her appearance is somewhat anachronistic in a costume which approximates that most outmoded item of spectral attire (the white sheet). The FX team on *The Ring* employ state-of-the-art digital design to simulate low definition analogue graphics. The video ghost is silent, practically black-and-white and her image is fuzzy, granulated and prone to interference.

Samara's synthesis of residual and emergent technologies produces a temporal indeterminacy that is itself characteristic of the digital revolution. According to Virilio, the past, present and future have been replaced by rewind, play and fast-forward.<sup>(32)</sup> Virilio is surely right to highlight the extent to which VCR profoundly altered the viewing experience and promoted a sense of chronological mutability. However, in the post-video age of integrated media (TVs wired to DVD players and gaming systems and laptops and the Internet), temporal instability has been dramatically accelerated. The structural logic of video, which is still basically sequential (since the tape must be wound backwards and forwards), is now being superseded by the digital rhizomatics of chapter selection and hypertext links. For the DVD viewer 'any point on [*The Ring* can be almost instantly] before and after any other point'.<sup>(33)</sup> The digital image is even more mobile, malleable and potentially ghostly than its predecessors. Photographs and video tape capture rays of light with chemicals, paper and celluloid. In this respect a material bond still exists between the object and its reproduction. Conversely, digital technology converts the visual into abstract electronic data. All that is solid melts into binary code. We have come full circle from the dashes and dots of Morse code on the telegraph, to the abstract ones and zeroes of digital telecommunications.

Part of the ghostly contradiction which Samara embodies is that the digital image is both de-realising and at the same time more immediately present. Postmodern optics acquire greater phenomenological tenuity even as their distance from material reality increases. Samara's entry into the spectator's world thus offers an allegory of the spectator's immersion in an image world that has and will become more substantial with advances in the technologies of telepresence and virtual reality. In contrast to the diaphanous ephemerality of analogue, Samara threatens the spectator with digital immanence and the cyberpunk prophecy of the image that looks back. Armed with Medusean hair and Gorgon's gaze, Samara is the moving image that observes and immobilises the viewer. In this regard, Samara might recall Benjamin's definition of aura:

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return [...] In dreams [...] there is an equation. The things I see, see me just as much as I see them.<sup>(34)</sup>

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin declared that contemporary technology jeopardised the aura of the art object – its ability to look back - by detaching it from its context and tradition and replacing a unique identity with endless copies. The consequent withering of



aura was described in spatial terms. For Benjamin, aura involves the ‘unique phenomenon of a distance’ or clear separation of subject and object which is decimated by the mechanical reproduction involved in film and photography.(35) In film, the spectator loses contact with the ‘whole living person’ and their presence in time and space’.(36) Immersion in the physical experience bridges the essential gap between observer and observed: ‘the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of aura in the experience of shock’.(37) As a result, the ‘sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology’.(38) In *The Ring*, however, Samara’s blossoming in the land of technology is no *fata morgana* in the desert of the real. As a ‘real toad’ emerges from an ‘imaginary garden’ the spectator experiences a traumatic return of aura. Ironically, by coming closer, Samara restores the distance between observer and observed and thus also restores the etymological roots of ‘tele-vision’ (in the Greek for ‘seeing at a distance’). *The Ring* might then prophesise a traumatic return of aura through digital colonization and the re-enchantment of technology.(39) Nor is this merely a matter of advanced technical fakery. For Benjamin, aura is always rooted in the history of the object and its embeddedness in a network of social relations. In the next and final section we will examine the roots of Samara’s aura in a buried history of transnational relations and trauma.

### ***THE RING AT GROUND ZERO***

She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated [...] Part of every child’s brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (40)

The bomb was a new medium, like television.

Klaus Theweleit, ‘The Bomb’s Womb and the Genders of War’ (41)

Writing in 1991, Fredric Jameson proposed that video, which he dubbed ‘surrealism without the unconscious’, was the key medium for a postmodern era in which spirituality had been practically extinguished and ‘the deep underlying materiality of all things has finally risen dripping and convulsive into the light of day’.(42) Sixty years earlier, at a time when he was also engaged in analysing surrealism, Walter Benjamin published ‘A Little History of Photography’ (1931). Here, Benjamin proposed that electronic image technologies permitted insights into a vastly expanded territory of unconscious forces:

For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than the eye: ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking [...] we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually steps out. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.(43)

In *The Ring*, Samara rises ‘dripping and convulsive into the light of day’, stepping out of a surrealist montage as a material spirit who, it will be argued, personifies the political unconscious of optical technology.(44)

An analysis of the political unconscious in *The Ring* should begin with the question of origins and this requires a return to the subject of reproduction. *Where does Samara come from?* A genealogy of ghosts in *The Ring* would head east. Not simply because Verbinski's film is an adaptation of Nakata's *Ringu*, but because Samara is adopted and the spectator catches a fleeting glimpse of Oriental characters on her birth certificate. This child from the east displays a dualism that is central to western colonial mappings of Japan: Samara is both 'the chrysanthemum and the sword'.<sup>(45)</sup> Since Samara is inseparable from the reproductive gadgetry which gives birth to her, technology in *The Ring* is not only gendered female, but orientalist as well. After she watches Samara's tape, Rachel is sensitised to the omnipresence of television and from her balcony engages in paranoid surveillance of the sets switched on in every apartment in an adjacent building. Subsequently, Rachel finds that TV is also inescapable beyond the city limits when she encounters sets in the cabins of isolated motels and the loft of a barn on a small island (Samara's bedroom). *The Ring* does not inquire directly as to the source of this ubiquitous device, but the orientalised ghost who is fused with television points the way. The production of televisions, VCRs and cameras is dominated by Asian manufacturing industry and corporate capital. The Zaibatsu - Sony, Mitsubishi, Hitachi, Yamaha, JVC and other vertically-integrated high tech entertainment conglomerates - often design the cameras which record films, own significant shares in the companies that air them and manufacture the audiovisual equipment on which they are watched. The domination of consumer technology markets by Japan reached its peak in the 80s and early 90s.<sup>(46)</sup> Although flagship corporations continue to flourish (Sony, for example, achieved record sales in the year of *The Ring*'s release), the Japanese economy has lost its supremacy and been outstripped by the four tigers (Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong) and now China.<sup>(47)</sup> Despite the ups and downs of its economic fortunes, Japan has managed to retain much of its mythological status as the empire of the gadget and the spiritual home of screens, cybernetics, miniaturisation, robotics, computers, video games and virtuality. In the cyberpunk imaginary, from Gibson to Manga, Japan, technology and the future are virtual syllogisms. In this context, *The Ring* articulates an orientalist technophobia. Samara is the allegorical spectre of Sonyism: a phantasmal yellow peril encrypted in semi-conductors that invade US homes to deliver deadly messages. Imperialist anxieties regarding Asian technology and trade relations thus manifest in a paranoid allegory of reverse colonisation. As Elizabeth Edwards has argued, there is a long history of complicity between colonial power and reproductive technology:

[i]n many ways those people who fear the camera would steal their souls, would peel their faces were right. The camera was one of those instruments of appropriation, which recorded culture at the colonial periphery and removed it for analysis [...] in the metropolitan centres.<sup>(48)</sup>

In *The Ring*, this technology is now deployed against the metropolitan centre as a dark-haired girl from the East arrives in a US city to steal the souls and peel the faces of her American victims.

That this ghost should assume the form of an orientalist young woman resonates with the global reconfiguration of relations of production and the industrial working class. As Gayatri Spivak argues in 'Ghostwriting': 'The subaltern woman is now to a rather large extent the support of production'.<sup>(49)</sup> Although Samara's body is trapped underground, across water and at the margins far from the postindustrial core, her spectral labours return to haunt the western city. The 'ghosts' of dead industrial labour performed by the subaltern woman can never be entirely exorcised from the postindustrial landscape since

the proliferation of phenomena of reproduction (fashion, media, publicity, information and communication networks) requires a vast expansion of material production; the greater circulation of images depends upon a variety of physical products - television sets, video recorders, satellite discs and the like.(50)

Samara's emergence from these machines signifies a terrifying materialisation of all that which lies buried and unseen beneath the postmodern image: the vast infrastructure of production, distribution and maintenance which sustains postindustrial networks of reproduction. In place of reified relations with things – a TV, a VCR, a phone – the consumer is suddenly confronted with the painful return of a human presence. As the spectre of social relations emerges from a technological commodity she materialises all those forces which, like the butterfly effect in reverse, lie behind the apparently simple gesture of pressing a button.

In *The Ring*'s climactic scene, as the ghost of subaltern labour crawls towards her western prey, it is clear that Samara's motive is revenge, but perhaps it is less obvious that her weapon is radiation. Radiation initially appears in the film's opening dialogue between 'Becca and Katy concerning the dangers of technology and in particular the 'magnetic waves' and 'electro-rays' transmitted by television and telephones. Subsequently, it is noticeable that exposure to Samara's video produces symptoms synonymous with acute radiation poisoning: nose bleeds, vomiting, skin discolouration and a 100% fatality rate after seven days. For patients afflicted by acute radiation poisoning, the seven-day period before death is referred to as the 'walking ghost' phase. Through contamination the walking ghost in *The Ring* aims to transform her victims into copies of herself. But Samara herself is a copy, or clone of Sadako in Nakata's *Ringu*.

Aidan: What happened to the girl?

Rachel: Samara?

Aidan: Is that her name?

According to Derrida there is always 'a crypt within a crypt, a name within a name, a body within the body'.(51) In *The Ring* the little girl whose body is encrypted in a well has a name that hides another name. For Japanese readers and film-goers, the name 'Sadako' would recall Sadako Sasaki, a young girl who, in 1945, lived in Hiroshima around one-mile from ground zero. Sadako survived the blast, but several years later she developed leukaemia, known locally as 'the atom bomb disease'. Whilst Sadako was in hospital she started folding origami cranes having been inspired by a Japanese proverb which teaches that the maker of 1000 cranes will be granted a wish. She died in 1955, aged twelve.(52) A memorial was dedicated to Sadako Sasaki in Hiroshima as a symbol of all the children killed by the atom bomb and in the US a Sadako statue was built at the Seattle Peace Park. In *The Ring*, Seattle is the city that Samara terrorises. Inside Verbinski's film we can thus detect the allegorical ruins of another story: the little girl dropped down a well is ghosted by the Little Boy dropped on a city.(53) *The Ring* resonates with nuclear symbolism: the film's key image, the eclipsed ring of light, recalls the dark sun that rose over Hiroshima; a burning tree is shaped like a mushroom cloud; and Seattle is subjected to the fall-out of endless black rain. The Little Boy was carried inside the B-29 bomber Enola Gay. In *The Ring*, the little girl is experimented on at the Eola Psychiatric Institute. Is there a name within the name?(54) The

perverse combination of birth imagery and violent death in *The Ring* was also conspicuous at Hiroshima. In 'The Bomb's Womb and the Genders of War', Klaus Theweleit notes that the 'first hydrogen bomb was saluted as a newly born baby boy'.(55) Theweleit goes on to cite Carol Cohn's observation that '[t]he entire history of the bomb project, in fact, seems permeated with imagery that confounds man's overwhelming technological power to destroy nature with the power to create'.(56)

In *The Shell and the Kernel*, their gothic revision of classical psychoanalysis, Abraham and Torok propose that the source of a crypt might not even be a trauma experienced directly by the subject. Traumatic experience that is not properly buried can be inherited and 'travel' as a 'transgenerational phantom'.(57) In his introduction to Abraham and Torok's work, Nicholas Rand speculates that the hauntings of ancestral spectres might not only be a family affair, but could involve 'the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of [...] the community, and possibly even entire nations'.(58) In *The Ring* we witness, in allegory, the phantomatic return of shameful secrets. Samara is a transgenerational phantom who travels from Hiroshima to Seattle. For Abraham and Torok,

[i]nexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objective correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person.(59)

Samara is buried alive in a secret tomb and the psychic telegraphy she performs from the crypt offers screen memories in a double sense: memories projected onto a screen that screens other memories. Words, vestigial scenes and affects are screened, encrypted and buried alive in *The Ring*: terror and guilt, revenge and radiation, Sadako and Hiroshima. In the immediate aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, an American eyewitness, Father P. Siemes, reported that '[n]one of us in those days heard a single outburst against the Americans on the part of the Japanese, nor was there any evidence of a vengeful spirit'.(60) In Samara, however, the vengeful spirit appears as an allegorical emblem. For Benjamin, such an emblem was the result of a failure to work through mourning. That which is not properly buried, that which has not been mourned, must return to haunt. The allegorical readings of *The Ring* offered here are intended to underline the extent to which history haunts even the most spectral of postmodern images. As the power and pervasiveness of contemporary phantasmagoria increases, so too does the urgency with which we should heed Benjamin's injunction to 'educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows'.(61)

1. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1989), 24.
2. Gore Verbinski (dir.), *The Ring* (DreamWorks SKG: 2002).
3. See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980). For viewers familiar with *Ringu* (1998), the Japanese film upon which *The Ring* is based, the analepsis here is interwoven with the eidetic presence of inter- and perhaps hyper-textual allusion.
4. It is worth noting that 'spectator' and 'spectre' share their etymological origin in the Latin *spectare* ('to see').
5. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 232.
6. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 328.
7. Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Picador, 2002), 126. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1977), 166.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx, the State of the Debt, the work of Mourning and the New International* trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.
9. For one of the most notorious instances see Andrew Osborn, 'Scream movies are blamed by teenage girl's copycat killer', in *The Observer*, November 18 2001. Accessed online at [http://film.guardian.co.uk/News\\_Story/Observer/0,,596971,00.html](http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Observer/0,,596971,00.html).
10. Cited in 'Robertson's Phantasmagoria', *Adventures in Cybersound*. Accessed online at <http://www.acmi.net.au/AIC/PHANTASMAGORIE.html>.
11. One of the most celebrated proto-cinematic innovations was 'Pepper's Ghost', invented by Henry Dircks and presented by John Henry pepper in 1862 at the Royal Polytechnic Institute in London. This illusion employed plate glass and lighting effects to conjure transparent phantoms in midair.
12. As Kate Fox grew older she retained this connection to the pre-teen cohort since the centrepiece of her psychic repertoire was the ghost of a young girl called 'Katie King' who, like Samara, was dressed wholly in white.
13. See Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 21-36.
14. It might be worth noting that whilst Rachel is retching a long black cord she is holding a cordless phone. Despite the insistent emphasis on her visuality, Samara's initial contact with her victim is sonic rather than optic and involves another haunted machine. Like the telegraph and the camera, the telephone astounded and at times unsettled Victorians with its radical dislocation of body and voice across space. It

was quickly adopted by the Spiritualist movement and became associated with a range of paranormal phenomena.

15. The origins of spirit photography are the subject of some controversy, but William Mumler is most frequently credited with producing the inaugural ghost image in 1861. The popularity of these images was substantial, particularly in the wake of the Civil War when the ranks of the Spiritualist movement swelled to over ten million believers and there was a concomitant upsurge in attempts to contact the dead.

16. Tom Gunning, 'Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films and Photography's Uncanny', in Patrice Petro (ed.), *Fugitive Images: from Photography to Video* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1995), 42-3.

17. Susan Sontag has refined this conjunction as follows: 'A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence'. See *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2002), 16.

18. See Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 167-96.

19. Ibid. 124-7.

20. Marianne Moore, 'Poetry' from *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 36.

21. From the Pew Internet & American Life Project at [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_ICT\\_Typology.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_ICT_Typology.pdf). In addition, the majority of Americans own cell phones (73%), desktop computers (68%) and digital cameras (55%), whilst an increasing number also possess video cameras (43%), MP3 players (20%) PDAs (11%), and GPS (7%).

22. Jacques Derrida, 'The Ghost Dance: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', an interview with Mark Lewis and Andrew Payne (trans. Jean-Luc Svoboda), *Public*, 2, 1989, 61.

23. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 55.

24. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), 10.

25. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Red and Black, 1977), 8.

26. Jean Baudrillard, from *Simulacra and Simulations* in Mark Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) 170.

27. The phrase is borrowed from Baudrillard's essay of the same name. See 'The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra' in Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 194-99.

28. See W.J.T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

29. Amongst male critics on the left there can be a tendency to characterize postmodernism as a gendered 'fall' in which the loss of an authoritative masculinity (associated with modernity and muscular manufacturing industry) is counterpointed with the emergence of an anarchic femininity (associated with soft postindustrial technologies). David Harvey's hostility towards a visual field described as 'frothy' and 'titillating' in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 63) would be a case in point here. More recently, in *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), Jonathan Beller remonstrates with the 'rampant visuality, overwhelming, indeed emasculating analytical thought' (224) in postmodern society. Jameson's at times anxious repudiation of the 'essentially pornographic' (1) nature of the visual in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and elsewhere might also merit scrutiny in this regard. At the other end of the spectrum, gender inflection is similarly conspicuous in the rhetoric of cyberspace gurus who ecstatically embrace virtual reality as an imminent return to a high-tech womb.

30. See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

31. For a more detailed engagement with this aspect of *The Ring*, see Caetlin Benson-Allott, 'Before you die, you see *The Ring*: notes on the immanent obsolescence of VHS' in *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/trialsite/bensonAllott/>.

32. Paul Virilio cited in Réka M.Cristian & Zoltán Dragon, 'American Studies in the Age of Visual/Electronic Reproduction', in *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, 1.1 (Fall 2005), 10. Accessed online at <http://americana.uw.hu/volIno1/AMERICANAvolIno1.pdf>.

33. Returning to our starting point and the quotation from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1989), 24.

34. Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 184.

35. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 216.

36. Ibid. 223.

37. Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', 190.

38. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 226.

39. Benjamin stressed that 'epochs which tend towards allegorical expression will have experienced a crisis of the aura'. See *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) 365. Samara's appearance might also underline the efficacy of Jonathan Beller's formula: 'The spectre of the visible (aura) has become the substance of the visual (simulation)'. See *The Cinematic Mode of*

*Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 214.

40. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1999), 155.

41. Klaus Theweleit, 'The Bomb's Womb and the Genders of War', in Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (eds.), *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 295.

42. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 67.

43. Walter Benjamin, 'A Little History of Photography' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol.2 1927-34* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 352. Benjamin does not mention here, but was almost certainly aware that Freud's first published use of the term 'psychoanalysis' (in 1896) coincided with Kodak's introduction of the pocket camera, the Lumière brothers inaugural moving pictures presentation and Roentgen's production of the first ever X-ray photograph (of his wife's hand).

44. This possibility might be underscored by reference to the work of Jonathan Beller. In *The Cinematic Mode of Production* and elsewhere, Beller has argued that political economy is the unconscious of the object world and that in postindustrial societies that object world is increasingly saturated by images and scopic machinery.

45. A phrase whose implications are explored by Ruth Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

46. Simultaneously, in the 1980s and early 90s, Japanaphobia swelled as Japanese corporate capital invested heavily in the US entertainment industry (buying out CBS, Columbia Pictures and MCA-Universal) as well as purchasing symbolic sites such as the Rockefeller building.

47. Sony's continued success in the twenty-first century is in part attributable to a successful gamble that the 9/11 attacks would encourage US consumers to spend more time at home thus increasing demand for its video, audio and gaming equipment.

48. Elizabeth Edwards, cited in Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 197.

49. Gayatri Spivak, 'Ghostwriting' in *diacritics* 25.2, 1995, 67.

50. Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 148.

51. Jacques Derrida, 'Foreword: Fors: the Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok', in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xxvii.

52. Coincidentally, the same age as Daveigh Chase, the actress who plays Samara in *The Ring*.



53. 'Little Boy' was the codename given to the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima on the 6th of August, 1945.
54. If 'Eola' is haunted by 'Enola' it may be significant that the elided letter, 'n', is the symbol for neutron in nuclear physics.
55. Klaus Theweleit, 'The Bomb's Womb and the Genders of War', in Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (eds.), *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 293.
56. Carol Cohn cited by Theweleit, 'The Bomb's Womb and the Genders of War', 294.
57. See Nicolas Abraham, 'Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology' in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Volume One*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 171-76.
58. Ibid. 169.
59. Ibid. 130.
60. Father P. Siemes, 'The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima', at *The War Times Journal*. Accessed online at <http://www.wtj.com/archives/hiroshima.htm>.
61. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin trans.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 458. Benjamin is quoting here from Rudolf Borchardt's *Epilegomena zu Dante*, v. 1. [Berlin 1923], 56-7.

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## Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men's Fiction

*Kirsty Macdonald*

In his discussion of 'Angry Young Masculinities', Berthold Schoene argues that:

Naturally, questions of sexuality and gender make up a crucial part of one's identity. But whereas women and gays — keen to reach a fulfilling definition of their place in society — can never avoid a confrontation with the strai(gh)tjacket of traditional gender roles, heterosexual men have so far managed to do without such a confrontation which would involve a profound reconsideration of all one's attitudes towards sexuality and gender.(1)

Schoene's comments reflect recent sociological discourse concerning masculinity. As the indefinable and unknown norm(2), heterosexual male identity is represented by 'the signifiers of "normal" sexuality [which] maintain a kind of hegemonic power by remaining invisible.'(3) Yet, by employing the Gothic mode, a number of Scottish male writers present the confrontation with literary representations of conventional heterosexual roles that Schoene calls for, indeed providing the potential for a reconsideration of sexuality and gender, and in turn widening the scope of Scottish fiction. Two of the major contemporary Scottish exponents of the Gothic — Iain Banks and Christopher Whyte — exploit the distinctive Gothic tropes of excess, transgression and anxiety concerning the female, as referred to as central concerns by a number of critics of the Gothic (4), in their often ironic and consistently interrogative portrayals of and confrontations with heterosexual male identities. Scottish fiction has previously only rarely been examined through the lens of the Gothic, with nationality and the construction of a tradition wholly distinct from that of English literature taking precedence. This paper argues for Banks's and Whyte's insertion into the lengthy and highly regarded tradition of Gothic fiction that addresses the nature of masculinity, whilst maintaining a recognition of their place in the Scottish literary canon.

### **Masculinity**

These writers deal with masculinity not as the normative referent against which all other identities are evaluated, but as a problematic gender construct. Gothic, like the emerging post-feminist field of men's studies in sociology, is the site 'where the scripts of the heterosexual matrix and normative masculinity are being interrogated and rewritten.'(5) Sociologists have also noted a recent 'crisis of masculinity' in the West (6) where, post-war and post-feminism there exists an identifiable 'weakening of masculine potency.' Gothic is often interpreted as a compensatory mode, a response to just such historical stimuli, and 'theorised as an instrumental genre, re-emerging cyclically at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises.'(7) Through their use of the Gothic, Banks and Whyte do not so much attempt to negotiate the current anxieties surrounding masculinity, as confront them bluntly and remorselessly, depicting heteronormativity as grotesque and monstrous through exaggeration and illustrating the subversive potential of threats to that conventional masculine identity in the form of transgressive androgynous, hermaphroditic and homosexual figures or threatening abject females; in short, anything identifiably 'other'. This article will argue these points with specific reference to Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984) and *Excession* (1996) and Whyte's *The Warlock of Strathearn* (1997) and 'Stifelio' (2001)(8), although similar concerns are evident throughout their work.

With reference to literary representations, literary critic as well as creative writer Whyte argues that heterosexual masculinity 'is the unknown which subsists in a space from which the known has been eliminated. It is originary, axiomatic and indefinable', and that 'the only speakable forms of heterosexuality are the perverse ones.'<sup>(9)</sup> The texts to be discussed support this premise, rendering male heterosexuality visible through perversity and excess. Indeed, the Gothic denotes a general and consistent concern with perversion and taboo, and with 'the unspeakable', which according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is 'one of the most distinctive of Gothic tropes', allowing for the discussion of 'things that are naturalistically difficult to talk about.'<sup>(10)</sup> Yet the texts all elaborate upon this notion of visibility through perversity by suggesting that due to its inherently superior and conventionally more powerful position, straight male identity is consequentially receptive to depravity and sordidness. As Lord Acton famously stated, 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.'<sup>(11)</sup> The texts abnormalise heteronormativity by presenting Gothic masculinities, both excessive and transgressive, from the monstrous anti-hero to the binary-eluding androgyne, thus undermining the hegemonic power of the male by destabilising traditionally the most stable of identities.

### **The Gothic**

Yet what exactly is meant by the term 'Gothic' proves considerably more elusive than the highly visible and locatable, monstrous and mutable masculinities presented in these texts. Definitions of the Gothic, particularly in a post-diffusion-of-media contemporary context extending from 'high' literature to graphic novel to cinema to computer game, are myriad and consistently lengthy ('Gothic Fiction' receives a six-page entry in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*)(<sup>12</sup>), and often evasively conclude with the growing recognition that there is no such thing as 'the Gothic.'<sup>(13)</sup> Ambiguity, ambivalence and a concern with boundaries are habitually listed as Gothic traits. Yet these obscure and protean qualities fail to delineate a coherent and autonomous genre. Hence, for the purposes of this paper, the term 'Gothic' applies to a mode, a certain approach to specific problems and anxieties, a connecting thread woven throughout literature from many genres and traditions.<sup>(14)</sup> This also gives rise to the title of the paper: 'Gothic' is used to refer to the masculinities portrayed within the texts rather than to the texts themselves, concomitant with the increasing difficulty in identifying fiction as generally and wholly Gothic. Certain relevant features of this mode — such as the 'unspeakable' — can, however, be identified. Glennis Byron and David Punter note a prevalent concern in the Gothic with 'the unbinding of coherent sexual identities.'<sup>(15)</sup> Early on in the history of Gothic criticism, Leslie Fiedler stated that 'the Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness' (<sup>16</sup>), while Angela Carter similarly, and more recently, argued that:

Gothicism grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane [...] Characters and events are exaggerated beyond reality to become symbols, ideals, passion. Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact. It retains a singular moral function — that of provoking unease.<sup>(17)</sup>

This is precisely the achievement of Banks's and Whyte's differing portrayals of masculine identity: conventions are exaggerated to the hyperbolic point of grotesquerie and the evocation of man as monstrous becomes a way of assailing clichés, unbinding coherent identities and exposing as absurd existing stereotypical power structures. Carter accurately locates the Gothic 'beyond reality'. In his discussion of *Sexuality*, Joseph Bristow observes 'the persistent sexual inequality that remains highly

visible in the West', (18) and indeed, rather than realistically reflecting their social context these writers hyperbolise and present reality as perverse in their fiction, amplifying and intensifying to expose these representations of persisting gender structures to Schoene's 'profound reconsideration', and even outright scrutiny.

### Male Gothic

The difficulty in tracing distinctive and uniform Gothic features in contemporary fiction, however, should not imply the absence of any continuity with the so-called 'original' Gothic of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the rough time frame denoting when the Gothic was identifiable as a coherent literary genre (although even here there is a degree of debate.) The phrase 'Male Gothic' has been retrospectively coined to classify those original Gothic texts dealing with similar anxieties surrounding the problematic portrayal of masculinity, the patriarchal family and the threatening female, such as the first self-proclaimed 'Gothic novel', Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In addition Beckford's *Vathek* (1787) and Lewis's notorious *The Monk* (1796) would fall into this category. Centering around a rebellious male protagonist who absents himself from society rather than conform, Male Gothic has been defined psychoanalytically as 'the clash between the ego and the super-ego refigured as conflict between the questing self and the ego-ideals of church, state, or "nature"'. (19) Anne Williams discusses specifically how

The hero/villain is an isolated overreacher punished for his hubris, his violation of the Law [...] even the survivors of the Male Gothic plot [...] emerge from the concluding apocalyptic orgy of violence with lowered expectations, permanently marked by what they have suffered. (20)

Indeed, in all the texts the central protagonists, isolated overreachers every one, clash with varying kinds of 'Law': Frank in *The Wasp Factory* encounters the Law of the Father but manages to elude the law of the land; Genar-Hofoen refuses to follow the conventions and protocol of his society, 'the Culture', in *Excession*; the warlock of Strathearn collides repeatedly with the iron law of the Church in seventeenth-century Scotland; and the narrator in 'Stifelio' clashes with the unspoken codes of his society.

Moreover, violence and psychological damage abound in these texts, reminiscent of the sensationalist 'horror', that source of fear connected to the body which 'contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates' the senses (21), of the original Male Gothic. Likewise, a connection can be outlined in terms of the Gothic's continuing concern with sexual identity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses early Gothic by men in connection to sexual identity, noting that 'the Gothic was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality', and listing 'a group of authors [who were] in some significant sense homosexual — Beckford notoriously, Lewis probably, Walpole if fully' (22) i.e. the main proponents of what is now termed Male Gothic. Christopher Whyte is the only gay-identified writer of the contemporary duo, but despite connections with Male Gothic, the writer's sexuality now seems wholly irrelevant in the face of an increasingly volatile and pluralistic notion of identity as a whole, not just sexual identity.

Sedgwick also notes the importance of paranoia in the Male Gothic, in the Freudian sense as a symptom of homosexual panic whereby the male protagonist is 'not only persecuted by, but considers himself transparent to and often under the compulsion of, another male.' (23) Similarly, David Punter theorises this as demonstrating continuity throughout the Gothic, arguing that it is 'impossible to make much sense

out of Gothic fiction without continual recourse to the concept of paranoia'(24) and this proves accurate in relation to the contemporary texts. However, one of the sources of panic and fear is now not so much the threat posed by homosexuality as the threat posed to freedom of identity by conventional masculinity, a prevalent feature of which, according to Michael Kimmel, is homophobia.(25) Homosexuality is no longer a horrific transgression, and monsters have mutated just as societal attitudes have evolved. The fear is no longer of an easily identifiable 'other', but of the fact that there may no longer be an 'other', a certainty to react against. This terrifying prospect, amplified by uncertainty and obscurity, necessitates internalisation; the monster becomes located within. This reflects the divergent socio-cultural context of contemporary Gothic, inheriting from but not concurrent with its ancestor.

Correspondingly, paranoia itself has evolved. Many of the protagonists in Banks's and Whyte's works believe themselves transparent to and under the compulsion of an often maternal female figure rather than a dominating male, again reflecting changing societal and gender structures. Paranoia and fear, symptomatic of the aforementioned 'crisis of masculinity', represent a last ditch attempt by male characters to aggressively reassert a lucid and straightforward identity. Contemporary Gothic by men is somewhat more problematic than an application of the term Male Gothic would allow for, and thus the term is only employed here to point up the partial continuity evident in the Gothic in general, but moreover to highlight the diffuse and multifarious nature of contemporary Gothic when compared to the more 'coherent' original variety.

### Scottish literature

Correspondingly, the diverse backgrounds of these new male purveyors of the Gothic reinforce this. Iain Banks writes both science fiction and more mainstream fiction, such as detective stories and *bildungsroman*, and consistently casts a Gothic shadow over his work. In addition he often draws from a distinctively Scottish tradition in literature, incorporating the figure of the double (perhaps the most renowned examples being James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of A Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)), the significance of the land and setting (as notable in George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901) and Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* (1932)), and folkloric aspects involving the supernatural, primitive religion and superstition. Again, the Gothic is one tradition amongst many evident in the work of Christopher Whyte. Although he often sets his work in Scotland, much of it has more in common with wider European traditions of magic realism in the vein of Kafka and Gogol, than Scottish fantasy, which appeals to an afterlife and an otherworld separated only tenuously from our own. However, *The Warlock of Strathearn* in particular draws on traditional customs and beliefs, and refers to actual events in Scottish history.

### Banks

*The Wasp Factory* is Banks's first published novel and, set in the remote North of Scotland, it focuses on, in Thom Nairn's words, 'growing up in a society where machismo is paramount'.(26) The chief Gothic feature of the novel lies in the fact that throughout his sixteen years of existence, central protagonist Frank believes himself to be male (his genital indiscrepancy explained by a dog attack when very young), only to discover that he is she, the product of an elaborate experiment carried out by his father.

Contrastingly, in *Excession*, set in the liberal future society of the Culture, bisexuality and sex changing are the norm, and *ubermensch* Genar-Hofoen performs the role of Gothic transgressor. He initially refuses



to ever be anything but male, yet eventually becomes female at the request of his female lover. He then swiftly reverts to male humanoid form, and finally becomes an Affronter, an alien life form whose society revolves around a deep-seated and violent patriarchy, even misogyny, and where the favoured pass-times are hunting and war. It is said that within Affronter society, made up of tribes such as the Winterhunters and the Bladescorners, Genar-hofoen 'had never felt so thoroughly at home.' (38) In the best allegorical tradition of science fiction, Banks extrapolates traits of present-day society and projects them onto a future macrocosmic world, defamiliarising to allow for objective interrogation.

### Whyte

Whyte presents the core of his novel *The Warlock of Strathearn* as a discovered eighteenth-century manuscript of a seventeenth-century tale, edited by the vain and pretentious patriarch Archibald MacCaspin, and after his death by his homosexual nephew. Thus situated clearly and self-consciously within the tradition originating in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the novel also makes use of wider Scottish folklore and fantastic stimuli. Another *bildungsroman*, the narrative follows the life and times of an unnamed protagonist who possesses great supernatural powers. As an adolescent, he attempts to conform by becoming a hard-drinking womaniser who finally falls in love with the unattainable (for most) lesbian witch, Lisbett. To win his desire, he magically turns himself into a woman and a plethora of problems ensue.

Similarly, the protagonist of short story 'Stifelio' is an ultra-masculine figure. An Italian sixteenth-century assassin who enjoys drinking and prostitutes, his downfall is also instigated by love for the wrong woman. By providing a historical setting, Whyte is again alluding to the original Gothic, and, like Banks, allowing for distance to defamiliarise features of our contemporary society.

### Monstrosity

This portrayal of hegemonic masculinity — involving a power 'constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women'(27) — is Gothically monstrous. Sociologist Gregory Herek states that 'being a man is a crucial component of personal identity for males in our society, stemming from the early experience of gender as a self-defining characteristic.'(28) Both Banks and Whyte show an ironic awareness of this view, portraying characters who actively and aggressively adopt the stereotypical characteristics of 'being a man', and exist within a symbiotic relationship with a patriarchal, masculine society; itself, often monstrous and threatening. Monstrosity has been a continuous central concern of the Gothic since its origins. However, as that which can be superficially identified as 'other' and to which fear and horror can be relegated and made tangible and thus certain through symbolic embodiment, the exact forms and origins of the monstrous have evolved greatly over time. Fred Botting notes:

a major shift in perceptions of Gothic monstrosity from a horrifying sight of that which was most unbearable in a culture to a recognition and embrace of the monster as the image, the inner, often denied aspect, of who we, in a (post) modern western world, truly are.(29)

The monster has moved within, and is no longer securely locatable as the embodiment of an outside fear such as race or class. This is evident from the outset in the texts with the use of first person or internalised omniscient narrative voices, providing the monster's point of view. The first groundbreaking example of this technique is Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, where she allows the monster himself to narrate a portion of

the story, illustrating the significant Gothic inheritance these writers have drawn from. Monstrosity is now a psychologically terrifying force threatening individual identity. A socially constructed hyperbolic masculinity is presented as such a threat in Banks's and Whyte's texts, and is depicted as monstrous to make visible, challenge and critique existing hegemonic structures, whereby the masculine exists through subordination of the feminine and the homosexual.

The literary notion of the stereotype is particularly relevant here. Stereotype and schema theory, involving the evocation of reader expectation through the portrayal of certain categories of people and situations can be applied to the heterosexual male:

In so far as we regard the category of person as displaying strongly predictable attributes or behaviour, the category may harden into a stereotype, an extremely simplified mental model which fails to see individual features, only the values that are believed to be appropriate to the type. This is, of course, a basic ideological process at work. A socially constructed model of the world is projected onto the objects of perception and cognition, so that essentially the things we see and think about are constructed according to a scheme of values, not entities directly perceived.(30)

The 'we' here refers to the reader, but in the texts it is the characters themselves who project stereotypical traits onto their own identities, adopted from the society around them, and Gothically exaggerated to evoke fear and horror. They assume an easily recognisable scheme of values and pattern of behaviour to allow for a glossing over of their own fundamental anxieties. This is also often an attempt to enter into and become accepted by a particular (patriarchal) society, but this regularly fails due to the excessiveness of the attempt, the compensatory exaggeration of the expression of 'being a man'.

In *The Wasp Factory*, Frank must compensate for his perceived physical lack of a phallus. Believing himself to have been castrated by the family dog in a savage attack during early childhood, Frank unconsciously models his actions, appearance and behaviour on a socially-given image of ultra-maleanness involving violence and misogyny, even going so far as to commit murder. The masculine pronoun is used with reference to Frank since that is the identity he assumes and what, for the greater part of the novel, he believes himself to be. Post-revelation of actual biological sex, Frank realises:

I believe that I decided if I could never become a man, I — the unmanned — would out-man those around me, and so I became the killer, a small image of the ruthless soldier-hero almost all I've ever seen or read seems to pay strict homage to. I would find or make my own weapons, and my victims would be those most recently produced by the one act I was incapable of, my equals in that, while they possessed the potential for generation, they were at that point no more able to perform the required act than I was. Talk about penis envy. (183)

The use of the phrase 'penis envy' here highlights Banks's awareness of existing gender stereotypes and clichés. Freud's notion that women experience in their bodies a lack and perceive themselves to be castrated which results in a life-long desire for a penis(31) persists as a hackneyed notion of gender identity, one which Banks employs to suggest the triteness of any socially-constructed gendered identity.

Frank is a Frankensteinian product of his society. The allusion in his name is no coincidence. We witness Frank endlessly consume popular culture in the form of punk rock and other music, television and literature. In turn he internalises the violent and patriarchal images contained within this — that which almost all he has seen or read pays homage to — to become a monster, created largely by his context, and not merely by the dubiously successful hormone-based experiments of his scientist father. Michael Kimmel states that ‘violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood’(32), and violent behaviour is the most monstrosity exaggerated cliché of masculinity that Frank performs. The notion of gender as performative, i.e. culturally constructed, consisting of an accumulation of both conscious and unconscious acts, gestures and modes of discourse that accrue a gendered meaning, is now a staple of gender theory thanks to Judith Butler’s influential study, *Gender Trouble*. (33) The fact that gendered meaning is socially given rather than essentially connected to the body suggests gender identity’s severance from biological sex, and implies the possibility of a person of one sex adopting a traditionally opposing gender identity. This is precisely what Frank, unconsciously, does. As well as seeing off three of his young relatives, he sadistically and ritualistically kills ‘God’s creatures’ by the sackload: ‘How the hell am I supposed to get heads and bodies for the Poles and the Bunker if I don’t kill things? There just aren’t enough natural deaths. You can’t explain that sort of thing to people, though.’ (13) His hobbies include making explosives and staging wars between various inanimate objects, such as ‘the Ordinary Soldiers versus the Aerosols [...] A good War, with all the right ingredients and a more spectacular ending than most (I even had my father asking me what all the explosions and the fire had been about, when I got back to the house that evening).’(24) Victor Sage notes that the male protagonists in Banks’s work often belong to a ‘barbarian, male, warrior-culture, essentially religious and ritualistic in nature’.(34) Indeed Frank, with his primitive quasi-religious beliefs and animalian territorialism, is one in a long line of almost feral anti-heroes (see for example ‘the Barbarian’ in *The Bridge*), typifying a central dialectic in Banks’s Gothic involving the Civilised and the Barbaric, and the fear that the primitive past may not be as distant as initially assumed or hoped.

In a sense, Frank’s maleness is simply ‘too much’, and it is only the subtle humour of the novel that saves the narrative from becoming intangibly far-fetched. This in itself is a distinctively Gothic trait. Judith Halberstam argues that monstrosity is the means by which the Gothic negotiates excess:

The production of fear in a literary text emanates from a vertiginous excess of meaning [...] Within Gothic novels, I argue, multiple interpretations are embedded in the text and part of the experience of horror comes from the realisation that meaning itself runs riot. Gothic novels produce a symbol for this interpretive mayhem in the body of the monster.(35)

The reality of Frank’s gender can be read in many different ways. Banks may be reinforcing the now common ideas concerning the power of nurture over nature, the notion of gender as performative, or making a wider comment regarding the problematic relationship between society and the individual. Yet despite its over-determined nature, Frank’s excessive maleness is clearly a monstrous source of fear and horror, threatening and destabilising through the grotesque exaggeration of conventional views of masculinity and thus allowing for a reconsideration of gendered identity in general.

In *Excession*, the monstrous other takes on the macrocosmic form of an opposing species, complete with green skin and tentacles, namely the Affront. This barbaric, patriarchal warrior culture exists in opposition

to the Culture, Banks's socialist but at the same time imperialist utopian society. The Culture consists of sex-changing humanoids and assimilated volunteers from other species, living in harmony in a society where everyone is equal, money does not exist and where, 'some people cycled back and forth between male and female all their lives, while some settled for an androgynous in-between state, finding there a comfortable equanimity.' (321) Isolated overreacher, Genar-Hofoen rebels against the perceived constrictions of the Culture and is attracted to the liberating alternative of Affronter society, which he ultimately joins, enjoying experiences unobtainable within the Culture. Genar-Hofoen is a hard-drinking womaniser who is most reluctant to change sex, and as a result is viewed as abnormal by his peers. He defensively states, however, 'I am who I ever was. What I called masculinity, what I celebrated in it was just an excuse for me-ness, wasn't it?' (348) Even the utopian Culture is shown to be restrictive and dogmatic, and Banks's rejection of any strict polarisation of good and evil where opposing societies are concerned combines with Genar-Hofoen's uncertainty concerning his true coherent self to suggest the arbitrary nature of gender-based identity in general.

The masculine becomes perverse in Whyte's short story 'Stifelio' through its association with death. The very title is a double reference to the erect penis — ultimate symbol of virile manhood — and to the corpse, or 'stiff'. The story relates the demise of a successful assassin in Florence in the sixteenth century. The assassin embodies all the male characteristics that come with such a career — coldness, rationality, stealth and a potential for violence, and as a pastime he frequents a dilapidated tavern, employing prostitutes there and justifying this, thus: 'What would happen to those poor wretches if men like you and me did not bring to them desires we have no lawfully wedded wives to satisfy, and pay them richly for their services?' (186) Women are reduced to economic commodity, available to be bought and sold, demonstrated again when the assassin's lover is sold by the mistress of the brothel she belongs to. (188) The assassin's downfall is triggered by a moment of weakness, when he falls in love with this prostitute. Some time later he is hired by a noblewoman to kill the future wife of her grandson, and in this way he becomes a kind of prostitute himself, exchanging specific characteristics of his gender identity — violent behaviour, detachment and unsentimental rationality — for money. The assassin discovers, moments too late, that the now-dead woman is the same he previously loved. A return to conventional hard-drinking masculinity provides comfort. This is where we encounter him, in the tavern relating the events of his life to a male stranger, and asking of him, in the unnerving conclusion to the story:

Will you forget my threats and taunts and stay at my side for as long as it takes? Will you hear everything I have to say and lodge it inside you, without betraying me? And without allowing it to contaminate you? For that would mean that the rottenness I am seeking to expunge would merely take root in another man. Can you help me be free of it without yourself succumbing?  
(190)

This rottenness is his monstrous masculinity, and the call to the stranger to resist is also a call to the reader to distance themselves from the contemporary version. The assassin kills the only thing he has ever loved, suggesting that conventional maleness is self-destructive, and that the adoption of constructed roles annihilates individual identity. Love is prohibited in this masculine scheme and therefore must be destroyed by a suitably masculine force, cold-blooded violence for the sake of economic gain. Masculinity is revealed to be, to actual people and to the self, deadly.

Contrastingly, in *The Warlock of Strathearn*, male-dominated society acts as primary monstrous ‘other’, positioned in opposition to the protagonist and narrator of the manuscript, the unnamed warlock himself. The manuscript is set in late seventeenth-century rural Scotland, where post-Reformation religious structures maintain an iron hold on public life. This allows Whyte, in a similar technique to that used in ‘Stifelio’, to defamiliarise contemporary values through their distancing in time. It is said of the Church that ‘it withered away and died, leaving only a rigid hierarchy of frightened men, hungry for power’ (54), and at one point during a sermon, a woman is verbally reprimanded for being single: ‘Why has she never married? Why has she remained, in defiance of St. Paul, without a man to guide her, to command her in the doings of each day?’ (83) The horrific consequence of this excess is witch burning, and throughout the novel many women who do not share the views of the establishment are singled out, ostracised and publicly executed, their ‘unnatural’ resistance linked to paranormal power. Interestingly, the contemporarily set frame, narrated at first by editor, Archie MacCaspin, subtly illustrates the persistence of patriarchy into the present day. Archie is a stereotypical pompous patriarch, schoolmaster whose word is Law, and who misogynistically lists his wife’s sole qualities as being a ‘faithful spouse’ and having ‘incomparable culinary skills.’ (8) The warlock’s main anxiety as an adolescent is that his supernatural powers will set him apart from his peers: ‘Any observation that implied I might differ from my contemporaries unnerved me [...] In order to live in the day-to-day, to pass for a normal adolescent, I had to blot out an entire field of receptivity.’ (112) As part of this ‘blotting out’, he adopts overtly masculine behaviour, winning respect for his skills in the arts of the bedchamber and his contributions to a circle of male friends who frequent a local tavern (118-120), successfully forming various homosocial relationships, bonds that, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, maintain the privilege accorded to the male sex.(36) He becomes accepted in this male community by drawing from the values and customs of the society around him, existing for a time, like Frank, as a Frankensteinian product of his context, within which he has generally felt himself an anomaly. The warlock’s eventual failure to belong to this misogynistic society, as he himself is attacked for his paranormal abilities and subsequently transforms himself into a woman to obtain love, is a covert critique of these values.

### **Ritual**

The warlock’s almost ritualistic donning of male traits highlights the anaesthetising power of ritual. As Louis Breger states, ‘rituals, whether personal or religious, can serve to contain and relieve anxiety and other disruptive emotions.’(37) Through stock, patterned responses the warlock is able to convince others of the authenticity of his performed identity for a short while, and also gloss over the disparity between persona and self. A childhood incident involving a punishment session he receives from his grandmother and her religious adviser, the sadistic Reverend Vincent MacAteer, indicates the importance of ritual through its lack:

If I had known with what frequency I was to be punished, or the likely number of strokes, I could have practiced economy, measuring out my determination to endure their cruelty in the needed doses. The utter unpredictability of it all came close to driving me mad. (100)

The absence of ritual actually amplifies disruptive emotions here. Williams argues that ritual is a distinctive feature of Male Gothic: ‘these “rules” even suggest a ritualistic or neurotic expression of “repetition compulsion”, a symptom of the male subject’s primitive, superstitious attempts to accommodate disorder within a pattern of order.’(38)

This is precisely what Frank of *The Wasp Factory* attempts. Ritual covers up, elides gaps, and anaesthetises both the victim and the proponent of monstrous masculinity. Frank uses personal ritual to desensitise himself to his horrifically violent acts by normalising his life through the imposition of routine. His grooming habits have an uncanny air of repetition:

Next the shave. I always use shaving foam and the latest razors (twin-blade swivel-heads are state-of-the-art at the moment), removing the downy brown growth of the previous day and night with dexterity and precision. As with all my ablutions, the shave follows a definite and predetermined pattern; I take the same number of strokes of the same length in the same sequence each morning. (44)

However, he extends this by building up an entire religion and way of life around everyday rhythms and patterns, complete with totemic symbols such as the head of the dog that supposedly castrated him, and fortune-telling machine in the form of the wasp factory itself which, Frank believes, prophesies events according to how the wasp trapped inside dies. These repetitions, recurring beliefs and patterns allow him to validate his manhood by negotiating his over-compensatory masculine behaviour. He relieves unresolved gender anxieties, a continuous and unconscious source of disruptive emotion for Frank, by imposing order on what would otherwise be chaos.

### **Enclosing Structures**

Indeed, order would be chaos in the paradigmatic binary sense also, as male Frank would be female were it not for ritualistically imposed conventional masculine traits. Gender identities in the texts are represented as at first sight conforming to traditional and implicitly hierarchical binary codes, upon which the Symbolic Order is founded. There clearly exists a hegemonic masculinity which relies on an active subordination and marginalisation of women and effeminised and homosexual masculinities, something that occurs in all four texts. Frank, Affronter society, the assassin and the community of Strathearn all demonstrate a deep-rooted misogyny, corporealised by violent acts towards women, while often concurrently holding strongly homophobic attitudes in a defensive attempt to prove and validate manliness.

Yet, furthermore, this excessive conformity to the dominant side of binaries and consequent adoption of a rigid masculine identity is exposed as just as entrapping and restricting as the limits posed on women and homosexual men by patriarchy. Through their Gothic explorations of masculinity, these writers present grotesque ostentations of traditional binary structures, exaggerating to expose as arbitrary. Frank metaphorises the enclosing nature of these hackneyed structures when he envisages the family home, traditional isolated Gothic site, as a head:

The House was dark. I stood looking at it in the darkness, just aware of its bulk in the feeble light of a broken moon, and I thought it looked even bigger than it really was, like a stone-giant's head, a huge moonlit skull full of shapes and memories, staring out to sea and attached to a vast, powerful body buried in the rock and sand beneath, ready to shrug itself free and disinter itself on some unknowable command or cue. (86)

The body is large and powerful, but is interred in the ground, the very foundations of life, and the liberating formula is paradoxically 'unknowable'. Live burial is another emblematic Gothic image, and the texts suggest that the adoption of a specific gender identity, with all the customs and expectations that come with it, is one form of being buried alive, trapped and suffocated by convention.

Images of enclosure are also numerous in *The Warlock of Strathearn*. In the local brothel, the mistress's laugh takes on a terrifying quality for the warlock: 'doomed and pitiless, as if it were welcoming me into a chamber of horrors from which no further escape was possible.' (130) Masculinity, as prescribed by patriarchal society, is as restrictive and limiting as femininity, if in vastly different ways, imposing as many obligations on behaviour and action, and becoming a chamber of horrors for those who struggle against conformity. Concurrently, binary oppositions have been hugely re-examined, debated and all but discredited in recent theory and this is connected to the generally acknowledged disparity between gender and sex and the dissolution of essentialist gender attitudes. As Butler states:

Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders [...] even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.(39)

Banks and Whyte self-consciously utilise the binary gender system and its inherent essentialism in order to bring in the shared knowledge of stereotypes to provide a horizon of reader expectation to transgress. Expectation is overwhelmed through monstrous exaggeration, as we have seen, in the way that Botting acknowledges with his argument that 'horror marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended.'(40) Moreover, the inherent essentialism belonging to these conventional gender binaries is often radically undermined by the ultimate revelation of true biological sex, in the case of Frank, or sexual metamorphosis, in the case of the warlock of Strathearn and members of the Culture.

### **Androgyny**

Leading on from this, three other seemingly transgressive figures demonstrate an initial disregard for the incumbent boundaries of gender: the homosexual, the androgyne and the dominant female. Some or all three of these are present in each of the texts, co-existing with and foregrounding monstrous masculinities. Yet, more often than not, the homosexual figures and powerful females ultimately reinscribe binaries by consciously or unconsciously adopting the conventional behaviour of the opposite sex. Homosexual figures such as Andrew Elliot, Archie MacCaspian's nephew, are feminised, while women such as Frank's absent mother, the warlock's grandmother and the noblewoman of 'Stifelio' display traditionally masculine attributes. Frank's mother rides in on a motorcycle, gives birth, then leaves the infant Frank to be brought up by his father. The warlock's grandmother Alison perceives his supernatural gift early on, and viewing him as a threat to her position, makes several attempts to murder him. In 'Stifelio', the grandmother who hires the assassin is described by him as 'rotten inside with ill will and viciousness [...] She is a cancer in the body of that family, ruling it still and sucking their vigour from the men.' (184/5)

It is with the figure of the androgyne, however, that liberation from binary restriction is made possible. Alongside the presence of homosexual, transgender and transsexual figures (who more often than not reaffirm hierarchical binaries), there are only two truly androgynous figures: Amorphia, the humanoid representative of the Mind ship 'Sleeper Service' in *Excession*, and the warlock himself in Whyte's novel. These figures manage to exist outside and beyond the control of traditional power structures. Androgyny, like the Gothic, remains notoriously obscure and difficult to define, but is clearly distinct from the sex/gender severance found in *The Wasp Factory* and *Excession*, and the feminised masculinity and masculinised femininity found in Whyte's texts. Again like the Gothic, androgyny is characterised by its extreme ambivalence, representing an unmarked and difficult to locate site for the meeting and melding of various oppositions; in Marjory Garber's words, 'a space of possibility.'<sup>(41)</sup> According to this definition, only the warlock and Amorphia are androgynes. Androgyny is a psychological rather than a physiological state, existing tentatively as liminality and balancing precariously on the unmarked border between genders, as these figures do. June Singer vaguely defines androgyny as that which:

threatens many presuppositions about individuals' identity as men or as women, and hence threatens the security of those people, including most of us, who have vested interests in the conventional attitudes towards sex (maleness and femaleness) and gender (masculinity and femininity).<sup>(42)</sup>

Despite the haziness of this outline, androgyny is clearly not a biologically definable characteristic (unlike hermaphroditism, which involves the presence of both sets of genitals). Neither is it related to sexual preference, and is thus distinct from homo- and bisexuality. Androgyny is the most explicit indicator of the independent existence of sex and gender, involving the formation of an identity completely dissociated from anatomy, and also from traditional binaries, relying on the amalgamation of maleness and femaleness to produce a liminality inexpressible through the present, inherently gendered, signifying system. The gendering of pronouns makes it impossible to designate and therefore constrict or pin down an androgynous being. It exists outside, beyond and in the liminal space between binaries rather than simply inverting or oscillating from one to the other. This excessive, ambiguous space where meaning is protean and multifarious is a most Gothic location.

In *Excession*, the artificially intelligent ship's avatar Amorphia, as the name suggests (connoting that which lacks definite form), is a 'cadaverously sexless creature', 'deliberately formed to look not simply neither male nor female but as perfectly, artificially poised between maleness and femaleness as it was possible to be.'<sup>(6)</sup> However, the fact that 'this seemingly quite human person was nothing of the kind'<sup>(6)</sup> implies the impossibility of this idealised state for anything other than a highly advanced machine. Amorphia's form serves a specific function, appearing as unthreatening and inoffensive as possible to both sexes and all genders, a necessity when working to promote machine/human relations. Humanity is plainly much too gendered to ever achieve this ideal, even the liberated transsexual humanity of the Culture where although biology is almost redundant, gender identities persist, as exemplified by Genar-Hofoen and his pregnant — therefore firmly female — former lover Dajeil Gelian. This perfection requires the cold, hormone- and culture-free logic of a machine, and is experienced as threatening by monstrous males such as Genar-Hofoen, and more generally the Affront who are defeated in their attempt to instigate war with the Culture by the collaborative efforts of several of these androgynous Mind-ships.



Helene Cixous argues that the solution to restrictive binary structures lies within the form of androgyny, dissociated from sexual preference, she refers to as:

the *other* bisexuality, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallocentric Performing Theater, sets up his or her erotic universe. Bisexuality — that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex, and, starting with this permission one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body.(43)

This *other* bisexuality, or androgyny involving the welcome and fluid location and amalgamation within one's identity of difference, can only be conceived of by 'subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.'(44) One such peripheral individual is the warlock. Despite his short-lived initial attempts to integrate himself, the warlock continues to elude patriarchy, epitomised in his context by the Church, and even often outside the inherently masculine 'symbolic' through his ability to communicate non-verbally with plants and animals and his susceptibility to the rhythms and drives of life. This is the realm of the semiotic, an unordered, unrestrained domain indifferent to verbal language and governed by drives and instincts.(45) The warlock has ready access to both modalities, to culture and nature, to male and female. After changing sex, he looks in the mirror and acknowledges that, 'the face was familiar, myself yet not myself [...]. But the eyes that met mine were the eyes I knew.' (154) Eyes are important in psychoanalytic interpretations as a general site of identity, and his eyes remain unchanged by his genital transformation. His biological identity shifts from male to female, but his gender identity exists as neither, ceasing to be a *gender* identity and continuing simply as an *identity*. Apart from the purely superficial, such as dress, his behaviour, attitudes and values remain consistent. He does not subscribe to societal pressure to remain on one side of any binary, and in this sense is a highly transgressive figure. Yet, like the machine Amorphia, who exists as a similar somatic metaphor for the destabilisation and deconstruction of binaries, he makes use of powers and skills unattainable to mere humanity to achieve and express androgyny. The human scheme again proves simply too inherently gendered to allow for liminality, and these figures are interpretable only within the metaphorical domain of fiction.

The warlock is positioned almost entirely outside the domain of existing 'human' structures, is thus indefinable and uncontrollable by them. He therefore becomes a threat to ultra-patriarchal figures such as the Reverend McAteer. Yet he is also portrayed in contrast to the abject and castrating uber-female Alison. Similarly, Amorphia exists in opposition to the two explicitly gendered figures of Genar-Hofoen, and the patriarchy he represents, and Dajeil Gelian who is 'perpetually pregnant' (383) and thus unambiguously female. These juxtapositions illustrate androgyny's dependence on gender: it requires gender's *lack* to *be*. The polarisation of the androgyne with extreme heteronormativity foregrounds the symbiotic relationship, and in both texts the opposition is made tangible through direct aggressive conflict. Amorphia maintains a dislike and distrust of Genar-Hofoen and his misogynistic and carefree behaviour (e.g., 394), while the warlock clashes repeatedly with the Church and with his grandmother. Yet both figures remain beyond the often-engulfing control of the potentially powerful forces signified by their opposites; Amorphia is fundamental in defeating the Affront in battle and is successful in encouraging Dajeil Gelian to have her child and leave pregnancy behind, while the warlock defeats

Alison and is relentlessly autonomous despite continuous torture and persecution by the Church. In Cixous's words, they are 'peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.' Yet in the presently gendered context, supernatural power or highly advanced artificially intelligent technology is required to obtain peripherality and elude subjugation by powerful others.

These factors may explain the lack of any detailed definition of androgyny; it lies beyond the possibilities of present gender discourse and is therefore impossible to explain clearly, subsisting in the unmarked liminal space between definitions. The ambiguity and subversiveness intrinsic to androgyny in these texts are distinctively Gothic. Indeed, the Gothic in general readily accommodates androgyny. This is evident from its outset, for example in the androgynous figure of the devil in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (46), through to contemporary popular adaptations of the Gothic, such as in 'Goth' culture and fashion, epitomised by androgynous figures like Marilyn Manson, who is biologically male but whose identity, still clearly fictitious, is an amalgamation of many diverse expressions of gender. These figures are consistently subversive, unseating heteronormativity and reader/audience expectation, threatening and destabilising conventional male-dominated power relations, and as Whyte proffers, successfully and visibly articulating transgressions.(47)

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this article has been concerned with arguing for a place within the tradition of Gothic fiction for Banks and Whyte as writers with canonical status within Scottish literature, and in turn refreshing Scottish literature by demonstrating its recurrent symbiosis with the Gothic. Examples of this symbiosis are evident in the work of many Scottish writers, from the Gothic works of Walter Scott and James Hogg, through Robert Louis Stevenson and into the present day. However, the argument here has focussed on Banks and Whyte as contemporary writers who draw from the Scottish tradition, while employing the Gothic mode, to interrogate masculinity as part of the significant and timely re-evaluation of masculinity in general.

1. Berthold Schoene, 'Angry Young Masculinities and the Rhetoric of Homophobia and Misogyny in the Scottish Novels of Alan Sharp', in *Gendering the Nation*, ed. Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p.102/3.
2. John MacInnes, 'The crisis of masculinity and the politics of identity' in *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.311.
3. Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p.13.
4. See for example Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge New Critical Idiom Series, 1996); and Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of the Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.xi.
5. David S. Gutterman, 'Postmodernism and the interrogation of masculinity', in *Theorising Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (California: Sage Publications, 1994), p.226.
6. See note 2.
7. Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the fin de siecle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.3.
8. Iain (M) Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Abacus, 1990 (1984)), *Excession* (London: Orbit, 1996). Christopher Whyte, *The Warlock of Strathearn* (London: Indigo, 1997), 'Stifelio', in *Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction*, ed. Alan Bissett (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2001). Subsequent references will appear in brackets.
9. Christopher Whyte, 'Unspeakable Heterosexuality', in *The Edinburgh Review* (No. 95, Spring 1996), p.127 & 125.
10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), p.14.
11. Lord Acton, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, April 1887.
12. J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp.381-386.
13. Allen W. Grove, 'Coming Out of the Castle: Gothic, Sexuality and the Limits of Language', in *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* (Vol.26, No. 3, 2000), pp. 429-446, p.429.
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24. David Punter, *The Literature of Terror vol.2*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1996), p.1.
25. See Michael S. Kimmel, 'Masculinity as Homophobia' in *Theorising Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (California: Sage Publications, 1994).
26. Thom Nairn, 'Iain Banks and the Fiction Factory', in *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, ed. Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p.128.
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38. *Art of Darkness*, p.175.
39. *Gender Trouble*, p.10.
40. *Gothic*, p.75.
41. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.11.
42. June Singer, *Androgyny* (London: Routledge, 1977), p.28.
43. 'Sorties', p.582.
44. Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975), in *Feminisms: A Reader*, ed. Maggie Humm, (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.200.
45. For more on this and its relation to gender see Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), trans. Margaret Waller with an introduction by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
46. The notion of androgyny is prevalent throughout this, one of the 'original' Gothic novels dating from 1796, from the androgynous and sexually attractive figure of the devil, who appears first as a naked youth with 'perfect form and face' and 'silken locks', to the cross-dressing and transgressive figure of Matilda. The categories of masculinity and femininity are shown to be unstable throughout. For more on this see William D. Brewer, 'Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*' in *Gothic Studies Volume 6, Issue 2* (November 2004), pp. 192-207.
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## **“I Want to Play A Game”: How to See *Saw***

*Jake Huntley*

In the opening scene of the first *Saw* film (2004), Adam (Leigh Whannell) struggles to consciousness in a filled bath to find himself chained to a pipe in a derelict room. Dr Lawrence Gordon (Cary Elwes) is similarly restrained in the corner opposite. The audio tape Adam subsequently finds in his pocket provides only the barest of explanation. “You’re probably wondering where you are,” the deadpan voice of Jigsaw tells him. “I’ll tell you where you might be. You might be in the room that you die in.” That expression of possibility is central to the concerns of the film and to the game Adam and Gordon must play if they are to have any hope of survival.

At the start of *Saw II* (2005), Michael (Noan Jenkins), a police informant, is faced with the prospect of cutting a key from within his eye in order to release himself from the death-mask locked around his neck. “How much blood will you shed to stay alive Michael?” Jigsaw speculates. “Live or die, make your choice.” Michael, choosing to discard the scalpel provided for him rather than use it, is subsequently added to the list of Jigsaw’s victims.

Towards the start of *Saw III* (2006) yet another victim, Troy (J. La Rose), trapped in a schoolroom, is forced to rip free rings secured through various parts of his body in order to avoid an explosion. Ultimately, his failure doesn’t matter; even if Troy broke his chains the room is inescapable, as Detective Kerry (Dinah Meyer) notes after they have to use blowtorches on the door to gain entry.

Of the three traps described, the last is not solely the work of John Kramer, the infamous ‘Jigsaw Killer’ (played in all three films by Tobin Bell) but is staged by Amanda (Shawnee Smith), his protégé, the person chosen to maintain Jigsaw’s work and provide him with a legacy when he finally succumbs to cancer. It is through Amanda that Jigsaw intends to achieve his desire for immortality. Crucially, Amanda misinterprets the rules. Despite having played twice herself and been forced to make her choice between living and dying she overlooks the fact that although Jigsaw’s games are grisly and always potentially lethal, he plays fair, adhering to a strict personal philosophy based upon the will to survive and an appreciation of life.

The subject of one of Jigsaw’s games is therefore always presented with an opportunity, the aim of which is to reinvigorate the potential of the subject, jump-start the survival instinct and instil a celebration or ‘savouring’ of life. In Deleuzian terms, it is the potential of life that is at stake. Amanda’s traps, however, are simply brutal killings disguised as games. Her victims, unlike Jigsaw’s subjects, find themselves in situations where they have no chance of winning. Those caught in Amanda’s games have already been judged undeserving and lacking. Her misinterpretation is such that she closes off all opportunity, denies any potential for escape and offers only death. If Jigsaw’s games are encounters with Deleuzian affect, Amanda’s games are anti-Deleuzian, operating more as encounters with Lacanian notions of the signification of death within the symbolic order and the death drive. This is because Amanda, as a Lacanian subject, becomes caught between her own subjectivity and the object of her desire. In purely cinematic terms, Jigsaw directs his games while Amanda acts in hers.

## Playing The Game

Gilles Deleuze's two books on cinema, *The Movement-Image* (1986) and *The Time-Image* (1989), place an emphasis on the potential or the virtual, that is, varying lines of possibility or 'lines of flight' offered by the meeting of human technology and cinema technology. In a philosophy based around notions of flows and folds, forces and speeds, and the potential both of and for difference, cinema's production and images offer a way of identifying this perception, making it the "organ for perfecting the new reality."<sup>(1)</sup> The cinematic techniques of montage or jump cut, for instance, introduce a new line of thought, a fresh way of understanding reality. Cinema then allows the potential of life to be *thought* – a key aspect of Deleuze's philosophy. Cinema's techniques open perception beyond the everyday, expanding beyond the lulled, quotidian routine one may experience. As Claire Colebrook explains, this is best identified in extreme or extraordinary circumstances. "Life's power is best expressed and evidenced, not in the general and everyday, nor in the normative, but in the perverse, singular and aberrant (for this is when life exposes its creative and diverging power, not the illusion of sameness which we require for utility)."<sup>(2)</sup> It is this that gives Jigsaw's games their Deleuzian tone, the urgent revitalisation of life occasioning new experiences to be learnt and assimilated: such as the perverse, singular and aberrant situation of waking to find a man-trap secured around you neck. There is then the instruction to live or die, to make your choice, to survive the encounter with *affect*, or the *affection-image*, which Deleuze explains through the notion of a reflexive face able to "say 'something' common to several objects of different kinds."<sup>(3)</sup> Affect can also be understood (perhaps more appropriately for Jigsaw's games) as "the turning point at which a physical system paradoxically embodies multiple and normally mutually exclusive potentials, only one of which is 'selected.'"<sup>(4)</sup>

It is this point – the opportunity to choose to 'win' and go free afterwards, presented without partiality – that Amanda does not get; along with Rick Worland, who, in *An Introduction to the Horror Film* (2007), aligns *Saw* with *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *The Abominable Dr Phibes* (1971) as films that "frighten not just with the mortal punishment the victims endure but from the soul-killing depression of knowing that the perpetrator is all-to-human and drawing a sadistic thrill from the victim's agony."<sup>(5)</sup>

In fact, Jigsaw's principle games – played by Adam and Dr Gordon in *Saw I*, the group trapped in the house and policeman Eric Matthews (Donnie Whalberg) in *Saw II* and Jeff (Angus Macfadyen), Lynn (Bahar Soomek) and Amanda (yet again) in *Saw III* – are designed to be winnable by their subjects as long as they take care to follow the rules and Jigsaw will accept any outcome with equanimity. There is no thrill, sadistic or otherwise, in setting these games; they are throws of the die by the subjects, aleatoric opportunities. Adam and Dr Lawrence Gordon are initially provided with the key to their leg restraints (although that particular baby disappears down the plughole with Adam's bathwater because Amanda merely tosses it into the bath when she helps to set up the game). Similarly, the group in *Saw II* also have a key and an escape route in the room they wake up in, whilst Eric Matthews has only to sit and listen to Jigsaw in order for his son to be returned to him safe and well.<sup>(6)</sup> In these examples, at least, there can be gain with a minimum of pain if one is willing to respond attentively and thoughtfully to the challenges presented.

Elsewhere, the command to search within for the will to survive is altogether a more literal and bloodier affair, although it is clear that these games are still centred on the chance to survive, if you've got the guts (or somebody else's). Paul (Mike Butters), a successful businessman 'guilty' of cutting himself, has to

tunnel through razor-wire before a basement door on a timer is locked and he is entombed. Amanda's first test involves slicing open the stomach of an incapacitated man to retrieve the key to the 'reverse man-trap' secured around her head whilst in *Saw III*, part of Jeff's game is to restrain his desire for vengeance and forgive and rescue the people perceived as responsible for, or implicated in, the death of his son in a car accident.

When Jigsaw, via recorded message or video-taped Billy doll, tells his subjects "I want to play a game", he is not there as a participant or even a spectator but instead as a referee, observing the rules pertinent to that particular subject rather than salaciously enjoying the 'victim's agony'.

### Self Help

As Jigsaw makes clear to Detective Matthews during their conversation in *Saw II*, where Jigsaw's motivation and philosophy are most comprehensively explored, "I've never murdered anyone in my life. The decisions are up to them." Whilst it probably wouldn't stand up in court, he is at least correct in his usual, carefully literal sense. The decisions, the choices, the selection of a potential, are in the hands of the subjects of his games and he only intervenes in order to keep the game within its rules so a decision can be reached. The subjects are faced with a shocking choice that forces them to acknowledge what Deleuze identifies as the virtual – that is, the unacknowledged aspects of our experience with reality. Gregory J. Seigworth observes that:

The virtual is perhaps easiest to consider as what transpires in those passing everyday moments that never really present themselves to our conscious minds, generally because such moments (in their various contexts and variable durations) arrive with insufficient force or otherwise descend with an intensity that is altogether dispersed or atmospheric.(7)

Challenged by Matthews, Jigsaw responds by representing the renewed awareness of life he achieved following the discovery of his inoperable brain tumour precisely through the virtual, those patches of life that emit such little intensity they can remain unacknowledged or unperceived in everyday life. "In a split second your world's cracked open.(8) You look at things differently. You smell things differently. You savour everything, be it a glass of water or a walk in the park."

Although never made explicit, it seems that John Kramer only embarked on his career as Jigsaw, orchestrating games to "test the fabric of human nature", after this traumatic revelation and, specifically, after he survived a subsequent suicide attempt. "My body had not been strong enough to repel cancer cells, yet I had lived through a plunge off a cliff," he explains to Matthews. This encounter with death is a transformative moment; more than 'John Kramer' flees from the side of the crashed, cracked car. Deleuze (writing with Guattari) notes how:

[W]hen we ascend toward the virtual, when we turn ourselves toward the virtuality that is actualised in the state of affairs, we discover a completely different reality where we no longer have to search for what takes place from one point to another, from one instant to another, because virtuality goes beyond any possible function. (9)



This, in effect, is the particular game that Jigsaw himself plays – one where the organism might be failing but the flow of desire succeeds and endures. Jigsaw might resort to discussing Darwin’s “little trip to the Galapagos Islands” to provide a theoretical underpinning for his project and echo Nietzsche in talking of the will to survive, but this merely misdirects investigators and witnesses in the same way that the gruesome traps and freely-flowing gore earn him his unsettling serial-killer soubriquet.

Jigsaw’s games are designed to crack open the world of their respective players: the challenges are nearly always relevant to the subject’s lifestyle in a symbolic or literal way, bringing them to (painful) self-awareness, prompting a reappraisal of their squandered potential. Thus, Michael, the police informant, has to sacrifice an eye, while As Deleuze (a successful suicide) notes, “A life should not be contained in the simple moment when individual life confronts universal death. A life is everywhere, in all the moments a certain living subject passes through”.<sup>(10)</sup> It is important to recognise that this also encompasses non-actualised moments, that is, potential moments that *may* occur but do not, the ripples within/alongside actualised moments that remain at the level of the virtual, of affect. Discussing this non-actualisation Colebrook comments that:

Affect is not the thing itself, for we only have things insofar as we (as sets of movements) are respondents to other movements [...] Thus affect is just that vibratory or felt movement that may or may not result in action [...] In order for there to be a self *that* decides or pictures its world there has to be some differentiation, and this is established through affect [...] It is only in *not* acting, in *not* expending energy but in ‘absorbing’ the force of the image, that something like a site of pooled energy as the reception of affect can be formed.<sup>(11)</sup>

In Jigsaw’s game with Detective Matthews, his challenge is exactly this: *not* to act. The rules, simply and unequivocally, are that Matthews sits privately with Jigsaw away from his police colleagues and listens, ‘absorbing’ Jigsaw’s conversation until the defined time is over. The distraction of another game being played on a series of monitors, with Matthews’ son, Daniel, as one of the participants, is in fact part of Detective Matthews’ game. The police assume – erroneously – that they are watching a live feed, but Daniel has already played his game. Eric Matthews’ failure to heed Jigsaw’s rules, his inability to listen on any level in favour of (forceful) action, is what condemns him not see his son Daniel again (who is released just as Jigsaw said he would be) and consigns Matthews to the same fate as Adam and Dr Gordon.

### **Pieces of the Puzzle**

Just as Jigsaw’s misunderstood instructions are partly a result of his misdirection, so the name ‘Jigsaw Killer’ is erroneously applied to John Kramer through the deliberate ambiguity of his actions. Jigsaw does not consider himself a killer, in the strict sense that he never personally commits an act of murder, he merely provides the open field where such an eventuality may occur. Indeed, he says to Lynn, the physician forced to keep him alive in *Saw III*, “I despise murderers”, in a rare glimpse of intensity and personal opinion. Similarly, the police and the press misconstrue the practice of marking failed subjects by cutting a jigsaw piece from them. It is understood as an aesthetic impulse, acknowledging ‘ownership’ of the victim or culpability for the crime. Steven Jay Schneider, in *Dark Thoughts: Philosophic*

*Reflections on Cinematic Horror*, [2003] summarises horror films concerned with murder as artistic product or artistic performance.

With respect to the former trend, what matters most from an aesthetic point of view is the scene of the crime and/or whatever remains of the victim(s), rather than the motive, the *modus operandi*, or even the presence of the murderer. With respect to the latter trend, what matters most aesthetically speaking is precisely the contrary of this, namely the way in which the murderer goes about committing (i.e. ‘performing’) his crime. It is important to keep in mind however, that these trends are by no means mutually exclusive; many horror films play around with both of them, often in interesting and complementary ways.(12)

The jigsaw piece is read as a logo or stylised signature, announcing the product and identifying the killer behind the performance (or perhaps ‘installation piece’). Detective Kerry, assigned to the Jigsaw serial slayings, and the obsessed near-victim Detective Tapp (Danny Glover), seem to understand the jigsaw mark as a vital clue, part of their inevitable procedural ‘building’ of the killer’s profile, a progressive ‘piecing together’ of the puzzle of his identity. Jigsaw, however, is up to something quite different. As he explains to the inattentive Detective Mathews, “The jigsaw piece I cut from my subjects was only ever meant to be a symbol that that subject was missing something – a vital piece of the human puzzle – the survival instinct.” Far from being a stamp of final approval, a post-(mortem)-script to the game, the jigsaw piece represents the admission of the subject’s missing survival instinct, the corporeal body’s non-relational or ‘snagged’ desire. Those marked with jigsaw pieces are the ones that got away, left inert, reduced to the zero intensity of death. It would seem strange that Jigsaw – surely the last figure ever to be deemed sentimental – should choose to extract this symbolic jigsaw piece from these subjects, except that Jigsaw is linguistically consistent in explaining how he ‘takes’ or ‘cuts’ the piece of skin. The jigsaw shape marking those who ‘fail’ is the *adding of a subtraction* – in effect, the removal of their inability, their unfulfilled potential or their lack – the excision that leaves the whole of the body that is not the closed, inert corporeal body but is, instead, the ‘body-without-organs’, that is, the nexus point where energy pools amid the flow and fold of forces and durations, existence beyond the living organism. Deleuze has various methods of explicating the ‘body without organs’, throughout his philosophical career (and in conjunction with Felix Guattari) but the consistent point is its nonorganic condition. “The body without organs is an affective, intensive, anarchist body that consists solely of poles, zones thresholds, and gradients. It is traversed by a powerful, nonorganic vitality.”(13)

### **It's No Game**

If it looks like a lack and smells like a lack it must be Lacanian. This is the point where Amanda gets it wrong, adopting “the cinematic theory inspired by Lacan, where the image on the screen stands in for, or covers over, that which we imagine as lost or lacking”(14) rather than adhering to Jigsaw’s Deleuzian model. As Lacan states (in relation to Freud’s *Fort! Da!* game), “the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire.”(15) The subject’s of Amanda’s games, undertaken for Jigsaw, constitute only the throwing away, the discarding, (the *Fort!*). At the most basic level, Amanda does not allow chance or potential to interfere, only ever seeing Jigsaw’s games as constitutive of the symbolic order, as an elaborate cover for staging the death of those who lack the survival instinct and thus do not deserve life – and her traps are truly elaborate. As

writer Leigh Whannell observes on the audio commentary for *Saw III*, “The traps themselves are slightly hyper-real. They look like props from a Nine Inch Nails video.” Luridly lit, shown through rapid slices of jump-cut editing, the traps featured in the *Saw* films are frequently exaggerated feats of engineering if not ‘hyper-real’ but none more so than the spectacular, impressive and excessive trap that kills Detective Kerry.

Drenched in a necrotic green light, suspended in a space reminiscent of a chapel arch, Kerry’s game seems to occur in *l’espace de l’entre-deux-morts* (‘zone between-two-deaths’) of mortal death and annihilation.<sup>(16)</sup> Having been kidnapped in her home by Amanda who is disguised in the pig mask, Kerry wakes to find herself locked in the ‘Angel of Death’ trap, the ‘wings’ of which are secured by pins through her ribs. She has to retrieve a key from a jar of acid to free herself yet when she successfully completes this the trap springs open anyway, effectively disembowelling her. Judged by the Billy doll as “dead on the inside” and keen to join the dead who constitute the “only family she has ever known”, Kerry is presented with no chance of escape, no possibility of survival despite having proved her will to live. These wings kill, rather than offering the chance to fly to safety. It is through this that Amanda “rediscovers in negation a final triumph”, in Lacan’s phrase.<sup>(17)</sup> Yet Kerry’s bloody demise, witnessed by Amanda dressed as Jigsaw, shares this zone with the ‘second death’ that is annihilation, the ending of the possibility of cyclical transformation or regeneration, for it is here that Jigsaw’s intended heir-apparent confirms her unsuitability. Her success constitutes her failure.

Amanda’s role as Jigsaw’s protégé is, for him, the solution to the question he poses to Detective Matthews during their conversation: “What is the cure for cancer?” Jigsaw decides that the answer is to achieve immortality through a legacy, having a successor to continue with his work. The impulse is Deleuzian. Jigsaw remains calm, neutral and impassive throughout the *Saw* films (not least because of his terminal condition) yet his only express wish, concern or desire, is that his legacy is maintained – the work of testing the fabric of humanity should go on. ‘Jigsaw’ – as the intensive site of being, a locus of desire, the body-without-organs – can survive the death of the organism John Kramer. ‘Jigsaw’ can endure through Amanda.

Jigsaw’s desire is not the same as that of Amanda, nor does she share his philosophy. As Lacan formulates desire, desire is always desire of/for/by the Other.<sup>(18)</sup> For Amanda, Jigsaw-as-signifier can only ever stand in the place of a vexatious and frustrating lack and it is this which locates Amanda in such a conflicted position – having given “every cell” of herself to Jigsaw she is only able to act in an imitative and repetitive way, a second, or understudy, in danger of being only slightly more useful than the Billy doll, waiting both for and against Jigsaw’s inevitable and impending death.

The difficulty Amanda has in locating herself within the symbolic order is evident in the *dénouement* of *Saw III*. In a flashback scene she commits a mercy-killing of Adam and is then attacked by the maimed Eric Matthews. Her face running with blood from their fight (reminiscent of Jigsaw’s blood mask as he lies prone throughout *Saw I*), Amanda walks away from the injured detective until he begins shouting after her that she’s “nothing” and “you’re not Jigsaw.” These taunts are what provoke a response. In the present of *Saw III* Amanda confronts Lynn and Jigsaw whilst brandishing a gun, angry and jealous over Jigsaw’s apparent fondness for the physician, demanding to know why Lynn is so important to him, complaining that Lynn is “nothing” and “worthless” and crying that she (Amanda) doesn’t mean anything to Jigsaw. “Nothing”, “not-Jigsaw” and “not important” become the signification closing in around

Amanda – yet her demand “Fix me, motherfucker,” is a mimicking of Jigsaw’s continual ambiguity of speech as it carries the implication of her past drug addiction before she knew Jigsaw. Even at such a critical moment, jostling a gun between the terrified Lynn and the terminal Jigsaw, Amanda’s desire to identify with her mentor remains.

Having fired a shot which hits Lynn, Amanda is in turn shot in the neck by Jeff. It is then she learns that the games played by Lynn and Jeff have been covers screening Jigsaw’s final game of all – one last chance for Amanda, an attempt to prove herself despite her mistakes. Lacan distinguishes between two differing formulations of chance or aleatoric event: *automaton* and *tyche*. *Automaton*, located in and determined by the symbolic order, is not strictly arbitrary, unlike *tyche*, which is a truly arbitrary incident irrupting from the Real.<sup>(19)</sup> Amanda’s final mistake, her last throw of the die, is to disrupt the end of what she believes to be Lynn’s game. Her attempt to “[perturb] the symbolic structure – the smooth running of *automaton*”<sup>(20)</sup> turns out to be nothing of the sort; the die is loaded and Amanda is still caught within the smooth running of Jigsaw’s meticulous planning. Jigsaw tells her, “This was your test. Your game. I was testing *you*. I took you in, I selected you to [*sic.*] the honour of carrying on my life’s work. But you didn’t. You didn’t test anyone’s will to live. Instead you took their only chance. Your games were unwinnable.”

Unable to speak, Amanda can only reach out to Jigsaw, who in turn tries to reach out to her, both of them anticipating (“anticipation being, as Derrida has it, first of all a matter of hands”<sup>(21)</sup>) the death of the other. Importantly, they do not manage to touch; the gap between them is too great. Indeed, the only connection Amanda manages to make with Jigsaw is in the symbolic ordering of their deaths – and it is quite beyond her control. Jeff, ‘forgiving’ Jigsaw as he exacts his vengeance, takes the saw Lynn used to save Jigsaw’s life and slashes him across the throat.

The frustrations of desire operate to produce Amanda as an exemplary Lacanian subject. While she can be read through the employment of Lacanian terms such as ‘castration’, ‘Oedipus’ and ‘Name-of-the-Father’, it seems less appropriate to do so in the light of the films’ increasing concerns with the transference of an identity. Jigsaw is, in the first film, assumed to be hospital orderly Zep Hindle. The key misdirection is revealed at the end of the film with the resurrection of the ‘corpse’ which has lain between Adam and Gordon throughout. John Kramer, barely-glimpsed cancer patient of Dr Gordon, is revealed as Jigsaw.<sup>(22)</sup> *Saw III* continually implies the handing over of the mantle from John to Amanda as his cancer becomes increasingly debilitating. What seems to be consistent thematically through the *Saw* films is that ‘Jigsaw’ is a part for various players, an identity composed of pieces and despite John’s preparations and Amanda’s willingness it is a puzzle into which Amanda is, simply, unable to fit. Her addiction to drugs and her self-harming are ‘helped’ via the games she plays by something that proves to be far more pernicious, as Jigsaw comes to stand not as the object of her desire but the cause. Far from achieving a sense of self, status and stability through her role as Jigsaw’s disciple, Amanda is not ‘reborn’ and ultimately loses her sense of identity.

Amanda is reduced to nothing or, as Matthews accurately and devastatingly phrases it, “not-Jigsaw.” Amanda Young grows out of her original place of signification and cannot occupy the space she desires, nor can she regress to fit herself back into the position of the signifier ‘Amanda’. The inevitable pressure of this untenable negativity is what causes Amanda’s dissolution. Unable to express her desire for Jigsaw,

unable to be Jigsaw and ultimately unable to be, she is squeezed out of any position within the symbolic order and caught in a horror of a hollow point of signification – which is the subtlest trap of all.

1. Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Athlone Press: London, 1986), 8.
2. Colebrook, Clare, *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Continuum: London, 2006), 20.
3. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 90.
4. Massumi, Brian in Patton, Paul (ed), *Deleuze: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1996), 226.
5. Worland, Rick, *An Introduction to the Horror Film* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2007), 8.
6. As is usually the case, Jigsaw's speech must be listened to carefully. Daniel is already in the room with them, hidden in the safe.
7. Seigworth, Gregory, in Stivale, Charles (ed) *Gilles Deleuze Key Concepts* (Acumen: Chesham, 2005), 163.
8. "To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari: like an egg as it cracks open, affect flees on all of its sides at once." [Seigworth, *Key Concepts*, 160]
9. Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, *Felix What Is Philosophy?* (Verso: London, 1994), 157.
10. Deleuze, Gilles in Khalfa, Jean (ed), *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* (Continuum: London, 1999), 172.
11. Colebrook, *Guide*, 54.
12. Schneider, Steven Jay and Shaw, Daniel (eds), *Dark Thoughts: Philosophic Reflections on Cinematic Horror* (Scarecrow Press: Oxford, 2003), 179.
13. Deleuze, Gilles, *Essays Critical & Clinical* (Verso: London, 1998), 131.
14. Colebrook, *Guide*, 42.
15. Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits: A Selection* (Tavistock Publications: London, 1977), 104.
16. Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary Of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Routledge: London, 1996), 31.
17. Lacan, *Écrits*, 104.
18. See Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* among various other sources.
19. Evans, *Introduction*, 24.

20. Žizek, Slavoj, *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid To Ask Hitchcock)* (Verso: London, 1996), 230.

21. Pelko, Stefan in Žizek, *Everything*, 111.

22. On the table across John's hospital bed is a sketch of one of his traps, which suggests that John returned to hospital after his suicide bid.

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## Filmography

*Saw* James Wan director. Leigh Whannell writer. (2004) Lionsgate Films

*Saw II* Darren Lynne Bousman director. Leigh Whannell & Darren Lynn Bousman writers. (2005) Lionsgate Films

*Saw III* Darren Lynne Bousman director. Leigh Whannell writer. (2006) Lionsgate Films

**‘Why don’t you remember? Are you crazy?’  
Korean Gothic and psychosis in *A Tale of Two Sisters***

*Coralline Dupuy*

*A Tale of Two Sisters* is the product of a notably rich period in Asian horror cinema in which wider distribution of Asian films and the increasing globalisation of popular culture has meant such movies have a better chance than ever before of reaching a worldwide audience. Contemporary high-quality Asian horror films often explore family dynamics and update the paradigms of Gothic horror. Whereas the works of Japanese directors Hideo Nakata (*Ringu*, 1998, and *Dark Water*, 2005) and Takashi Miike (*Audition*, 2005) have been commercially and critically successful, the works of Korean directors such as Kim Ji-woon, Park Chan-wook (*Old Boy*, 2004) and Joon-ho Bong (*The Host*, 2006) mark the emergence of Korea as a worthy and original contributor to the Asian horror boom. Kim Ji-woon has recently emerged as a director to be reckoned with, bringing to the screen subtly crafted and thought-provoking works such as *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) and, most recently, the gangster melodrama, *A Bittersweet Life* (2005).

As Fred Botting has suggested, the shocking opposition between reality and appearances is one of the central mechanisms of Gothic narration: ‘Throughout Gothic fiction terror and horror have depended on things not being what they seem.’<sup>(1)</sup> South Korean Kim Ji-woon’s intriguing multi-layered film, *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Janghwa, Hongryeon*, or *Rose and Lotus* in English, 2003) provides a fitting illustration of Botting’s statement. Using a discourse of denial and the subject of family disintegration the film articulates several Gothic themes. Concomitant with these Gothic elements, the film may also be read as a modernisation of the fairy tale; most notably in its thematic focus on the figure of an evil stepmother and the vulnerable children under her “care”. *A Tale of Two Sisters*’ deft transmutation of fairy tale paradigms into a modern setting constitutes the first topic of this article. Specific attention will be paid to the symbolic locations of the film, especially the lakeside family home; in which an elaborate correspondence is made between family secrets and the house. The enclosure of the residence is a space in which transformation and terror are closely intertwined, aligning it with Rosemary Jackson’s seminal definition of the Gothic enclosure as a space of maximum transformation and terror <sup>(2)</sup>, and clearly marking the lakeside home as a Gothic space. Family politics are intimately connected with the fate of the house, and this symbiosis between the house and the disintegrating family unit is the third theme dealt with in this article. Following on from this, will be an analysis of how, through the course of the film, identity and memory are undermined by our central protagonist’s, Su-mi, unreliable perspective. The last point under discussion will be Su-mi’s unsuccessful repression of traumatic memories and how it impacts upon the viewer’s interpretative task.

*A Tale of Two Sisters* begins in a hospital with the interview of a female patient whose identity remains undisclosed. The narrative then moves to sisters Su-mi and Su-yeon’s return home after a non-specified illness. They are welcomed back to the family’s lakeside house by their distant father and their resentful stepmother, Eun-ju. Over three days, Su-mi and Su-yeon witness and experience unexplained occurrences, such as uncanny duplications, suffocations, and ghosts. The simmering resentment between the two girls and their stepmother escalates into physical violence. At this point, the hitherto self-restrained father angrily confronts Su-mi and reminds her that her sister, Su-yeon, is in fact dead. The viewer then understands that Su-mi’s subconscious has kept her younger sister, Su-yeon, alive. Her



mental anguish and her desire to believe her sister is still alive are the result of her guilt over the untimely demise of her mother and her sister, both of whom died in a tragic accident that she feels she might have prevented, had she not been involved in an argument with her future stepmother, Eun-ju, at that fateful moment.

The details of the accident remain undisclosed throughout most of the film. They are as follows: the accident takes place in Su-yeon's bedroom, while Su-mi and Eun-ju are arguing downstairs in the lakeside house. Their mother, ill and depressed, has hung herself in Su-yeon's closet. Frantically trying to pull her mother out, Su-yeon accidentally causes the closet to collapse and is smothered by her mother's body. Eun-ju has seen the accident and could have helped Su-yeon, but following Su-mi's outburst (in which she accuses Eun-ju of trying to steal her father's affection) Eun-ju changes her mind, leaving Su-yeon to suffocate under the weight of the closet and her mother's corpse. Despite Eun-ju's wilful inaction in the matter, the film focuses more on Su-mi's part in her mother and sister's deaths and the possibility that the double tragedy could have been avoided had Su-mi not lost her temper with Eun-ju at that fatal moment. While the suicide and Su-yeon's accidental death are revealed in this scene, and Su-mi's subsequent psychological instability has been established, all is not satisfyingly accounted for. Indeed, the theory of the "explained supernatural"(3) in the film is undermined by two key scenes in the film. The first of these scenes involves an episode that occurs during a family dinner in which the girls' aunt has an unexplained fit. While writhing on the floor, she sees the figure of the younger girl (Su-yeon) covered in mud, lurking under the sink. This unexpected vision is one of the most terrifying images of the film. The viewer sees Su-yeon from the choking woman's perspective, but only in a frustratingly short glimpse. The impact of this image on the viewer is all the more profound as it is never explained. The second "*un*explainable supernatural" moment in the film is in its second-last scene, when Eun-ju is attacked by a female ghost crawling out of Su-yeon's closet. These two female phantoms are the physical embodiment of the film's resistance to a logically accountable ending. Thus the viewer is denied any attempt to explain away the uncanny episodes of the film.

### **A Modern Fairytale**

Director Kim Ji-woon acknowledges that his 2003 work is based on the Korean fairytale *Janghwa, Hongryeon*. His film is just one of a number of Korean cinematic adaptations of the tale.(4) As a result, the Korean audience would undoubtedly be acquainted with the story of the two sisters, either from hearing it as a folktale and/or from watching earlier film versions of it. Western viewers, however, cannot be assumed to be familiar with the tale. In brief, it tells the story of Rose and Lotus, two dead sisters, whose ghosts visit a town official to explain to him how they met their untimely deaths. Planting a skinned rat in the girls' bedroom, their jealous stepmother had tricked their father into believing that the elder sister had miscarried an illegitimate child. Cast away from home by paternal opprobrium, the accused girl drowns in a lake. Her sister's distress is such that she also drowns on the same spot. After seeing the sisters' ghosts, the city official investigates the case and reveals the stepmother's guilt. The girls' father remarries and his third wife gives birth to twin girls, whom he names Rose and Lotus after his two lost daughters. The Korean ghost story reaches a satisfying end, where retribution is meted out and where the ghosts succeed in expelling the malevolent element from the family unit. The film, on the other hand, offers a modern transposition of the fairy tale that eschews such a well-ordered ending.

*A Tale of Two Sisters* features strong visual and thematic markers that point to the fairytale origins of the plot, such as an aesthetic obsession with flowers, the presence of ghosts, and the idyllic, yet isolated,

lakeside location of the family home. All of these visual markers have strong symbolic values, echoing Jung's statement that 'in myths and fairytales, the psyche tells its own story.'<sup>(5)</sup> In a direct reference to the original fairytale of Rose and Lotus, chapter four of the film, entitled 'Dad's Asleep', has Su-mi find a bloody package containing fish and bloody fish entrails in the fridge; a gory package which is clearly an allusion to the skinned dead rat in the original fairytale.

Of course another link between Kim Ji-woon's film and the fairytale upon which it is based is the theme of the avenging ghost. In her article, 'The Ghost Story,'<sup>(6)</sup> Julia Briggs explains that ghost stories are multilayered but despite their diversity, they all feature a challenge to the rational order and the observed laws of nature. Ghost stories reintroduce 'what is perceived as fearful, alien, excluded or dangerously marginal' (122). In her analysis, she locates the source of terror in the past and the dead or the untamed world of nature. Briggs insists on the creative aspect of dreams and imagination in the ghost story: 'The ghost story reverts to a world in which imagination can produce physical effects, a world that is potentially within our power to change by the energy of our thoughts, yet practically alarming' (124). Keeping with the theme of revenge, which Briggs defines as 'the most primitive, punitive and sadistic of impulses' (128), Kim Ji-woon traces the origin of terror in the familiar. For the viewer part of this familiarity is its modernity. As the director has himself explained, his aim was to try to give a modern meaning to the tale. He took the motif of the stepmother from the fairytale and added an element of horror to a modern setting, claiming he wanted to 'express the distorted mind of people in the modern family.'<sup>(7)</sup>

The film offers an ideal medium to translate and transform the dark and disturbing fairytale, particularly by emphasizing its modern Gothic elements. Heidi Kaye sees similarities between Gothic films and texts in their common use of images with a strong impact and the necessity of audience response.<sup>(8)</sup> The continued success of the Gothic genre may be attributed to its adaptability of to modern concerns: 'Gothic tales seem destined to be continually reborn to suit the fears and desires of each new period. The monsters, their creators and their victims are sufficiently malleable in their indefiniteness to allow them to convey ongoing human concerns and tensions' (191). Kim Ji-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters* is an excellent example of the Gothic's malleability.

### **The Topography and Colour of Nightmares**

Topography plays an essential part in conveying the unsettling atmosphere of *A Tale of Two Sisters*. In the film, the house is under attack. Its very location, by a lakeside, is significant. The two sisters are seen sitting on the pontoon by the lake, dangling their feet in the water. This makes an obvious reference to the lake in which Rose and Lotus drown. The end credits show Su-mi in exactly the same place, wearing the same outfit, but by herself. Both scenes are visually striking and thematically very rich. The murky lake waters of the lake may be interpreted as a metaphor for opacity or, indeed, as a psychoanalytically charged image, symbolically associated with a feminine space. It is also interesting to note that other recent Asian writers and filmmakers have also used the image of water to chilling effect, most notably in the novels of Koji Suzuki, *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* and their cinematic adaptations, *Ring* (1998, American remake 2002) and *Dark Water* (2003, American remake 2005).

The film's *mise en scène* has been exactly structured. For Ji-woon, the film set and its aesthetic impact are of linked to a desire to create a new visual language in the Korean horror cinema. As Ji-woon explains, he wanted 'to create, to show a sense of colour that wasn't there in Korean horror films before'

(*A Tale of Two Sisters* DVD, 2003). One filming technique was to put coloured cloths in front of the lighting to create powerful colours, using different colours for different spaces; purple for the stepmother's room and green for the sisters' rooms. The colour red, of a very dramatic bloody hue, pervades the screen from the opening credits, in which the two sisters wear red clothing and red flowers are seen in the garden.<sup>(9)</sup> Bloodshed features several times; Su-mi stabs herself in the hand while in a rage and her menstrual blood also alluded to. The dining room scene in the third chapter of the film ('At Dinner') is suffused with a red light that makes the space seem cluttered and gives an oppressive atmosphere to an already tense family gathering. This chromatic constant takes on a deep macabre significance and its prevalence is clearly an omen of the tragic revelations to come.

This colour-coding of the interior acts a strong visual signifier indicating that the locus of anxiety in the film is the house itself and what happens to the family in this setting. The trailer for the movie explicitly proclaims this symbiotic link between the family and the house: 'A hidden secret. A house of lies'. In the film itself, Su-mi also remarks on the house's influence and its connection with their 'new mother': 'That woman is strange and so is this house' (Chapter Four, 'Dad's Asleep'). The house is the physical space where psychological tensions take shape; an illustration of what David Punter aptly calls 'the nightmare topography of the mind.'<sup>(10)</sup> Even the varying effect of the lighting on the interiors' wallpaper adds a vividly morbid ambience to the film as the narrative progresses. As the director explains, the aim behind aspect of filming was to invoke a sense of decay and stolen youth: 'I wanted all the interiors and the sets – the flower motifs on the walls, for instance – to look initially beautiful, but then gradually become scary and horrible during the course of the film. It signifies the fact that the two sisters die before blossoming' (DVD leaflet, interview with Jamie Russell). All these visual markers suggest that the house acts as a catalyst for repressed memories to emerge. Haunted by memories, Su-mi suffers from repression. As Kristeva describes it, repression has 'the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat.'<sup>(11)</sup> As a consequence of her repression, the visual language the film uses to represent Su-mi's experience contains repetitions and blanks, leaving the viewer with the interpretative task of deciphering which aspects of her experiences are hallucinatory and which are truly uncanny. Yet other characters in the film experience fantastic and inexplicable events too, thereby calling into question the power Su-mi's repression has over the narrative as a whole. The most dramatic and problematic example of this real/hallucinatory confusion, which appears to be outside of Su-mi's own hallucinatory experience, is the episode of the girl under the sink (Chapter Eight, 'Visitors'). In this scene, the girls' aunt collapses and chokes on the red floor of the dining room during a tense meal. The intense colour of the floor is already a sign that the dining room is a space of extreme emotional turmoil. While the woman writhes and gasps, she keeps looking under the sink and at Eun-ju's feet; Su-mi is nowhere to be seen. Afterwards, in the car with her husband, the aunt tells him: 'There was a girl under the kitchen sink.' She has a flashback of seeing Su-yeon all covered in black mud-like earth, crouching under the sink. This stage of the film represents the point of no return; the tension in the house becomes suffocating and has physical effect on its denizens. The house is an oppressive and asphyxiating place, and it also contains smaller, metonymic versions of itself, such as Su-yeon's closet, which turns into a literal coffin.

### **Family Disintegration in The House of Lies**

When Eun-ju snappily exclaims: 'This damn house won't leave me the hell alone' (Chapter Ten, 'Locked Doors'), her statement points to the uncanny atmosphere that pervades the house. Freud's seminal work on the *unheimlich* explains that 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary

appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises.’(12) The lakeside house is the locus of uncanny events, the space where the frontiers between the dead and the living, past and present, metaphorical and actual significations are repeatedly crossed and thereby put into question. As the director explains, ‘I wanted to express the irony that the family is threatened in its very home’ (DVD leaflet, interview with Jamie Russell) by making the home the terrifying place of the plot, as opposed to the hospital, for instance.

As a result of Kim Ji-woon’s decision to firmly locate the uncanny events in the family home, family politics becomes one of the central issues of the film. When asked in an interview why children are so prominent in Asian horror movies, Ji-woon explains how the lack of independence for children in the East means that a child relies on his parents a great deal. Therefore, the intensity of the moment of horror increases in this cultural context, when parents become threatening. The film combines the traditional Gothic motif of the danger within the house with a more culture-specific allusion to the child’s heavy dependence on his parents in Korean culture. Su-mi perceives her family as besieged by Eun-ju’s intrusion. Su-mi’s perusal of old family pictures is an ordeal for her because she sees Eun-ju posing in all of them as her father’s assistant. For Su-mi, the family is jeopardised in its structure because Eun-ju has supplanted their mother. In the dining-room, Eun-ju upbraids Su-mi for resenting the change: ‘Listen carefully. I’m your mother, got it? As much as you hate it, I’m the only one in this world you can call mother, get it?’ (Chapter Seven, ‘Family photographs’). In his 1909 study, ‘Family Romances,’ Freud has suggested that for a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief. (13) Deprived of her mother and confronted by this hostile replacement, Su-mi’s vulnerability is thus double-fold.

Su-mi’s distress at her mother’s death is such that she cannot come to terms with it and unconsciously blames her father for what she interprets as a betrayal of her late mother. Su-mi’s dead mother is a ghostly presence haunting the living; appearing in the film with long flowing hair. Long hair, according to Kim Ji-woon, functions as a metonymy for death in Asian horror film. The belief that hair keeps growing after death, conveys to the audience an understanding that the vision of a dead loved one with long hair is the result of incomplete bereavement. This is certainly the case for Su-mi. As one study on the nature of childhood bereavement and trauma has argued, psychologically bereaved children can regress to an earlier stage of emotional development and behaviour.(14) Under the terms of this definition, normal grief stretches over five stages: denial; anger or guilt; depression; reconciliation; and eventually re-attachment. The symptoms of the denial stage include restlessness, disbelief, looking for the lost person, seeing the lost person, a loss of the sense of one’s identity and disorientation in time and place. The second stage is characterised by anger and guilt, and the symptoms include recrimination, fantasies of violence and retaliation against others, self-doubt, blaming self and others.(15) Taking such psychological theories into consideration, it can therefore be argued that Ji-woon’s film offers a psychologically accurate depiction of a young girl stuck between the first two stages of grief, but unwilling to progress further. In this sense, Su-mi behaves in an emotionally predictable manner after the demise of her sister and mother. What differs is the depth and power of her grief, not its methodology or symptoms.

### **Unreliable Perspectives and Unsuccessful Repressions**

Su-mi’s obsession with Eun-ju provides the viewer with a gateway into the many contradictions of her perspective. The frontiers of individual identity collapse in Su-mi’s visions. Her dreams reveal her confusion about her identity, echoing Freud’s claims that ‘dreams have at their command memories which

are inaccessible in waking life.’(16) The stepmother is the embodiment of Su-mi’s unacknowledged darkness. Jungian analyst and folklorist Marie-Louise von Franz has suggested that the stepmother in fairy tales is ‘a symbol of the unconscious in its destructive role - of its disturbing and devouring character.’(17) As such, Eun-ju may be interpreted as Su-mi’s own unconscious, her double. Duplications feature heavily in the film. Objects are faithfully duplicated, creating many uncanny occurrences and signalling that split personality is a theme of the film. Su-mi’s diary and clothes in the wardrobe are the first duplicated items. These are exact duplications. Eun-ju also finds duplicated clothing, by doing so she duplicates Su-mi’s action. And while female characters in the film are not accurately duplicated, Eun-ju and Su-mi imitate each other so much that confusion about identity is nonetheless generated. Su-mi and Eun-ju replicate each other’s gestures (Eun-ju is at one stage seen perfectly imitating Su-mi’s gesture of looking over her shoulder when she was in the forest), suggesting that, for most of the film, Eun-ju is in fact generated by Su-mi’s distorted vision. Elisabeth Bronfen explains how repetitions destabilise the concept of self and other: ‘a repetition that succeeds perfectly may be fatal because the space of difference between model and copy has been eliminated, collapsing both terms into one entity and abolishing the singularity of each separate term.’(18) Eun-ju therefore is an inexact replica of Su-mi, she embodies the emotions that Su-mi cannot accept as hers, such as resentment towards her father, and anger at herself for not being there when her sister suffocated to her death under the weight of the collapsed closet.

Projecting these unaccepted emotions onto Eun-ju, Su-mi’s sense of her own identity becomes problematic; her ambivalence about herself is exteriorised by transferring her negative feelings on Eun-ju, whose face Su-mi’s has angrily blacked-out from the family photographs. (Chapter Ten, ‘Locked Doors’).(19) Eun-ju is Su-mi’s dark double in the latter’s hallucinations. Of course, the use of the figure of the double is a typically Gothic device in a context of fragmented identity, as Fred Botting explains: ‘The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanised environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation.’(20) Julia Briggs, in *Night Visitors*, asserts that the double, being neither the self nor another, constitutes ‘a powerful symbol of unresolved inner conflict.’ (21) While venting hostility at her stepmother, Su-mi’s unresolved anger seems, in truth, directed at herself and at her father; a character whose discreet presence fails to soothe Su-mi’s deteriorating psychological condition.

Su-mi’s father is a doctor.(22) His profession introduces an opposition between two discourses: the psychosomatic manifestations of Su-mi’s ailment versus the rational scientific discourse of medicine. The first scene of the film shows a male psychologist trying to coax the unidentified female patient into a talking cure therapy: ‘Well, then, shall we talk? Who do you think you are?’ In the house, Su-mi’s verbal exchanges with her father are unsuccessful. With literal skeletons in the family closet, Su-mi’s father berates her for bringing up the accident: ‘Su-mi, we agreed not to talk about that closet’ (Chapter Six, ‘Out in the Cold’). The word ‘closet’ becomes a taboo in this household; other words are also implicitly prohibited. Su-mi’s father avoids saying the word ‘insane’ for most of the film, instead relying on euphemistic expressions such as ‘sick:’ ‘You are not even accepting all this. You’ll get sick again.’ (Chapter Seven, ‘Family Photographs’). During this dialogue, the dramatic use of lighting shrouds the left half of Su-mi’s face in shadow; signifying her obscured memory and her resulting fragmented sense of self. Pitting the discourse of Su-mi’s overpowering daydreaming against her father’s clinical statements, it is clear that he does not understand and/or cannot accept the rationale behind Su-mi’s phantasies. In his study of day-dreaming, Freud states that ‘the motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every

single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality.’(23) He also highlights the highly pathogenic quality of excessive phantasies, when left unchecked: ‘If phantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the conditions are laid for an onset of neurosis or psychosis’ (148). Su-mi’s father appears to have no understanding of his daughter’s emotional turmoil. He never asks her why she wants to believe that her sister is still alive, he keeps telling her not to do it: ‘Please, stop it. I’m sick of this now’ (Chapter Thirteen, ‘Identity Crisis’). Her father’s definite statement: ‘Please stop! Su-yeon is dead’ (Chapter Eleven, ‘Digging a Grave’) temporarily dispels the narrative confusion of the film, but Su-mi refuses to give up her psychotic visions of Su-yeon. In *Madness and Cinema*, Patrick Fuery highlights the frequent dichotomy between emotion and science in films: ‘More often than not, what is essential for the solving of the riddles and enigmas is not the rational efforts of science, but the emotive.’ (24) Su-mi’s father is ineffective on a number of fronts; as a doctor, as a father, and implicitly as a husband. Su-mi’s mother hangs herself, literally strangling herself into speechlessness. Her choice of suicide method points to her lack of voice in the household. Su-mi’s father is unable to deal with his daughter’s psychosis or keep it under control, just as he had been unable to recognise, let alone prevent, his wife’s emotional descent and suicide.

Simultaneously, Su-mi is unable to deal with the reality of her mother and sister’s death and sinks into a state of permanent daydreaming in which she reconstructs history and keeps them alive. Her attempt is weakened by the unwelcome resurgence of traumatic images. The most shocking vision is that of the creeping woman in the black clothing with her hair down about her shoulders, hiding her face. The woman’s neck has been snapped, judging from the way she moves. She steps on Su-mi’s bed and Su-mi sees blood trickling down the woman’s legs. This scene is shot in such a way that Su-mi appears framed by the woman’s legs. Her vision imprisons her, and the birth symbolism of the blood running down the apparition’s legs is quite striking. In his seminal *Semiotics of Cinema* Jurij Lotman suggests that in films an image can be made particularly meaningful by playing with and destroying usual expectations about this image and that ‘objects in close-ups are seen in cinema as metaphors.’(25) Su-mi’s bedroom contains many unexpected elements, such as the stopped clock, which she rewinds. The insistent close-up on the clock forces the viewer to ponder on the meaning of her action. The stopped clock may be a sign that a death has taken place in this house, while Su-mi’s rewinding of it suggests her unwillingness to accept this. The film articulates signs of ambivalence and confusion. The unexplained presence in the dining room of a collapsed girl with her long hair down on her face wearing the green silk dress (the same dress hanging in the closet where Su-yeon died) is another sign that Su-mi’s world, as she has recreated it, is becoming incoherent. Su-mi’s identity crises reaches a violent climax when, in another instance of inexact doubling, she stabs Eun-ju in the hand (Chapter Twelve, ‘Trail of Blood’), and is afterwards found by her father, unconscious with a wounded hand. It is only when faced with the real Eun-ju that Su-mi’s world of illusion collapses (Chapter Thirteen, ‘Identity Crisis’). Her memories and the inconsistencies in them are the key to her psychosis.

Su-mi’s anger at her disintegrating family features strongly in the narrative, but this theme also serves as a palimpsest for the issues of repressed mourning. Repression and denial are pitted against the unwelcome resurgence of buried traumas that Su-mi endeavours to negate out of her guilt for surviving when her sister, Su-yeon, has not. Su-mi’s survivor’s guilt is palpable when, in her visions of her sister, she insists that Su-yeon informs her of any danger: ‘If she ever gets on your case, then tell me and don’t ignore it like before, OK?’ (Chapter Three, ‘At Dinner’). Her expression of devotion to Su-yeon (‘I’ll always be with you’ Chapter Four, ‘Dad’s Asleep’), viewed retrospectively, takes on an incantatory dimension. When she

swears to Su-yeon that she will never abandon her again ('I'm sorry, Su-yeon, I'm sorry. This will never happen again. Never' (Chapter Ten, 'Locked Doors'), the repetitions in her sentences betray her anguish. Moreover, the adverb 'again' implies that something has happened to Su-yeon before. Crucially, it can be interpreted as an admission on Su-mi's part that she knows that something bad has already happened to her sister, despite her hallucinatory attempts to keep her alive. Without a clear demarcation between Su-mi's visions and reality, the film highlights Su-mi keeps a weak control over her memories; the incoherence of numerous episodes pointing to her wilful, yet partially ineffective, forgetfulness. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer's influential study of hysteria highlights that forgetting is an act of volition: 'before hysteria can be acquired for the first time one essential condition must be fulfilled: an idea must be intentionally repressed from consciousness [...]. The repressed idea takes its revenge, however, by becoming pathogenic.' (26) In particular, Freud and Breuer have stressed that the forgotten content is layered depending on the gravity of the blocked memories. The contents of each particular stratum are therefore characterised by a certain equal degree of resistance and that degree increases in proportion as the strata are nearer to the core of the repressed memories. More recently, Alice Miller has argued that 'repressed pain blocks emotional life and leads to physical symptoms.' (27) *A Tale of Two Sisters* presents the viewer with a grotesquely amplified case of repressed memories, where the symptoms expand beyond the mere psychosomatic level and include parasitic visions and hallucinations, which in turn lead to physical injury.

In *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Vicky Lebeau commends Freud's quest to discover the meaning behind his patients' symptoms as a means of reconnecting the hysterical symptoms with the thoughts that generated them. Linking this quest with the interpretative task of the film viewer, she describes how the aim of this process is 'to listen for the story – wishful, anxious, traumatic – embedded in the image.' (28) What story is embedded in the images surrounding Su-mi? Two images, in particular, yield crucial clues; one involves a statue in the house, the other, a bloody bag, which Su-mi fails to open. The statue is a life-size of a child shielding his eyes in his hands. This white statue can be seen as another double of Su-mi, who is horrified by the events that have taken place in the family home. The posture of the child is one of fear and a rejection of the visions that surround him. The statue is in the corridor on the ground floor of the house, which is exactly where Eun-ju and Su-mi had their argument on the day of the double tragedy. The statue is thus a marker of a fatal moment in time; it also acts as a mirror of Su-mi's psychological status. Both are frozen in time, refusing to accept the painful past and to live in the present, unwilling to acknowledge reality. The film's image of a bloody bag is another clue to Su-mi's psychological state. When Su-mi struggles with resurgent images and when her aggressive behaviour becomes increasingly alarming, she is seen trying to drag and hide a bulky and bloody cloth bag which looks like it contains a person struggling to break free. The trail of blood and the blood-stained bag stand for the interrupted path in Su-mi's memory, the bag being the content she has wiped out; its trail is the path she has blocked off is her memory. In this instance, Su-mi's delusions reveal how she resents herself for failing her younger sister. Although Eun-ju is guilty of not assisting Su-yeon when she still could have been saved, Su-mi feels indirectly responsible for having failed her sister. Eun-ju, who is guilty by voluntary omission, thus becomes the consuming object of Su-mi's redirected self-hatred.

In their compelling analysis of the mechanisms of false memories, psychologists Sven-Ake and Engelberg convincingly argue that a memory is totally inhibited 'when the individual is unable to integrate the experience with existing schemata pertaining to self-image and life in general.' (29) From this perspective, Su-mi's identity confusion exposes her attempts to eject certain memories from her mind. On

two occasions, Eun-ju is actually Su-mi's mouthpiece. In Chapter Eight, 'The Visitors,' Eun-ju behaves and talks like an overexcited teenager at the dinner table. The table is set for four, whereas it should be for five, suggesting that Eun-ju and Su-mi at that moment only constitute a single presence. This scene is the first example of the use of the device by which Eun-ju speaks for Su-mi. An hysterical and giggly Eun-ju swings from elated excitement to cold hatred when she verbally attacks Su-mi's uncle and aunt: 'Do you remember? My memory's a bit blurry, but I think it did happen.' 'Su-mi as Eun-ju' (30) says what Su-mi cannot bring herself to say. In 'Trail of Blood' chapter, Su-mi's reliance on a phantasy version of Eun-ju grows more insistent. In this scene, Su-mi as Eun-ju berates Su-mi for her inability to create a coherent phantasy: 'Remember when I said you'll regret it some day? [...] Know what's really scary? You want to forget something, totally wipe it from your mind. But you never can. It doesn't go away, you see, and it follows you around like a ghost.' This poignant monologue actually mirrors Su-mi's own self-deprecating thoughts and reveals that she is aware that her illusions are floundering in the struggle between repression and memory.

In choosing a repression-prone individual as the central character of his film, Kim Ji-woon adopts a patently Gothic device which evokes a strong, yet ambivalent, audience response. Numerous seminal Gothic texts, from Edgar Allan Poe's unnamed narrators in many of his short stories, such as 'Ligeia,' 'Berenicë,' 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and 'The Black Cat' to Henry James' unnamed governess in *The Turn of the Screw*; rely on the device of the unreliable narrator to destabilise meaning and make a division between reality and the imaginary difficult to achieve. Just as the reader of these texts must put into question what is presented to him/her, so must the viewer of *A Tale of Two Sisters*. Its viewers are faced with the task separating fact from fiction and deciphering Su-mi's hallucinations and dreams as a palimpsest of her trauma. If the film is a dream, then it shows the manifest content of the dream and merely points to the latent content, to use Freud's essential dichotomy. In her study of the psychoanalytical dimension of cinema, Vicky Lebeau states that 'even in the dream, it seems, the child's wish cannot speak its name.' (31) Su-mi's vivid images therefore mask her pain and yet they are the only signs of what they refuse to express clearly. If indeed the goal of a repressive procedure is 'to allow the person to remain unaware of what is being processed,' (32) Su-mi's repression can be interpreted as fulfilling the function of a shield that protects her from painful memories. Paradoxically, this coping device also prevents her from making the necessary progress towards completing her mourning. And if, as specialists such as Kihlstrom and Hoyt argue, 'repression, in order effectively to defend the individual against threatening ideas and impulses, must be unconscious' (202), then Su-mi efforts to block her traumas are doomed to fail, because she does so knowingly. The film narrates an imperfect repression accompanied by the deliberate fabrication of memories. This may in turn be interpreted with recourse to Martin Conway's discussion of false memories, which underlines the crucial point that if an event is not properly understood at the time of experience, then later memories formed from it will contain erroneous as well as accurate details: 'Errors in the knowledge base from which memories will later be constructed, established at or close in time to actual experiences, can give rise to memories which are basically accurate but contain minor errors or to memories that are grossly incorrect but which, none the less, contain some accurate details.' (33) This accurately summarises the profound epistemological confusion behind an interpretation of Su-mi's memories as well as her visions, both of which are partially accurate and convincing, up to a certain point. The interpretative difficulty arises in attempting to define that point.

The coherence of her visions falters when imagistic memory invades her phantasy. Kihlstrom defines imagistic memory as a memory that breaks through the conscious mind in the form of imagery, (34)



arguing that unconscious memories do not go away and instead express themselves as symptoms, affecting conscious experience in the form of intrusive images, somatic feelings, and dreams. The very last chapter of the film, entitled 'Closets,' presents to the viewer the point of origin of Su-mi's trauma, which has up until this point only been vaguely suggested. It is, of course, her mother's suicide in the closet and her sister's fatal attempt to pull her mother down. While trapped under the upturned closet and her mother's body, Su-yeon slowly suffocates and weakly cries for help. Eun-ju sees and hears Su-yeon crying for help but, when she reaches the ground floor, Su-mi angrily confronts her about her involvement with their father: 'Now you are trying to act like mum. Do me a favour. Stay out of our lives.' Irked by the girl's hostility, Eun-ju decides not to tell about the tragedy unfolding upstairs and warns Su-mi that their argument will have dire consequences: 'You might regret this moment. Keep that in mind.' Su-mi's reply seals her sister's fate: 'What can be worse than standing here with you?' She storms out of the house while Su-yeon suffocates. From the balcony of the first floor, Eun-ju silently watches Su-mi walk away, knowing that Su-mi is not aware of the tragic accident that might have been averted. The last chapter of the film is its genesis. Instead of reassuring the viewer, the end destabilises the audience further with its implication that Su-mi will cling to her psychotic daydreams. In her discussion of the psychoanalytical dimension of the Gothic, Michelle Massé claims that daydreams and neurotic symptoms are mechanisms of defence used to construct systems that satisfy basic desires while still letting us function adequately in the real world.(35) It ensues that daydreams are a creative expression of desire, 'stories written by ourselves for ourselves' (p. 229). The Gothic dimension of Kim Ji-woon's film is all the more prevalent because Su-mi's desire and denial are so excessive. She is utterly immersed in her phantasies to the point of psychosis. No one is able to convince her to abandon her illusions, especially not her father, whose discourse of rationality utterly fails to comprehend, let alone deal with, his surviving daughter's psychotic desire.

## Conclusion

In terms of audience response, we may ask what type of spectator the film constructs. In *The Analysis of Film*, Raymond Bellour evokes 'rhetorical obscurity' (36) and, using Alfred Hitchcock's work as a foundation of his analysis, argues that Hitchcock's films are designed as experiences of semiotic ambivalence. Kim Ji-woon's work functions along the same lines and requires a high level interpretative effort from its audience. Tzvetan Todorov states that the Gothic relies on ambivalence and resistance to interpretation, claiming that 'perception constitutes a screen rather than removes one.' (37) The second-last scene of the film, in which Eun-ju is swallowed up by a creature in the closet, completely undermines the hypothesis that all that the viewer has been witness to is part of Su-mi's hallucinatory delirium. Eun-ju drives back to the house after visiting Su-mi in the hospital. Walking towards Su-yeon's bedroom, she steps on the wooden floor and the spectator sees blood oozing from under the floorboards. Eun-ju opens the fatal closet and a female form crawls out and engulfs her in darkness. The inclusion of this second-last scene makes it impossible for the audience to come up with a reasoned explanation for the events narrated in the course of the film. For Rosemary Jackson, resistance to endings is the defining feature of Gothic plots: 'Uncertainty and impossibility are inscribed on a structural level through hesitation and equivocation' (49). Kim Ji-woon's film embraces interpretative resistance as its *raison d'être*. In *Madness and Cinema*, Fuery compellingly analyses the 'enigmatisation' process of Gothic cinema and the impossibility of analysing certain aspects of a film conclusively as part of cinema knowledge: 'What is meant may not be clear, may indeed be unresolvable, but it continues to assert its status as meaningful.'(38) What makes the film so engrossing is exactly this resistance of the plot to any definite interpretation. Kim Ji-woon defends this open-endedness: 'Asian horror leaves you with

something that is unresolved in your mind' (DVD, interview with Jamie Russell). In psychological terms, Jung maintains that such an enigma should be respected: 'A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous.' Kim Ji-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters* taps into rich emotional territory by touching upon universal fears and longings. In addition, the film is an amazing feat in terms of the sheer aesthetic quality of the visuals. Its masterful execution fulfils the viewers' desire for arresting and stimulating art while the intricate workings of the plot remain an enigma.

1. Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 170.
2. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 47.
3. The 'explained supernatural' is a term used to describe tales which appear to have a supernatural element but can ultimately be explained as entirely natural. Walter Scott is the first writer to have critiqued this mention of story-telling in his comments on the work of Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe. See E.J. Clery, 'The Supernatural Explained' in *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800* (Cambridge; Cambridge UP, 1995), 106-171.
4. At least five film versions of the tale have been made by Korean filmmakers.
5. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1933), 217.
6. Julia Briggs, 'The Ghost Story' in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 122-131; 122).
7. Tartan Films, 2003. Director Kim Ji-woon's interview in *A Tale of Two Sisters*. [DVD]. London: Tartan Video.
8. Heidi Kaye, 'Gothic Film' in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 180-192); 181.
9. David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: the Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 152.
10. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
11. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), 244.
12. Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 237.
13. Paul Barnard et al., *Children, Bereavement and Trauma: Nurturing Resilience* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1999), 28.
14. Paul Barnard et al., *Children, Bereavement and Trauma: Nurturing Resilience* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1999), 86-87.
15. Sigmund Freud, 'On Dreams' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 12.

16. Marie-Louise von Franz, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Dallas: Spring, 1970), p. 88.
17. Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Risky Resemblances: On Repetition, Mourning, and Representation' in *Death and Representation*, eds. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 103-129), 104.
18. Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 157.
19. Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), 19.
20. Ineffective male doctors feature in several seminal Gothic texts depicting female insanity. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1899), the narrator's husband is also a doctor who fails to understand feminine emotions and distress.
21. Sigmund Freud, 'Creative writers and day-dreaming' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 146.
22. Patrick Fuery, *Madness and Cinema: Psychoanalysis, Spectatorship and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29.
23. Juri Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1976), 44.
24. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, 'Studies on Hysteria' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 116.
25. Alice Miller, *The Drama of Being a Child* (London: Virago, 1979), 162.
26. Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower, 2001), 21.
27. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Development of Personality*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 183.
28. Sven-Ake Christianson and Elisabeth Engelberg, 'Remembering and forgetting traumatic experiences: a matter of survival' in *Recovered Memories and False Memories*, ed. Martin A. Conway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 230-250), 232.
29. For the sake of clarity, the author of this essay prefers to refer to 'Su-mi as Eun-ju' in order to differentiate better between the two versions of Eun-ju present in the film.
30. Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower, 2001), 39.

31. John F. Kihlstrom and Irene P. Hoyt, 'Repression, Dissociation and Hypnosis' in *Repression and Dissociation: Implications for Personality, Psychopathology, and Health*, ed. Jerome L. Singer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 100-117), 101-102.
32. Martin A. Conway, *Recovered Memories and False Memories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 178.
33. John F. Kihlstrom, 'Suffering from reminiscences: exhumed memory, implicit memory, and the return of the repressed.' In *Recovered Memories and False Memories*, ed. Martin A. Conway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.100-117), 102.
34. Michelle A. Massé, 'Psychoanalysis and the Gothic' in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 229-241), 229.
35. Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 238.
36. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 105.
37. Patrick Fuery, *Madness and Cinema: Psychoanalysis, Spectatorship and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 72.
38. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Spirit of Man in Art and Literature*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 104.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **A History of Violence: A Brief Examination of Fear & Loathing at the Bookshop**

**Jean Seaton, *Carnage & the Media: The Making & Breaking of News About Violence* (London: Penguin, 2005); Joanna Bourke *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2005); Mark Ames, *Going Postal: Rage, Murder & Rebellion in America* (London: Snow Books, 2007)**

***Dara Downey***

On initial inspection, Jean Seaton's *Carnage & the Media*, Joanna Bourke's *Fear* and Mark Ames' *Going Postal* would seem to have little enough in common with one another. When read in quick succession, however, it becomes clear that all three either point towards, or, more worryingly, actively create a cultural trend in which a fascination with fear and violence has spilled over the slimy, cyclopean walls of Gothic productions per se and into the psychopathology of everyday life.

The existence of this psychopathology is, of course, hardly a new or revolutionary notion. Particularly since the 1890s, by which time the Gothic novel had mutated almost beyond recognition, the horror genre has been more than willing to let us know that the monsters don't need to invade the everyday, because they are already here, chuckling malevolently to themselves as they gleefully inhabit a world struggling vainly to evict them by defining itself as "normal". Nonetheless, it remains a notion about which Western society seems to need constant reminding – although not everyone would agree. Jane Austen's affectionate spoofing of Ann Radcliffe's work in *Northanger Abbey* directly confronts the concern that a cultural climate where girls described as sweet and charming regularly devour the most "horrid" of books, books detailing rape, incest and imprisonment, might be neither a healthy nor even a very safe one. Much like the gory chillers that Austen (and Charlotte Lennox before her) felt compelled to condemn (at least in part, an ambivalence that I share), Seaton, Bourke and Ames tap into and cultivate a market where horrid books constitute light afternoon reading, to be strewn on coffee tables and read about in Sunday newspapers – and without the comforting bulwark of fiction and fantasy. And yet this, I would argue, is only made possible by a drive to construct and uphold a sense of the abnormal and containable nature of the very threats that these books gleefully insist are our constant bedfellows.

The basic premise of Seaton's book, which takes in the Roman games and medieval martyrs, as well as twentieth-century conflicts, is to let us know that war and violence are everywhere. From here, she argues that the media coverage of these sorts of events is in itself a form of violence, violence performed upon the truth, but also upon us, the viewers and readers, who find ourselves manipulated into believing what the media want us to believe and remaining ignorant of the things they want to keep from us. It's not all doom and gloom, of course, and Seaton acknowledges that audiences bring their own assumptions and interpretive tools to bear upon what they see and read. All the same, at the end of the book, we are left with the distinct feeling that there are weapons flying everywhere, whether actual or metaphorical, and that it's only a matter of time before one (or indeed many) of them lodges itself in our soft flesh.

Conversely, Bourke's weighty tome, in spite of its constant protestations to the contrary, because it is organised in essence as a chronological history of the things that people have been afraid of since the early 1800s, leaves one with the sense that, in "the long ago", people were afraid of silly things, and now that we have cancer and terrorists, we *really* know how to be scared. At the same time, her discussion of both of these modern fears is well nuanced, demonstrating that that fears of premature burial were entirely justified up until very recently; and, at the other end of her historical scale, that fear itself is often what ultimately kills a cancer patient. She also examines in detail the anti-Muslim propaganda fostered in the America press both before and after the events of September 11th 2001. Nonetheless, it's difficult not to come away with the impression that in the past they had fear, but now we have problems.

Finally, Ames' book deplores the media tendency to ascribe workplace and high-school shootings to psychological disturbance or to the violent nature of cultural texts and the ready availability of guns. As an alternative, Ames proposes that the systematic exploitation of ordinary workers by high-powered and overpaid bosses, and the pressures on high-school students to perform so as to become one of these exploited workers creates a profound but often unspoken discontent which briefly erupts into what he sees as essentially isolated and untheorised attempts at revolution. His vision of American society is itself rather Radcliffian, with the big-business moguls as the charismatic, vampiric, aristocratic villains, and the down-trodden white-collar workers and stressed-out students as the spunky but terrified heroines desperately but ineffectually fighting back.

In his critical work, *Terrors of Uncertainty* (1989), Joseph Gixti describes the worldview presented by Stephen King (that great barometer of what the American public are thinking – or at any rate what he thinks they ought to be thinking) in his novels as one which combines "helpless unease with vacuous optimism," (74), and it would seem to be precisely this queasy, limbo state that all three books are also, however unconsciously or peripherally, trying to promulgate. *Carnage & the Media*, to my mind, is the worst offender on this score. Admittedly, it is not without its high points. Seaton's discussion of the cultural (mainly Romantic) origins of the notion that emotions are, in comparison to reason and logic, both natural and inherently sincere, is both well placed and compelling. The section on the current state of Russia and its efforts both to copy Western styles of war reporting and resist their cultural hegemony makes for equally fascinating reading, and provides a much needed dose of cultural relativism. She also makes a point of occasionally distinguishing the tactics of British and American news in reporting events close to home for each country, and makes the interesting point that in Scandinavia, news about the conflict in Northern Ireland was presented from the side of the Republicans, which, she argues, resulted in a very different picture of events from that promulgated in Britain. On the subject of Northern Ireland, my personal favourite snippet of information about Russian newscasting relates to the debacle of the first Chechen war, about which Seaton imagines the Russian military elite saying to themselves, "'Let's have a short quick successful war – just like we watch on TV!'" She notes that "Russian television-watchers (including generals) had seen British tanks and rockets apparently suppressing communities in Northern Ireland for more than three decades – except that the images were fraudulent and had been from military exercises and promotions for international armament sales," (174).

In spite of these flashes of brilliance, however, Seaton's book succeeds only in implying that, really, Western news-making all falls generally under the same homogenised banner, a banner which proudly announces a commitment to manipulation (both of audiences and of "facts") and a willingness to pander to increasing time pressures. And this, I would argue, is where Gixti's "helpless unease" comes in,

partnered with the “vacuous optimism” of Seaton’s repeated but utterly unsubstantiated assertions that audiences respond to news and film intelligently, with an awareness of conventions and artificiality, and an ability and desire to read what they see critically rather than passively. Repeatedly invoking an image of a general public at once victimised by representation, and competently dissecting its trickery, exactly where Seaton stands on the issues she raises about media-audience relations is far from evident.

This overall sloppiness and lack of clarity characterises the book as a whole. Almost as grating as her overuse (and frequent misuse) of the word “paradoxically” are her interminable, labyrinthine sentences, which only succeed in muddying the argument and frustrating and wearying the reader. Nevertheless, this would be entirely forgivable were it not for a serious lack of organisation more generally. Issues that would seem to have already been covered return repeatedly, not merely name-checked so as to build up a solid argument, but dusted down and examined all over again, and rarely in a new light. Her discussion of body bags, and how they both occlude and speak of unspeakable horrors, sprawls over two chapters concerned with other matters, and comes to no real conclusions. The second and third times that the issue is raised she fails to acknowledge that it has already been dealt with. Indeed, her discussion of corpses overall, the fears surrounding them and how the news reacts to and seeks to forestall those fears, which contains the germs of some extremely important and challenging ideas, is where the book feels most rushed and poorly constructed. Seaton makes statements along the lines of “in nearly all societies, in all time periods, [the unburied corpse] has been an object of considerable fear,” (191-92), but fails to address this at all, moving on instead to talk about the treatment of soldiers’ bodies since World War 1, and, almost as an afterthought, eventually discussing some theories explaining this fear, such as David Stannard’s *The Puritan Way of Death*, several pages later. This would have been helpful at the point where she makes her sweeping generalisation, not after she’s spent quite some time on other things. Over and over, her abstract observations, bereft of illustration or explanation, leave the reader scratching his or her head and struggling to fill in the yawning blanks.

Finally, while I can see why Seaton chose to do it, the first three chapters, which concentrate on the games in the Roman arena and the martyrdom of early Christians, fail to gel with the purely modern focus of the rest of the book. In subsequent sections, she makes some half-hearted, often rather strained and irrelevant comparisons between this religious bloodshed and modern media, parallels which are, of course, obvious, but once again Seaton does little with them. One gets the impression that she just knows a lot about really old stuff, especially really old stuff to do with Christianity, and wanted to stick it in, whether it fit in with her overall thesis or not, and the result, as in the book as a whole, is a muddle.

In a rather different manner, in spite of its many strengths, Bourke’s *Fear* also falls victim to the impulse identified by Grixti. I agree wholeheartedly with her staunch rejection of the more reductive conclusions of twentieth- (and indeed nineteenth-) century psychology, which she sees as blatantly – almost wilfully – privileging individual psychosis over social and cultural pressures and rigidly defined norms. Indeed, she sees psychology in this garb as actively harmful and even dangerous, dooming those individuals to further torment, isolation and madness by labelling, stigmatising and demonising them. She also hits the mark with her discussion of women’s fears of being attacked when alone and outside, especially at night, and the investment which patriarchal culture has in creating and fostering these fears. Indeed, the issues raised by this discussion help to illuminate the way in which Seaton and Bourke’s books each focus upon, and indeed produce, one of two very different kinds of narratives of fear. On the one hand, there is the fear akin to that generated by trailers for films of the stalk-and-slash variety (or, as in the recent spate of



“Gornography” films, stalk-capture-and-mutilate). While one is actually watching these films, the safety net of plot, dialogue and ingenious or groan-inducing resolution hangs securely beneath us; but in their absence, faced only with horrific flashes and terrified screams that leave us to imagine what might have elicited them, our fear has free rein. On the other hand, when one watches a film in its entirety, those same reassuring mechanisms, and the sense of unity and continuity that they create, can themselves send out messages about the causality of violence and the blame and justification that can be accorded to victim and villain alike. “Don’t go out alone, don’t talk to strangers, all men are out to get you,” these films and the smooth logic of their plots tell us, and even those of us armed with a battery of academic knowledge and an awareness of horror conventions as conventions sometimes can’t help but find ourselves listening.

This opposition is an intrinsic part of what, together, these books create. Seaton’s fun-fair peep-show rendering of history, hopping across continents and in and out of various points in the twentieth century, combines with her messy argumentation to produce a sense (often opposed to what she is actually trying, incoherently, to say) that there is neither rhyme nor reason to the violent things that happen to ordinary people, and that bombard us on a daily basis. She provides us with sound-bite explanations, so jumbled and abbreviated that these explanations themselves require explanations that just aren’t there. Meanwhile, Bourke takes the opposite tack, providing readers with an impressive, teleological, even epic narrative sweep, bringing us happily to a point in the twenty-first century where we need no longer fear burial alive, being crushed to death in a theatre fire, or having our minds subtly destroyed by our well-meaning analyst. She founders, however, on the rocky shores of the 9/11 question. *Fear* roundly, and with much success, condemns the racist fear-mongering that it has trailed in its wake like the gruesome products of a lynching, but seems to be unable to get beyond the simple fact that the bombing of the World Trade Centre was a horrific act of mass murder that left Americans (and most of the Western world, not to mention the Middle East and many American and British citizens who have suddenly become “immigrants”) gripped by profound and justifiable fear. Where Seaton’s eschewal of neat narrative generates its own sort of unease, Bourke’s espousal of plotting as a means of allaying fear proves impossible to sustain in the face of the cataclysmic events of September 11th and its aftermath.

This is made painfully obvious in the final pages of her conclusion. She suggests, with admirable simplicity, that

[...] there is nothing inherently wrong about fear. In many circumstances fear is an appropriate emotion to incite. Obviously parents are acting correctly when they evoke fears in their children: crossing roads, playing with fire and touching electrical sockets are rightly taught to be scary. In times of disaster or when faced with a serious threat, the “flight” response to fear might also be beneficial [...]. (389)

From here, however, she goes on to make such trite observations as “A world without fear would be a dull world indeed,” “A world without fear would be a world without love,” and “much of the human urge to creativity depends upon fear,” (390-91). Now, I sympathise with Bourke here – she needs a nice neat little conclusion to tie everything together, but this is hardly the way to do it. Indeed, having shown incontrovertibly that the current anxieties about foreigners living in and coming into the United States were fuelled, even created, by ideologically motivated writing and reporting, what ought to be quite heartening statements can only fail to ring true. More generally, the book deals with some issues of

central importance to the way we lead our lives in the modern world and have done in the past – the potentially harmful influence of psychiatric techniques upon patients, and of the feminist “discourse of terror” surrounding the threat of rape upon women’s lives; the artificiality of panics surrounding immigration; the dangers of careless design and lack of planning for emergencies in public buildings; the very real fear of live burial in the nineteenth century. However, faced with the prospect of summing up, she concludes lamely by saying, in effect, “fearing these things makes us better people,” when she should be saying, “isn’t it appalling that something isn’t being done about these things, about the way we’re encouraged to fear them without doing anything about them, and which will therefore continue to rule our lives with very real fear and even more pressing danger.” In spite of appearing to be the polar opposite of the gaping holes in Seaton’s arguments, Bourke’s neat little fairytale concludes in the weakest manner possible: she announces that it was all a dream, but we can still see a wolf sitting in our beds instead of Grandma. This isn’t comfort – it’s plausible denial, and that, in itself, is pretty scary.

This, however, is not something that Ames could be accused of – though perhaps we might wish it were so. Like Seaton, Ames’ attitude to editing appears to have suffered from the very work-related pressures they both so vehemently deplore. For the first few pages, I must admit to having been rather put off by Ames’ chatty colloquialisms, his minor repetitions (resulting in his using “obscene” three times on the same page, and several times per chapter) and (gasp!) the occasional typo, as well as by his relationship with the work of Michael Moore, which is characterised by petty one-upmanship. Fifty pages in, however, and I was hooked, not least by the clarity and accessibility of his writing, but also by the utterly compelling nature of the facts he presents. Like Bourke, he condemns psychoanalytical readings of behaviour, which both privilege personal neuroses and psychoses over social pressures and contradictions, and which create jeremiads against individuals seen as monsters while failing to address the core problems which have made them like that. Sticking closely to this stance, Ames paints a bleak and unforgettable picture of thousands, millions of ordinary American white collar workers and cheerful high-school kids convinced that they’re living the American dream, with a house, a career, a car, a scholarship, but all the while being ground down by their bosses and by the government and by that very American dream which, it turns out, is only for the very few at the very top. And yet, Ames insists, chillingly, they worship the rich bastards like Donald Trump who work them till they’re good for nothing but therapy, and then refuse to give them sick pay or medical cover. They ignore the relevance to their own lives while religiously recording the fat cats’ TV shows and buying into their philosophies. The result is an almost science-fictional vision of a world on the brink of apocalypse, where the upper echelons are so corrupt that the only apparent solution is to spray bullets into fellow employees who may represent the oppressive system but certainly aren’t the ones responsible for it. Indeed, workplace shooters in particular frequently miss their bosses in their rampages, who somehow have always just stepped out of the building moments before the carnage. Nonetheless, this is a solution which, appallingly and unbelievably, Ames quite unabashedly supports, in what he sees to be the absence of all others, in spite of its built-in flaws and, more importantly, the very real pain and suffering it inflicts on the innocent.

As he notes himself in his afterword, Ames’ publishers were initially concerned, especially as he was writing it when 9/11 happened, that the book might come across as sympathising with, even encouraging, those who opened fire in schools and offices. And he would be the first to agree. He does so, he argues (perhaps rather speciously), in an effort to force us to see these shootings as the equivalent of slave rebellions, which may not always have struck at the right target, but which were the only means of

expressing discontent and pain in the absence of any support from fellow slaves or from authorities. On the one hand, the evidence presented in *Going Postal* makes a fairly solid case for seeing the school and office systems in America as the dispensers of wholesale injustice, relentlessly terrorising and heaping intolerable pressures upon employees and students, leaving no time for leisure, family or rest, and with ever-decreasing rewards. On the other hand, Ames also (at least nearly) manages to convince us that violence is, if not the answer, then at least a reasonable response to all of this tyranny. And this is far from being a comfortable, or indeed tenable, position for a reader to occupy. In his favour, his solution, however immature and insupportable it might be, most certainly cannot be described as “vacuous optimism” and the unease he represents, while all pervasive and all too often exploding with devastating results, is far from being “helpless”. Only if we apply a certain amount of pressure to his thesis does this sense of impotence emerge in the book. He has proven himself incapable of proposing an alternative, non-violent answer – an impotence on his own part that, I suspect, he would rather sweep under the carpet and then stamp on, violently.

Overall, then, all three books wind up displaying highly complex and far from unobjectionable attitudes towards their central motifs – fear and violence. Only Ames, of course, has the guts to come out and condone violence, and as a result one finds oneself, strangely and unpleasantly, less disturbed by his book than by the others’. He, at any rate, has been honest, and if his thesis is impossible to agree with and as horrific as the oppression it seeks to combat, if not more so, at least he doesn’t suggest that we should all just become better at watching the news or learn to love our racist fears and our victimisation at the hands of a culture that all but feeds off of fear. If nothing else, his book forces us to accept the fact that, whether we turn and fight them, or turn and flee them, fear and violence are our congenital, indeed our terminal, dis-eases.

**DARA DOWNEY**

**Jonathan Rigby, *American Gothic: Sixty Years of Horror Cinema***

London: Reynolds & Hearn LTD, 2007

Following his exhaustive volume on the British horror film entitled *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema*, author Jonathan Rigby returns with an accompanying chronological look at the early history of the American horror film. In *American Gothic: Sixty Years of Horror Cinema*, Rigby maps the development of the genre from its origins in the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, documenting the fates of the two most renowned genre actors of the period, Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, as a means of structuring his analysis.

Whereas *English Gothic* was able to find a prominent place in the vanguard of carefully considered scholarly analysis about British horror cinema (due, in part, to a dearth of available comparable material), the topic of Rigby's second book arguably doesn't allow its author such an easy ride. There is after all a wealth of material already published on the so-called 'Golden Age' of American horror cinema, specifically the more celebrated pictures released by Universal during the 1930s; David J Skal's *The Monster Show* and Mark A. Viera's *Hollywood Horror* to name but two. Rigby overcomes this potential problem by throwing his critical net wider than most, investigating a combination of canonical examples (*Frankenstein*, *Dracula*), moderately well-known, yet largely unstudied pictures (*The Old Dark House*, *Mystery of the Wax Museum*) and those films for which little or no academic analysis exists (*The Most Dangerous Game*, *All that Money Can Buy*).

The book begins by examining the origins of American Gothic in literature and film, introducing many of the conventionally recognised influences such as European Gothic writing and the pioneering work of Georges Méliès. Though Rigby duly acknowledges these actuating forces, his ability to go beyond established critical discussion concerning the horror film soon becomes evident in his decision to devote his entire second chapter to a wide ranging yet enlightening survey of silent horror cinema. The book takes in detailed studies of such silent films as Universal's 1924 adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*, the mystery melodrama *The Monster*, and the 1927 version of *The Cat and the Canary*. Rigby proposes that the theatrical 'Old Dark House' story and the writings of Edgar Allen Poe were of particular significance to the early development of the American silent horror film and charts the manner in which writers and directors drew narrative concepts from both sources in order to start producing a body of work that was definably American in nature.

As the book's focus moves onto the 1930s, Rigby accordingly examines the Universal Horror films and the fortunes of their two most prominent stars, Karloff and Lugosi. Largely concurring with established critical opinion, he praises both *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* for their intellectual handling of the source material, wealth of subtexts, and deftness of touch while criticising *Dracula* and the later *The Wolfman* due to leaden performances and wooden scripts (Rigby appears to hate Chaney Jnr. full stop). Alongside this reiteration of conventional critical opinion, Rigby adds to the established knowledge on this much discussed studio's output by virtue of his thorough accounts of the various sequels and spinoffs that came to form such an important part of Universal's horror proto-franchises. He provides comprehensive analysis of the more straightforward Universal sequels such as *Dracula's Daughter*: "possessing a mordant wit", *Son of Frankenstein*: "a masterful fusion", and *The Mummy's Hand*, alongside 'cross-pollinated' examples like *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*: "plenty to enjoy", *House of*

*Frankenstein*, and *House of Dracula*: “a final lapse into juvenilia” and the comedy Abbott and Costello spinoffs.

As Universal’s horror movies garnered more and more success, so it was that a host of rival major studios and independents attempted to take advantage of the perceived horror boom by releasing their own genre films in the 1930s and ’40s. Studios such as RKO, Paramount and Warner Bros released movies that, while never receiving quite the levels of success of Universal’s did, nevertheless proved a commercial money-spinner. Indeed, Rigby’s dissection of many of these non-Universal, lesser known horror movies forms perhaps the most interesting part of *American Gothic*, providing the reader with a valuable insight into a range of non-canonical films that is both valuable in and of itself and as a means of reassessing and re-evaluating the canon. Rigby’s exploratory instincts see him examine the cycle of RKO/Val Lewton films; choosing *The Seventh Victim* and *The Body Snatcher* for particular praise, he calls the former “expertly crafted” and discusses its foreshadowing of both *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Psycho*; and dubs the latter “beautifully played”. The ‘Doctor X’ run of films at Warner Bros, which he suggests are “Hollywood’s first out-and-out shocker(s) to sport an aggressively contemporary setting”, and many of the horror films produced by Paramount and M-G-M that seem to be frequently overlooked by other academic studies yet remain integral to the development of the American horror film.

Rigby wisely chooses to end his chronicle of American horror in the 1950s, a decade which witnessed a severe decline and subsequent displacement of the genre’s more gothic trappings by ‘space-race’ fuelled science fiction motifs. While he somewhat vaguely suggests that a few of the science fiction films of the era (*The Thing From Another World*, *The Man From Planet X*) have enough gothic paraphernalia to qualify as valid subject matter, Rigby rightly acknowledges the near death of horror (and the careers of Karloff and Lugosi) in American cinema in the mid-1950s and the genre’s subsequent rebirth in England as an appropriate point at which to end his study.

In conclusion, in presenting the reader with such an engaging and informative evaluation of a set of lesser known films alongside an analysis of their more renowned contemporaries, *American Gothic* succeeds as a useful addition to the horror aficionado’s library. It is both the breadth and depth of Rigby’s selections that render the book a must-have for anyone with an interest in the subject matter. Though it may be the case that *American Gothic* cannot hope to be as comprehensive or as original as Rigby’s earlier study of the English horror film (which also examined significant examples of genre television in addition to surveying the entire history of British horror cinema), the greater output of genre product in America undoubtedly makes such a task impossible. Nonetheless, it is a testament to the passion and rigour of Rigby’s book that one is left with both a greater understanding of the significant trends and developments in the early American horror film, and an enormous desire for the author to extend his analysis of the genre into the cinema of the latter part of the twentieth century by producing an *American Gothic 2*.

**DAVID SIMMONS**

**Shaun Hutson, *Unmarked Graves***  
Orbit books, 2007

Shaun Hutson has been a mainstay in British Horror fiction for over 20 years, with more than 60 novels to his name (including those written under his 8 pseudonyms). Of these, some of the most memorable include *Slugs* (which features slugs growing teeth and developing a taste for human flesh) and *White Ghost* (involving the IRA and severed heads in Leicester Square...).

*Unmarked Graves* is the latest novel from Hutson and continues the theme of urban horror that runs through many of his previous books. The novel follows the story of three main protagonists. The first is Nick Pearson, an investigative journalist recently returned from Sierra Leone (having reported on genocide committed during the civil war) and now keen to investigate racism against African immigrants in Darworth, a typical small English town. The second is Stephen Kirkland, a resident of Darworth and leader of a group of neo-Nazis involved in tormenting the town's growing immigrant population. Kirkland's prejudice is further fuelled by the fact that his brother was killed by an African. The final character, initially only described as the 'Tall Man', journeys from Sierra Leone to Darworth, a trip occasionally punctuated by the odd bloody sacrifice. Once he arrives in England he swiftly begins to incite the immigrant population to begin fighting back against the racists who continually attack them. This tripartite narrative division includes occasional points of crossover, helping to develop motivations and insights into character actions.

Just so you know, when I was asked to review *Unmarked Graves* I jumped at the chance. I like cheesy horror novels and films - especially the ones featuring giant crabs, man-eating slugs and blood beasts. They make me grin from ear to ear because at times there's something deeply enjoyable about reading a novel in which plot so unashamedly takes second place to gore and where you're guaranteed at least one set of heaving bosoms every chapter. This is a feature of a number of horror writers who specialise in producing written versions of slasher film and B- movie plots (writers such as James Herbert, Guy N. Smyth and the ever popular Richard Laymon). The 1970s and '80s saw an explosion of these 'schlock' horror films and books, much in the same way as there is a current trend towards torture movies (such as the *Saw* series and the disappointing *Hostel*) today. As a result of this convergence of literary and filmic horror motifs you come to expect some stereotypes in this type of horror fiction. There's *always* a square-jawed, slightly right-wing hero, a ravishing blonde and some sort of unholy terror, as well as the inevitable moment when it is revealed that the real evil was humanity, all along. Having said that, this tick-the-box approach to certain books and films was acceptable enough during the seventies and eighties but as book and film audiences have matured over the years, much more has come to be expected from writers and film makers alike - such as a plot. These expectations are best seen in the breakdown of the formulaic movies churned out by Hollywood over the last three decades. The audiences' increased expectations have resulted in the strip mining of new media industries, most notably graphic novels and video games, for ideas (although this has resulted in some of the most horrendous films ever made - such as anything directed by Uwe Boll).

But to describe *Unmarked Graves* as hackneyed is perhaps not harsh enough. The character types follow the stereotypical format of this kind of pulp fiction to the letter, with Kirkland acting as a counterpoint to the liberal ways of Nick, and the 'Tall Man' inevitably acting as the evil mastermind who's manipulating everyone for his own ends, but here it fails to work even on the most basic level.

The writing is generally poor, and Hutson has an unfortunate tendency to overstate character comments (for example an inner-city racist when tending a grave “smiled to himself. ‘I wonder if they can hear?’ he murmured, continuing his own ministrations,” something the character couldn’t even spell, let alone do.) The chapters follow an almost painful progression characterised by clichéd dialogue and poorly paced plotting. And worst of all, the novel is just plain boring. By the time the first zombie shows up the book is 100 pages in (and in this long awaited scene, all it does is walk out of the morgue) with the book a total of 264 pages long. In many ways this is one of the most unforgivable aspects of this novel, in that it neglects to provide for the needs of its target audience, those interested in the cheesy, fast read.

Even more problematic are Hutson’s desperate attempts to treat the topic of immigration into Britain in a ‘sensitive’ manner. Every character – even the Neo Nazi – gets a chance to try and justify their motives for behaving like they do. The police try their best to solve the murder of a refugee and the refugees refuse to trust them. The strange thing is that all of the immigrants in the book are illegal, despite living in rental accommodation and receiving state benefits, an apparent vision of the Daily Mail’s worst fears suddenly realised. *Unmarked Graves* genuinely feels like a novel in which Hutson was trying to tackle the effect of increased immigration from outside Europe into the UK and the potential clash of cultures that may result, and as such this presents a timely and potentially fascinating topic for a horror novel. It’s unfortunate then that *Unmarked Graves* fails to deal with these issues satisfactorily or to make imaginative use of the vast tract of mythology available within African folklore. Instead, he just uses the standard voodoo plot (native villagers, turned evil, use magic to attack unsuspecting white people) which has been bandied about for decades.

Another major flaw in the novel is that it isn’t frightening on any level whatsoever, relying instead on standard plot devices more akin to those seen in films such as *Friday the Thirteenth* than in an effective horror novel. This can have an upside if one is looking for a no-brainer read but carrying this off successfully does require a certain slickness which *Unmarked Graves* fails to provide, making this a painful read. In this reviewer’s opinion, *Unmarked Graves* is a novel best avoided. Give me Guy N. Smith’s *Night of the Crabs* any day!

**RICO RAMIREZ**

**Steven Hall, *The Raw Shark Texts***

Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007

*The Raw Shark Texts* can immediately be praised for being a pun with a point. Like the Rorschach test it alludes to, this debut novel by British author Steven Hall revolves around the issue of perspective, its narrative shifting under the reader's gaze. This experimental work requires faith on the part of the reader; the novelist as helmsman perhaps, steering through the murky waters of the narrator's consciousness. The inevitable comparison here is to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), which likewise uses elements of horror to produce something entirely new, yet at the same time gestures towards the future of the genre. Like *House of Leaves*, *The Raw Shark Texts* could be categorised as an existential horror novel, and shares key concerns such as memory and identity. Unlike Danielewski's exhaustively annotated work, however, this is a more conventional novel. The fast pace and roughly linear narrative allow for Hall's work to be read as a straightforward thriller, albeit one that is consistently preoccupied with the nature of language, subverting even its own storytelling in the process.

Although the film rights are already under negotiation (with Nicole Kidman apparently interested in replacing the novel's male lead), it is difficult to see how this would work. Hall's strong internet presence and Canongate's marketing would suggest that what we have here is a modern cult writer in the vein of Chuck Palahniuk, yet *The Raw Shark Texts* is not inherently a filmic novel. Unapologetically literary, it is concerned as much with the nature of its own existence as with the motivations of the central protagonist and supporting characters. As is the case with *House of Leaves*, Borges is clearly an influence, and is referenced before the first chapter. Likewise, Italo Calvino gets a mention, and Calvino's technique of making the reader aware they are reading a novel is omnipresent. Most obvious is the use of pictorial illustrations composed of text, which range from the subtle use of vowels to represent bubbles underwater that opens the second section, to one spectacular example of textual play near the climax (involving a shark composed of previously used sections of narrative). The knowing postmodernity, however, is not as intrusive as in *House of Leaves*, and this remains in many ways a conventional mystery/horror novel.

*The Raw Shark Texts* revolves around a man in his late twenties called Eric Sanderson. Suffering from extreme memory loss, he discovers a note from "the first Eric Sanderson" containing instruction that will lead him into a bizarre adventure. Eric discovers that he is being pursued by a creature called a Ludovician: a "conceptual shark" composed entirely of ideas. This linguistic predator feeds on memory and leaves its victims devoid of the narratives of their own lives. The chief question facing the reader is the extent to which this creature is real and how much it owes to Eric's traumatised response to the death of his girlfriend Clio in a scuba-diving accident. Either way, Hall manages to construct convincing justifications for the existence of this creature, largely based on the "meme" theories of Richard Dawkins and Susan Blackmore, a meme being a single unit or building block of cultural information or evolution. Also important is the nature of "un-space", described as, "the labelless car parks, crawl tunnels, disused attics and cellars, bunkers, maintenance corridors, derelict industrial estates, boarded-up houses [...] the pockets of no-name-place under manhole covers and behind the overgrow of railway sidings" (80). In some ways reminiscent of J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), these spaces are bleak and lonely areas, yet here provide refuge from the relentless flow of information and narrative inherent in contemporary society.



This is certainly a novel of ideas, yet it is not entirely navel-gazing. One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Raw Shark Texts* is what it has to say about the state of literature and culture. References to contemporary society do not feel forced, but tap into the more recent memetic reference points to sink into our collective consciousness. Take for example Hall's description of the character Scout "throwing herself through a Tetris gap of missing bricks at the end of the corridor" (218), or an unexpected yet pleasing anecdote where another central character recounts the oriental history of his secret society in a style taken straight out of a Kung-Fu popcorn flick, the slyly referential tone comparable to Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films (2003/2004). This casual postmodernism is carried on throughout, leading some critics to comment on the magpie-like style of the novel, which does borrow heavily from other sources, notably Spielberg's film version of *Jaws* (1975). Yet to dismiss this as a facsimile would be to miss the point spectacularly. *The Raw Shark Texts* is primarily a novel about narrative; both the act of storytelling and the way in which we transform our lives into linear stories (an issue particularly relevant in the age of blogging and MySpace). In a poignant moment where Eric thinks of Clio, he reflects that:

There's no way to really preserve a person when they've gone and that's because whatever you write down it's not the truth, it's just a story. Stories are all we're ever left with in our head or on paper: clever narratives put together from selected facts, legends, well edited tall tales with us in the starring roles. (413)

Despite this acknowledgement, there is the sense that the novel does yearn for something concrete in the midst of the white noise of the information age. Eric, however, is not an aloof protagonist who stands back from the symptoms of postmodernity, coming under fire in a flashback scene with Clio for "this thing you have about always comparing things in real life to things in films" (39). In few other novels (aside from Don DeLillo's) is the condition of hyperreality more apparent or convincing. At one point in the novel Dr. Fidorous, an expert in conceptual fish, constructs a boat out of ideas. To Eric's remark that the boat (which is clearly modelled on that in *Jaws*) looks familiar he replies, "It should be familiar. If you were to say shark-hunting boat to almost anybody in the western world they'll visualise this exact same boat. This [...] is the current collective idea of what a shark-hunting boat should be" (314-315).

It might seem that the search for real meaning in the midst of this memetic flux is futile, yet Hall's obvious skill as a writer manages to transcend the conceptual chaos and convey moments of real poignancy. Eric, devoid of memories and meaning, ponders his situation as he begins to rebuild something resembling a life and identity:

I'd been a flat thing, something I always mistook for a shadow, but maybe the eroding effect of events had begun weathering me out of the ground, revealing new surfaces and edges. Can nothing really be scraped away the same way something can? I wondered about what else might be down there, what I could become if all these layers of absence and loss and bad things could ever be excavated and taken away. (232)

*The Raw Shark Texts* succeeds on a number of levels. Although not hardcore horror, it balances suburban realism and fantasy gothic with as much flair as Clive Barker's *Weaveworld* (1987). Meanwhile, the well thought-out and implemented elements of linguistic play give the narrative satisfying intellectual depth without losing sight of pace and humour. Not only does the novel succeed in making the absurd believable, but perhaps most impressive of all is its ability to be genuinely touching while maintaining a

pleasingly cynical edge. In this case the hype is to be believed: *The Raw Shark Texts* is not just a promising debut but displays the kind of originality and style that will almost certainly create a legion of cult followers.

***KEVIN CORSTORPHINE***

**Charlie Huston, *No Dominion***  
Orbit Publishing, 2007

*No Dominion* is the second book in Charlie Huston's 'Joe Pitt' series, a modern take on the vampire that for once doesn't involve leather-clad heroines filled with angst at their vampiric state whilst having interesting sexual encounters with werewolves, demons and anything else with (or without) a pulse.

In the first novel, *Already Dead*, readers were introduced to a world where Manhattan is divided into competing Vampyre Clans (Yes, I said Vampyres, but trust me, it's not a bad thing...) who have divided the island amongst themselves. Vampyres are created by a virus known as 'The Vyrus' which results in the victim lusting after blood and being highly allergic to sunlight (which makes them grow tumours all over their bodies and die screaming within a few minutes of exposure). Unlike traditional vampires, Huston's interpretation of the supernatural monster doesn't have the standard fangs; instead they knock their victims out and drain their blood using a syringe.

The Vampyres of Manhattan are highly territorial, killing any rival clan members who enter their territory, each clan jealously protecting their land. The largest and most powerful of the clans is the Coalition, which once claimed all of Manhattan as its territory. This is of course until the Society made an appearance and precipitated a Vampyre civil war, gouging out its own slice of the island with its liberal, hippy-like outlook on living with humans in peace and the ultimate goal of finding a cure to the Vyrus. The Hood is made of African American, Hispanic and Chinese Vampyres who occupy Harlem and really don't like white people (Vampyre or human). The most mysterious clan of Vampyres (and the most feared) is the Enclave, who attempt to unlock the true power of the Vyrus by reducing their blood intake to the point of near starvation.

In the midst of this maelstrom of blood-thieving competitiveness lives Joe Pitt, a rogue Vampyre who once worked for the Society as a clan enforcer and now uses his expertise to help anyone with enough money to pay for his services.

*Already Dead* saw Joe trying to track down a kidnapped human girl who knew a bit too much about the Vampyre underworld. In the process, he managed to upset the Coalition, his main source of income, now out to ruin him any way it can.

*No Dominion* begins a few months after the events of *Already Dead* and, suffice to say, Joe is hitting hard times. He's low on cash, low on blood and, in true film noir fashion, his rent's due. In order to rectify this unfortunate situation, Joe takes an under-the-table job from the leader of the Society, tracking down the source of a new drug which is being used by Vampyres (something which should be impossible as a result of the Vyrus destroying anything toxic that enters a Vampyre's body). This leads Joe across Manhattan tracking down the source (including a run-in with a new-born Vampyre who calls himself Vlad and has a harem of three Vampyre women who seduce anyone who walks in the door. Sound familiar?).

The 'Joe Pitt' series takes as its inspiration the hard-boiled detective novel, with Pitt regularly facing the more gritty aspects of a private detective's life, up to and including regular beatings, drinking whiskey and being sarcastic whilst getting punched in the face. This darker approach to the vampire novel results

in a wry and witty read that pulls no punches when it comes to violence. Pitt is regularly faced with nasty situations that result in broken necks and teeth being spat about the place.

The series also moves the supernatural idea of vampires aside, instead focusing on a disease carried in blood as the cause of Vampirism (rather than demonic possession, being half-demon or having angered God and being cursed to work the world forever, cursed to feast on blood, brood, and if it's an Anne Rice novel, have sex with everything that moves.) This focus on blood is a recurrent theme in both of the Joe Pitt novels. Houston takes great pains to detail how a Vampyre goes about getting blood, eschewing the traditional teeth/neck interface for a dose of Rohypnol and a needle in a vein, with the victim left alive (the reason given being that with a population of a few thousand Vampyres for 8 million humans, eventually the police would notice exsanguinated bodies turning up all over the place and draw some interesting, if not downright inconvenient, conclusions).

The author portrays in detail the pleasure the Vampyres take in drinking blood, ignoring the previously standard approach of the vampires feeling remorse for their bloodlust and hanging around grave yards feeling sorry for themselves (*à la Angel*, Barb and J.C. Hendee's *Dhampir* series of novels, *Interview with the Vampire* and anything else written since 1980). Rather, Houston's Vampyres exalt in it and revel in their abilities, with one group of Vampyres attempting to explore their belief in the mystic nature of the Vyrus (one of the few allusions in the Pitt series to the Supernatural) by refusing to feed, resulting in the Vyrus ramping up their abilities and their lust for blood to ensure its own survival.

Houston also parallels Pitts' Vampyric nature with that of his girlfriend (Evie) who has AIDS. Both diseases are carried in blood, with both characters afraid to have sex with the other for fear of infection. A moral dilemma develops in *No Dominion* as Evie's condition begins to worsen, with Joe aware that he could save her by turning her into a Vampyre.

*No Dominion* is an excellent take on the Vampire (Vampyre) mythos, adding a new and interesting twist on a genre that has been in danger of becoming tired and overused (the aforementioned scantily clad heroine and brooding. Lots of brooding), no thanks to a combination of Anne Rice and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

*No Dominion* is an excellent novel that adds significantly to the Vampire-related fiction, turning what was becoming a bland and increasingly annoying genre into an exciting and original approach to the mythos. Much like Sergei Lukyanenko's *Night Watch* Trilogy, the Joe Pitt series has added something bold and interesting that will hopefully breathe new unlife into this perennially popular subgenre of horror fiction.

**EOIN MURPHY**

*Gothic NZ: The Darker Side of Kiwi Culture*, eds. Misha Kavka, Jennifer Lawn & Mary Paul  
Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006

New Zealand has no more intrinsic claim to ‘being gothic’ than any other nation. Indeed, it may well have less, yet it is a nation that is certainly fond of the gothic turn. Our national filmmaker – Peter Jackson – had his beginnings in splatter before shifting his attention to teenage murderesses. Our national writer – Janet Frame – was almost as famous for her time spent in institutions as for her writing about her time spent in institutions. Our national painter – Colin McCahon – produced bleak landscapes spattered with forbidding biblical quotations. Our national game – rugby – at club level involves standing around in the rain in the middle of winter while cheerfully encouraging our children to brutalise one another. While these observations might be glib, clichéd, there’s no denying that New Zealanders pride themselves on a national tradition that is a little bit gloomy, a little bit grim.

*Gothic NZ* is the first book-length publication to treat the ‘darker side’ of New Zealand culture. It’s a collection largely composed of critical essays, although it also includes a few snatches of poetry, a memoir-ish rumination, and a number of prints. The focus is generally contemporary. The collection ought to be a treat; in actuality, it’s a little trickier than that.

‘Where is the gothic?’ asks editor Lawn in her introduction. Certainly, the mobility of the genre is part of its appeal as a field of research, and *Gothic NZ* includes articles so diverse as to suggest that whatever the gothic is, it is itinerant. There are pieces which feature colonial architecture, tattooing, the gothic potentialities of home renovation, and the kind of streetwear favoured by disconsolate young people who hide behind their fringes and paint their fingernails black. It’s easy enough to locate the gothic in these disparate locations – but how are we to account for their disparate gothicnesses? How are these things connected?

Lawn’s answer is evasive: nothing is gothic in itself, but it is possible to look at anything gothically. It’s a fair enough response to the bewildering proliferation of gothic manifestations, but one that proves unsatisfying as an editorial policy in a collection like this. If it is possible to look at something gothically, then what would prompt us to do so? Once we have chosen to see something gothically, how is our understanding modified? Likewise, if seeing the gothic is a shift in our mode of vision, is seeing something as ‘kiwi’ a similar choice? To introduce a collection about the ‘darker side of kiwi culture’ with this argument creates a need to draw out these considerations within the selections. The contributions themselves are often entertaining, generally interesting and occasionally astute, but their arguments – through no fault of the contributors, as the collection has been assembled from conference papers and a handful of already published pieces – can barely treat the editorial premise. All the same, there’s good fun to be had.

*Gothic NZ*’s catholic approach really works well in the case of Bill Manhire’s smart poem, ‘Ghost Painting’, which is accompanied by the unattributed colonial painting ‘Picnic at Woodhaugh c.1863’, which it describes. These are joined by contemporary painter Saskia Leek’s somewhat uncanny reiteration of the picnic in her own work, painted after having read the poem but not having seen the original picture, and curator Justin Paton’s notes from Leek’s 2000 exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. The featured works aren’t new, the reproduction of Leek’s picture is frustratingly tiny, and Manhire’s poem is gothic really in title only, but it’s a satisfying bringing together of texts nevertheless. Yet this approach

doesn't work quite so well elsewhere, particularly with the other two poetic inclusions, from less established poets; white text on black pages is inexplicably accompanied by photos of headstones and goths standing in the water. These feel like verse from a '90s gothic fanzine, and whether you'll like them or not depends on whether you like that sort of thing or not.

Martin Edmond, in a well turned-out piece of essayistic memoir, frames gothic moments from his provincial Ohakune childhood: the madwoman from across the road butchering a bull for her dogs in the Edmond's garden on a dark and stormy night strikes me as a particularly authentic, and particularly kiwi, gothic turn. His piece is interspersed with photographs of Ohakune, Raetihi and Waiourou, landscapes that are underdeveloped, filled with the twisted wreckage of trees. The country seems bleak in black and white, and people are missing or dwarfed. Yet all of these pictures date from a period much earlier than the one being recounted – as if the editors were worried that pictures dating from Edmond's childhood might not have made the provinces look quite sinister enough.

Sarah Shieff worries about the racist/racist readings which are possible in the recent *Lord of the Rings* films (surely only an adopted New Zealand text!) What are we to make of those nasty, dirty and brown Uruk-Hai compared to the nicely laundered, white elves? Of course, Shieff is right; the *Lord of the Rings* probably does articulate rhetorics of race. My real question is, why does this discourse find space in a collection about New Zealand Gothic, given that the *Rings* films aren't exactly New Zealand texts, and aren't really gothic either? Aren't they better understood as part of the now problematic genre of the epic, which frequently depends on making the distinction between various groups and then discriminating between them? Is it really useful to regard race rhetoric as inherently gothic?

Misha Kavka does a good job of describing the aesthetic of Misery, the artist responsible for a popular brand of local streetwear that features cutesy-creepy images, often drawn out of nursery rhymes. A selection of Misery's drawings are included and are a pleasure, but Kavka leaves uninterrogated the question of how the ooky-spooky pop-gothic has become such a populist, youthful phenomenon, and how it might relate to bleaker visions of the gothic.

Photographer Yvonne Todd is represented with a selection of her work. Todd is perhaps best known for her images of Virginia-Andrews-gothic young women, which are included and do have a gently disquieting quality, but also included are Todd's images, 'Clammy Pipes' and 'Wet Sock', both of which depict exactly what they claim to. As no essay on Todd's work is included, I am left to puzzle over what, exactly, is meant to be gothic in these images. This can hardly be a criticism of Todd for not being 'gothic enough', but is a query about an editorial policy that espouses a very foggy notion of what might be gothic. This is perhaps best exemplified in an article where Mark Jackson links a group of dinky tattoo designs to Medieval Scholasticism via High Gothic architecture, Edgar Allan Poe and Adolf Loos. It's a baffling read.

This sort of approach – where any one thing that is named as gothic relates to any other thing which shares the category – ignores the historicising work done by a number of very capable scholars. Simply put, the gothic isn't what it's always been; what once referred almost exclusively to works by Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis and Fuseli has recently included considerations of gothic Oprah Winfrey and gothic Martha Stewart. According to *Gothic NZ*, we can add leaky buildings, plumbing problems and quest

fantasy to the list. How far can we stretch a discursive term? Does the gothic, as it is now critically conceived, have anything to do with how the term is popularly understood?

Gothic studies have been increasingly popular internationally over the last thirty years, and I was surprised that the collection seldom engaged with the considerable body of scholarship that has developed. There are only a tiny handful of international gothic scholars in the collection's bibliography. Why does *Gothic NZ* exclude reference to so much salient work that's already been done?

There are other silences too. Why not a proper article on author Ronald Hugh Morrieson, generally regarded as our premiere gothicist, rather than scattered allusions? Why not something on the maudlin, grotesque paintings of Tony Fomison? Why not photographer Christine Webster's *Black Carnival* or *New Myths* works? Where are bands such as the Skeptics, Children's Hour? Is New Zealand's only Booker winner, *The Bone People*, gothic? And why is there only the odd mention, in passing, of perhaps our most profound visionary of the domestic gothic: Janet Frame? It seems to me that if there is room in the collection for more marginally gothic considerations – for instance, glum modernist architectures, the incursion of tree roots into plumbing, Land Transport Safety Authority ads – there ought to be room for more substantial material too. Gothic studies has opened up significant possibilities, and there's plenty of work yet to be done in explicating the gothic in New Zealand texts more important than the ones explored here.

Even more curious is *Gothic NZ*'s tendency to avoid texts we might regard as horrific or even fearful. Perhaps the article on a series of Land Transport Safety Authority advertisements depicting violent car crashes and their aftermaths is an exception here, but the campaign's ambit is really limited to didactic shock effects. In general, the gothic described by the collection is a feeling of quiet unease, a subtle darkening, an academic argument; yet this is hardly the whole of what we might describe as the gothic. Where are the ghosts, the murderers, the zombies? Why should the collection avoid them? There's perhaps a sense the editors would like to shun all that sort of unpleasantness, that they would like to make the gothic a little nicer than it actually is.

The book itself looks lovely, with wide margins and colourful illustrations; but as I write this, having had the book for only a week, there is a large crack appearing in the binding. I'm left with the sense that *Gothic NZ* is an appealing collection, but one that doesn't hold together particularly well.

**TIM JONES**

**Gary William Crawford, *Robert Aickman: An Introduction***

Baton Rouge: Gothic Press, 2003

What an odd man Robert Aickman was. Various a conservationist, a short story writer, an editor, a devotee of inland waterways, a cultural activist and administrator, Aickman was the grandson of the great *fin-de-siècle* bestseller Richard Marsh, author of that landmark work of orientalist sleaze, *The Beetle*. He seems to have been conceived on his parents' wedding night, apparently the only time they had sex: an experience which was, his mother later informed Robert, 'worse than I could ever have believed possible' – honestly, how Freudian is that! Well, as Philip Larkin once wrote, 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad' – they did, indeed, if you were a certain kind and vintage of Englishman, which Aickman and Larkin both were. Aickman found it difficult to make friends with men, but enjoyed the company of many women, as variously friend, confidant, or lover – often unrequited, though occasionally not, as in the case of Elizabeth Jane Howard, with whom Aickman had an affair before her marriage to Kingsley Amis. During the inter-war years, Aickman lived something of a Bohemian lifestyle in London, stepping out with cross-dressing women, and escorting to the opera a woman wearing a fur coat and nothing underneath, before settling down to a most unconventional marriage with his wife Ray, whom he married 'not for love, but out of sympathy'. She later divorced him, found God, and became a nun, Sister Benedicta. Aickman Snr, an architect whose practice failed because of his chronic lack of punctuality (and general weirdness), didn't have the money to send Robert to Oxbridge as he would have liked, and so his son grew into a classic autodidact, who could seem polymathic, but who became insecure and defensive when challenged. Unsurprisingly, he liked to host dinner parties, in which he could hold forth to handpicked guests.

I think I first came across Aickman in his role as editor of the great Fontana Ghost Stories series, a gig he got from Herbert Van Thal, legendary editor of the rival Pan Horror Stories, whose lurid covers may have got me into this horror business in the first place. Across a number of introductions to this series, Aickman articulated a philosophy and aesthetics of the ghost story which is in equal parts subtle and contradictory, often difficult, occasionally banal, and sometimes profound. They could also often be wildly out of step with the intellectual interests and abilities of his actual readership. Take this, for example, from *The Third Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories* (1966):

The first good reason [to read ghost stories] is the need we all must feel for some degree of reconciliation with death. The second is vaguer but still more continuously present in the consciousness of most of us: the need to escape, at least occasionally, from a mechanistic world, ever more definable, ever more predictable, and, therefore, ever more unsatisfying and frustrating. As an antidote to daily living in a compulsorily egalitarian society, a good ghost story, against all appearances, can bring real joy. The reader may actually depart from it singing.

To which I now say: *Gaudeamus*. But what many of Aickman's original readers in the sixties and seventies (including my younger self, just graduated onto this from reading Warlord comics) would have made of this spot of prefab Anglo-Adorno is anybody's guess.

Aickman's stories are arresting in their very oddness. Though he was a believer in some sort of supernaturalism, Aickman's ghosts are barely there at all, shades of shades, nuances of peculiarity just – just – ruffling the surface. It's as if, for Aickman, the simple fact of Englishness is uncanny enough (and,



given his family history, this may have seemed an inescapable conclusion for him). Thus, to read Aickman is to enter a world where heroines have names like Griselda de Reptonville or Clarinda Hartley, and where the men are called Wendley Roper or Laming Gatestead; a world of self-actualizing lesbians and (you guessed it) sexually-repressed men. Colvin, the protagonist of 'The Visiting Star', is writing a book on lead and plumbago mining (what a great word, plumbago). One occasionally suspects that the whole thing might be a rather droll if obscure joke, except that I'm not sure Robert Aickman had a sense of humour to speak of.

Gary William Crawford's book is very keen and incredibly informative, but it's not a work of criticism in any way that I understand the word. He tells us interesting things, for sure, and knows more about Aickman than you or I ever could. The opening section, a sketch of Aickman's life, is completely fascinating, and had me wishing that Crawford had gone for a full-scale critical biography. Problem is, when it comes to discussing the fiction itself, Crawford gives far too much weight to opinions from the *demi-monde* of amateur horror commentary – of which he himself is a part – where old-school connoisseurship and new-fangled fandom combine to produce a kind of unlicensed quasi-scholarship in which the opinions of online enthusiasts are offered as oracular. Hell, I know this makes me sound like a crusty, institutionalized old academic fart, and maybe I am, but nevertheless there is a real difference between literary criticism, a professional skill which takes years of training to develop, and simply recounting the plots of stories. And this is not to assume an *a priori* position of cultural snobbery – as the very existence of this journal amply testifies.

Perhaps this is unfair. Unlike some of the online fellow-travellers he freely quotes, Crawford does have a kind of thesis here, albeit one that is never fully worked out, and certainly never really integrated into the readings of the stories themselves. Aickman, Crawford believes, was a particular kind of very English Freudian, fucked up by his mum and dad, and also a Surrealist. Well, Griselda de Reptonville and experts in plumbago mining seem pretty surreal to me, and Crawford dots his book with quotations from Freud and Breton. But these theorists exist in a kind of parallel intellectual world to Aickman's own writings, never intersecting. To give an example. In 'No Stranger Than a Flower', the heroine, Nesta, in an unsatisfying marriage with her (repressed!) husband Curtis, changes her appearance through the supernatural agency of Mrs De Milo. Her mouth transforms into 'a new wound'. Now, Crawford does acknowledge that this is 'surreal' and 'sexual', which it is - but that's it. Let me tell you, if I had written this book, reader, you would at this point have got a five-page Freudian disquisition on castration and lack, on Freud's Wolf Man and his haunting visions of his mother's vagina as an open wound. (And speaking of lack, I'm sure I could've got Mrs De Milo in there too.)

But perhaps this is just me, and perhaps this, too, is unfair. After all, this is, as its subtitle tells us, a critical introduction. And if the purpose of a critical introduction is to send readers back to the original works with new, or renewed, interest and enthusiasm, then yes, Gary William Crawford's book does just what it says on the tin.

**DARRYL JONES**

## FILM REVIEWS

### TWO ACTS TO GRIND: *DEATH PROOF*, *PLANET TERROR* & THE 1970s REVIVAL

***Death Proof* (Dir. Quentin Tarantino) USA 2007**

Dimension Films/Rodriguez International Pictures/Troublemaker Studios

***Planet Terror* (Dir. Robert Rodriguez) USA 2007**

Dimension Films/Rodriguez International Pictures/Troublemaker Studios

It's been business as usual in horror movie-land this year, what with all the sequels and remakes (too many to count); unfortunate tourists who (fingers crossed) hope just to end up in a spooky hotel (*1408*) rather than a torture chamber (*Hostel: Part II*); genetically-modified beasts (*The Breed*; *Black Sheep*); and paranormal activities from creepy ventriloquist's dummies to Biblical plagues (*Dead Silence* and *The Reaping*). But perhaps the most dominant trend in this year's crop of horror films has been the ongoing obsession with the 1970s. Arguably the best horror film of 2007 (David Fincher's *Zodiac*) was not obviously a horror film at all, but a throwback to that great 1970s subgenre of investigative journalism films (such as *All the President's Men*); and the most notorious film of the year was the 1970s-inspired *Grindhouse*, the double-feature by Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino which aimed to recapture the titular cinematic experience of grotty exploitation flicks for a modern multiplex audience, rather than the drive-in and midnight movie theatres they would have played to in the 1960s and 1970s.

In April, *Grindhouse* made its US debut as a three-hour feature, comprising a double-bill of Tarantino's *Death Proof* and Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*, complete with deliberately abrupt cuts and missing reels; grainy footage to suggest decaying film stock; and fake trailers directed by a veritable who's-who of contemporary horror directors, all of whom had major movie releases of their own this year. Rodriguez added fake trailer *Machete* to his duties as *Planet Terror* director; Rob Zombie (director of another 1970s throwback, the *Halloween* remake that took advantage of the Labor Day weekend to top the US box office) contributed *Werewolf Women of the SS* (featuring a relatively-restrained turn from notorious scenery-chewer Nicolas Cage as Fu Manchu); Eli Roth took time out from coming up with his 'original' idea of using girls instead of guys as the focus of *Hostel: Part II* to put together his fake trailer for slasher-flick Thanksgiving; and best of the bunch was Edgar Wright's *Don't* (a near-perfect recreation of the kind of inexplicable and demented Euro-horror that populated the shelves of the earliest video stores; it featured a cast of many of his regulars from TV's *Spaced*, *Shaun of the Dead* and this year's *Hot Fuzz*, which played something like *Bad Boys 2* meets *The Wicker Man*). All in all, the *Grindhouse* project had the makings of a fascinating experiment in filmmaking, an attempt to replicate a subgenre of cinema and the now-lost experience of viewing it, but infamously the film failed at the US box office. Executive producers Harvey and Bob Weinstein took evasive action, repackaging the film as two separate feature-length instalments, re-instating the missing reels and dumping the fake trailers. In Europe, then, the film became the single-greatest disappointment of 2007 even before it arrived on these shores. But how much more disappointing it proved when the first feature-length half arrived in the shape of Tarantino's *Death Proof*, an irritating, masturbatory mess of a film that seems to have been made with only one audience in mind: Quentin Tarantino.

*Death Proof* is a film in which very little happens – twice. The first half of the film introduces us to the first group of ‘The Girls’ (the kinds of characters that should be bumped off within the first ten or fifteen minutes of an exploitation flick, making way for the main action) – Arlene (Vanessa Ferlito), Jungle Julia (Sydney Poitier), and Shanna (Jordan Ladd). They drive around, dangling legs precariously out of car windows, shooting the breeze and planning a girls-only trip to Shanna’s father’s cabin. Eventually, they end up in a bar, where they lead Eli Roth on and politely decline to comment on Tarantino’s embarrassing extended cameo as Warren the bartender, and bitch about other girls, primarily Pam (Rose McGowan) who, in turn, bitches about them to Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell). After The Girls consume a lot of alcohol and talk a lot of what Tarantino seems to think is his trademark dialogue, *Reservoir Dogs* is fast becoming a very distant memory, and we’re not even at the halfway point. First, Arlene has to give Stuntman Mike a lap-dance before Pam can ill-advisedly accept a lift home from the tee-total, slightly weird but apparently harmless Stuntman. Stuntman Mike, however, is a classic stalk-and-slash killer who uses his specially-modified stunt car in place of a blade; he quickly dispatches the hapless Pam before tracking down the rest of The Girls and running their car off the road, dismembering and annihilating them in a multi-angle orgy of carnage. Fifteen months later, Stuntman Mike is on the road again; Abernathy (Rosario Dawson), Kim (Tracie Thoms) and Lee (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) are a new group of Girls who drive around, dangling their legs out of car windows, shooting the breeze and planning a weekend off with their stunt-lady friend Zoë Bell, recently arrived from New Zealand. Stuntman Mike has picked the wrong bunch of girls to mess with this time: two of them are stunt-drivers, fans of *Vanishing Point* and well-able to handle a stick-shift; and one of the others is Rosario Dawson (the fourth doesn’t really figure, as they just use her as collateral to borrow the car that they want to test-drive). Attempts to run these Girls off the road only get them mad, intent on getting their revenge on the man who has such disregard for a 1970 white Dodge challenger (let alone the women within). \*\*\*\*SPOILER FOLLOWS\*\*\*\* In what is presumably supposed to be an example of Girl Power, they track Stuntman Mike down and spend the last few minutes of the film beating to a pulp the not-so-tough-now-are-ya? Stuntman, who is, it transpires, just a weak, whiney coward after all; and the credits roll after a vintage freeze-frame. \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

For the first half of the film or so, Tarantino does at least follow through on the idea recapturing the grainy look of a 1970s exploitation flick and transplanting it to the present day (indicated by the inclusion of mobile phones, text messaging and iPods). But at the midpoint of the film, two key scenes seem to drag the film and its *mise en scène* into the present day. The first is the visceral multi-angle repeat of Stuntman Mike’s murder of the first car-load of girls; a sequence that is practically voyeuristic in its individual views of each girl’s demise and shot with such visual flair that it serves as a telling reminder that this is a product of 2007. The next key scene occurs shortly afterwards, when the second group of girls are introduced: for a few minutes, the film turns from grainy colour to black and white; when it returns to colour, all the scratchy jumpiness of the opening half has disappeared, leaving a pristine print for the remainder of the film. It’s unlikely that any change of reels in a 1970s grindhouse cinema could ever have produced so drastic an improvement; and it seems as though Tarantino suddenly realised the folly of trying to recreate the grindhouse experience for an entire feature, and gave up on the gimmicky sleaziness of the opening scenes in favour of a more polished visual style.

This is the least of its problems, though, and in order fully to capture the spirit of the kind of 1970s exploitation flick it to which it aims to pay homage, *Death Proof* should have been driven by a sense of narrative urgency. Instead, the first half of the film is languorous, weighed down by turgid and

unmemorable dialogue; and by the time Stuntman Mike finally starts going about his business of carnage, the film has already become a bloated irritant that is not eased any by the second half's mirrored structure, scenario and dialogue. Admittedly, things pick up when Zoë Bell and co begin their motoring hi-jinx with some very impressive and highly ill-advised stunt-work atop a speeding car, and the comedy *volte face* of the final minutes may raise a smile in some quarters, but it's too little, too late to banish the tedium of all that has gone before. At least Kurt Russell looks as though he's having fun throughout, but in truth the character of Stuntman Mike is actually another of the problems of the film. An all-too-knowing glance at camera as he sets off to dispatch Pam and then the other Girls indicates that we should recognize his status as a cult figure, but the character is so thinly drawn that Russell has nothing much to work with that can actually justify such a tag. It's enough, apparently, that Tarantino thinks Stuntman Mike is a ready-made icon, without actually bothering to write him that way. From the opening shot of feet on a dashboard to the casting of Uma Thurman look-a-like (and erstwhile stunt double) Zoë Bell, ultimately *Death Proof* emerges as a vehicle for Tarantino's ever-increasing self-indulgence; and fails either to sustain the experiment of recreating the down-and-dirty spirit of the 1970s or to succeed as a film on its own terms.

*Death Proof* has underperformed at the box office, and proved such a disappointment on all fronts that the prospect of shelling out again for Rodriguez's instalment did not seem a particularly appealing one; but what a pleasant surprise *Planet Terror* proved to be when it made an appearance as the closing feature of this year's Horrorthon festival at the Irish Film Institute. In contrast to the dull, flat and fundamentally pointless *Death Proof*, *Planet Terror* is unashamedly silly, overblown fare: but crucially, it remains more aware of its own rules as an act of homage to the exploitation genre and the grindhouse experience, even coming prompted by the release of an experimental biological weapon which turns people into zombies. A selection of stock characters and their back-stories are introduced in the opening stages of the film: go-go dancer Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan) who wants to make a change for the better; her mysterious ex-boyfriend El Wray (Freddy Rodriguez); grizzled Sheriff Hague (Michael Biehn); even-more-grizzled local restaurateur J.T. Hague (Jeff Fahey); Dakota Block (Marley Shelton), on the run from her initially-domineering, subsequently- zombie husband William (Josh Brolin); renegade scientist Abby (Naveen Andrews); and a large group of supporting players (including a turn from Tom Savini as Deputy Tolo). Some gross-out hospital procedures and zombie attacks later, Cherry has lost a leg (to be replaced by the end of the film with a machine gun) and the motley crew of survivors have been assembled and are ready to battle past the zombies into the military base that houses the bio-weapon, and attempt to put things right.

*Planet Terror* is not without its faults: in particular in the early stages, there are moments when the pace lags a little under the weight of introducing such a broad array of leading characters, and the cameos by Bruce Willis and (of course) Quentin Tarantino in the military sequences are complete misfires – as are the appearance of standard Tarantino-inspired in-jokes (such as Red Apple cigarettes and close-ups of feet) which prove merely to be an irritating reminder of the self-indulgence of *Death Proof*. But ultimately, *Planet Terror* just about succeeds because it stays true to the form that it sets out to replicate. Rodriguez maintains a consistently grainy visual style throughout, building to the film's funniest gag involving a missing reel and the omission of salient exposition; likewise, the tone, plotting and characterization remain gleefully exaggerated throughout, allowing him to poke fun at the excesses of the exploitation film while simultaneously adhering to its rules. Fundamentally, Rodriguez's over-the-top exaggeration of an exploitation film manages to fuse the necessary elements of comedy and horror that

the *Grindhouse* experiment inevitably called for; and more importantly, he lets the audience in on the joke. In this, at least, it succeeds where *Death Proof* failed.

***Jenny McDonnell***

***Halloween* (Dir. Rob Zombie) USA, 2007**  
Dimension Films

Famously, not a drop of blood was spilled onscreen during John Carpenter's finest film, *Halloween*, which was released in 1978 and helped spawn the slasher genre which would dominate American horror cinema for the next decade. Predictably, the same cannot be said of Rob Zombie's latest cinematic abomination (following the dreadful double whammy of *House of a Thousand Corpses* and *The Devil's Rejects*), a pointless, witless remake which makes brain-numbingly explicit all that was left chillingly unsaid in the groundbreaking original, and as a result is more often unintentionally hilarious than terrifying.

The original Michael Myers ('The Shape') frightened audiences and intrigued critics because he was a genuine enigma, a soulless killing machine spawned amidst the happy families and orderly surroundings of a seemingly idyllic suburban neighbourhood. The opening sequence, in which "*Psycho* unites with the *Halloween* sequence of *Meet Me in St. Louis*" (as Robin Wood has memorably phrased it), remains one of the most dramatic in modern horror cinema; moreover, it established from the outset the impossibility of ever knowing what motivated such a young child to commit bloody murder. By way of contrast, given the deeply dysfunctional background of Zombie's young Michael Myers, one would almost be amazed had he not grown up to be a serial killer. Zombie's greatest mistake is to spend almost half the film's running time showing us just *why* his leading character became a brutal monster, in the process utterly divesting this iconic figure of any shred of genuine menace. He makes us sit through thirty minutes of painfully unsubtle set-up before we even get to Myers' first murder. It's akin to a remake of *Jaws* setting the scene for a spot of human-chomping by painstakingly explaining first that the Great White's parents had been killed by fishermen and that he had been bullied as a sprat by all of the bigger fish. If only someone had gotten to him in time!

Here, the reasons for Michael's psychosis are blindingly obvious. This being a Rob Zombie movie, Michael's mother (Sheri Moon Zombie) is a stripper (in one of the few clever in-jokes, we're told that she works in 'The Rabbit in Red', a reference that fans of the original will recognise). His sister Judith (Hanna Hall) is a sexually-precocious, foul-mouthed teen, whilst his mother's boyfriend Ronnie (played by William Forsythe) is an abusive, leering thug who sits round the house all day drinking beer and watching television. Michael himself is a chubby, blonde, lank-haired ten-year-old who looks more pasty than menacing. Less than five minutes in, though, he's dissecting a pet rat, wearing a silly-looking clown mask and screaming obscenities at his headmaster, so we know this kid's got issues from the start (presumably Zombie just didn't have time to include scenes of fire-starting and bedwetting). However, he does seem to love his Mom and his baby sister, Boo, so he's not all bad, even if he has just beaten a bully to death with a branch. Nevertheless, when Judith refuses to take him trick-or-treating so that she can fool around with her greasy-looking boyfriend, Michael descends into complete madness, and decides to carry out some bloody trick-or-treating of his own.

This marks the end of the first act of the film; the second heralds the entry of Malcolm McDowell as Dr Sam Loomis, whose shameless chewing of scenery makes Donald Pleasance's performance in the original seem positively restrained. First seen in an appalling wig and groovy 70s threads, Dr Loomis is Michael's court-appointed psychiatrist, and the next, even more ill-advised segment of the film depicts their relationship over the months which follow. So we get scenes of young Michael making silly-looking

masks, fidgeting his way through tape-recorded interviews, and asking his mother (now looking quite respectable and non-stripper-like, so it seems that the murders, though tragic, have at least straightened her out) when he can come home. We're clearly meant to be gaining some sort of sympathy for this poor, deranged child, but the fact that he gets chubbier and whinier in each successive sequence doesn't help, and even another (distinctly Hannibal Lecter-like) explosion of violence involving a fork doesn't really liven things up that much.

By the time little Michael has grown up – literally, and in all directions, as he's now played by ex-WWF star Tyler Mane, who is 6'8 and weighs about 250 pounds – the audience will probably be wondering how he managed to work out so much if he's in such a small cell all the time. Have they been conducting medical experiments on him on the sly? Is it a *really* elaborate mask? The fact that the adult Michael Myers is here a gigantic hulk of a man capable of punching through walls and breaking steel shackles with his bare hands also means that one of the most effective tricks of the original – the way in which Myers would suddenly just *appear* in the edge of the frame – is invalidated: you can see, and hear, and *smell* this guy coming three blocks away. The inanity of the asylum sequences – which seem to be a kind of extension of those contained in the little-known US TV version of the original film, added to bulk up the original running time – can be perfectly summed up by the most jaw-droppingly ridiculous exchange of the entire film (an accomplishment in itself): a scene in which Loomis actually tells Michael that he's his *best friend*. That sound you just heard may well be Donald Pleasance rolling in his grave.

Naturally, Michael escapes, and the final section of the film – the one which bears most resemblance to the structure and content of the original – can begin. Michael returns to Haddonfield to catch up with his little sister (how he discovered her whereabouts whilst mutely confined to an asylum remains a mystery, of course), and the body count begins to rise even further, despite the fact that Loomis is in hot pursuit, helped by bad horror film regular Brad Dourif as Sheriff Brackett. The new Laurie Strode (Scout Taylor-Compton) – who here wears glasses to show that she's more intelligent and repressed than her slutty cheerleading friends – is slightly better than expected, but her performance is still nowhere near as affecting as that of Jamie Leigh Curtis, whose shy, wary hesitancy made a character who might otherwise have been a boring goody-two shoes immensely likable. For about ten minutes or so, the film moves along pretty well, but tellingly, this is actually because this section contains a number of scenes which are virtually shot-for-shot facsimiles of sequences from the original film, such as the classic moment where Myers silently dons a sheet before murdering Laurie's friend Linda and her boyfriend Bob. Crucially, we don't get nearly enough time to know Laurie, her friends, or the streets of Haddonfield themselves, so when the murders do begin, they're not so much suspenseful as they are predictably gory retreads of material handled better elsewhere.

Having gone to such pains to establish Michael as the sadly damaged result of a deeply dysfunctional background, and therefore more sad than bad, *Zombie* changes tack completely in the final reel and allows Loomis (as in Carpenter's original) to rave about the fact that he is the embodiment of absolute evil, and ultimately a creature of supernatural rather than human providence. This worked – just about – in Carpenter's film because it was made clear to us that Michael's initial acts of violence were a shocking eruption of disorder in an otherwise orderly world. Here, Michael is so obviously the product of a troubled childhood environment that he cannot suddenly be castigated as a hulking spawn of demonic evil without completely cancelling out the ham-fisted efforts at psychological realism attempted earlier.

Still, despite having all the tawdry ingredients of the typical Rob Zombie film – strippers, murderous poor white trash, dead cheerleaders, heavy metal, lots of bare breasts, unconvincing 1970s settings and repetitive, pointless gore – this is probably the best of his (admittedly rather woeful) film-making efforts to date, because it does, very occasionally, show an odd spark of narrative coherence and wit amongst all the fan-boy ultra-violence he condescendingly doles out for his core audience of cinematically-illiterate seventeen-year old metal-heads. Some of the in-jokes are nicely handled, and it's pleasant to see such a wide selection of 1970s horror talent (including the likes of Ken Foree, Brad Dourif, Udo Kier, and Dee Wallace) briefly on the big screen again. Nonetheless, the film is still a complete mess, and further testament, as if any were needed, to the sheer pointlessness of the Hollywood remake factory. The real horror here is not Michael Myers, but the fact that this film was made at all: one can only hope that the boogeyman disembowels those responsible before they can dredge up a sequel.

*Bernice M. Murphy*



***Hostel: Part II* (Dir. Eli Roth) USA, 2007**

Lionsgate

Since bursting onto the scene with *Cabin Fever* (2002), Eli Roth has emerged as a director who pays homage to the great horror filmmakers of the late 1970s and early 1980s, appealing to hardened devotees of classic 1970s horror cinema and introducing younger viewers to that golden age of splatter and slasher films. The surprise success of *Cabin Fever* (picked up by Lionsgate at the Toronto Film Festival after a ferocious bidding war) led to the green lighting of a number of other Roth projects. The fledgling director was granted a budget of five million dollars to develop and shoot *Hostel* (2005) under the tutelage of Quentin Tarantino who encouraged him to make low budget horror films in order to establish his name as a horror filmmaker during a time of reawakened public interest in the genre. Subsequently *Hostel* made a killing at the box office and on DVD. This year saw the release of *Hostel: Part II*, which promised to be a bloodbath of a sequel that would further fuel the ongoing debate regarding the apparent popularity of so-called ‘torture porn’ (or ‘gornography’) in horror cinema. However, it seems that the initial success of *Hostel* (which infamously depicted the buying and selling of torture victims by wealthy sadists seeking perverse thrills) was something of a double-edged sword for Roth. Sequels are a daunting task for any screenwriter, and in Roth’s case, this reprise of the original is more a messy montage of gory death scenes probably written out of the first film than a coherent, intelligent and thought-provoking screenplay. The surprising depths of the original, which are only truly revealed upon multiple viewings and exposure to Roth’s insightful and entertaining commentaries on the DVD, simply do not repeat themselves in the sequel, despite the hopes of Roth’s passionate fan base.

The film begins where *Hostel* left off, revealing that the only survivor of the events of the original is suffering from post-traumatic stress and paranoia. His paranoia is justified; he dies just moments later in an unintentionally hilarious scene at the breakfast table. In again featuring this character, the scope of *Hostel: Part II* could have been opened up, and the viewer might have been forgiven for expecting a continuation of the events of the first film, but this is not the case. Instead the film merely retreads the same ground as *Hostel* but reverses the original’s premise (which focused on three sexually-starved guys) by introducing three new female protagonists – Beth (Lauren German), Whitney (Bijou Phillips) and Lorna (Heather Matarazzo). Like their predecessors, the trio are persuaded to travel to Bratislava for a spa weekend by the alluring Axelle (Vera Jordanova). At the Hostel, the group is gradually split up, and one by one the girls are snatched by members of the Elite Hunting Group (the corporation who provide the torture victims and location) and subjected to various methods of torture. \*\*\*\*SPOILER FOLLOWS\*\*\*\*The formula of the original film is closely replicated: both the promiscuous and the more chaste members of each group are dispatched, and in each case an arrogant American survives (the smug Paxton in the original film, and wealthy Beth here). \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\* However, the build-up to each torture sequence is simply too long and laden with expectations of extreme gore that more often than not are not met. The editing is very uneven and the quick cuts employed by Roth compromise the subsequent cycles of set-up and follow-through; and crucially, we do not see much of the victims or their injuries. The only notable exception is the scene when one victim is sliced open while she is suspended upside down over a naked woman in a bath. Here, the editing is slow and graphic, but the lack of continuity (mere spatters one minute, Glastonbury mud-bath levels the next) proves infuriating and plain daft. Instead of leaving the viewer hungry for more, the film descends into tedium.

On some levels, Roth could be accused of borrowing his concept from Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*, but by spreading his story over two ‘volumes’ rather than one interesting instalment, he leaves the audience

disappointed with such a drawn-out plot and a lack of finality in the story. The film attempts to illustrate the corporate nature of torture and offers minor character resolutions which at least prohibit innumerable sequels (a fate which far too many horror franchises propagated in the 1980s, including *Nightmare On Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th*), but it also simultaneously counteracts the plot and narrative as it is forced to extend itself to outdo its original. Tellingly, although *Hostel: Part II* is only the second instalment (in comparison to the usual eight or nine movie chapters seen in the 1980s horror movement), Roth's film is already tired, a mere parody of history's and popular culture's most infamous villains, with little imagination left by the time of the inevitable 'twist' ending and genitally-abusive climax.

Much to the joy of Fangoria and ComicCon fans at conventions around the US earlier this year, Roth promoted the film as gorier, nastier and sicker than the original "only this time with girls!" Despite the highlighted gender differences (which actually have no significant impact on the film at all), it fails to build upon the political subtext which many critics detected in the original. If his first film can be regarded as a cinematic vision of Abu Ghraib-inspired horror in its echoes of the kinds of horrific abuses seen in the widely-publicised photographs of US Military personnel sexually humiliating and sadistically dominating Iraqi inmates, Roth's sequel could have provided a further platform for debate on the continued practice of so-called 'extraordinary rendition' and the global network of torture. This is, after all, a film about torture, about sick and debased sexual desires and the terrible misuse of physical force. Yet, Roth's clichés only serve to offend the viewer rather than genuinely provoking thought. The deaths and torture scenes featured here include a (literal) blood bath *à la* Countess Elizabeth Bathory; the castration of a very generously-endowed male victim; and a cannibal dining slowly on his living victim's leg-flesh while enjoying some classical music and a glass of wine (a nice Chianti, I presume...). Such unimaginative homage to the deeds of infamous horror icons are so lazy as to imply not only that Roth did not bank on a sequel being made, but also that he hurriedly had to complete the screenplay in order to capitalise on the original's unexpected success. The resulting film is simply quite dull and, worse still, even lacks the gross-out factor Roth has come to depend on to appease his core audience.

What will also particularly disappoint such fans is the fact that Roth had three specific plot moments when he could have altered the all-too-predictable arc of the script and genuinely surprised viewers. At each turn, however, he fails to seize his chance. One scenario in particular, which involves a complete about-turn in a lead character's motives, could have been more fleshed out in a much more satisfactory manner. \*\*\*\* SPOLIER FOLLOWS\*\*\*\* It is ultimately revealed that the Slavic Hostel is running an international killing auction on each of its guests (a kind of murderous eBay), and that the winners of the auction are drafted into this world of club membership and must be tattooed and contracted if they wish to participate in the murder. Those who fail to murder the victims they have bought become prey themselves because they have broken their contract \*\*\*\*SPOLIER ENDS\*\*\*\*. What is illustrated here is a world full of victims – torture victims, economic victims and emotional victims – in which the Almighty Dollar is the key to salvation. Perhaps Roth can relate to this after the release of the film. He has already scrapped plans for a third instalment, claiming he has no interest in pursuing the project any further, an impulse that may in part be motivated by the fact that *Hostel: Part II* holds the record for being one of the most pirated films available on the internet and lost over twenty five percent of its international box office before its cinematic release; and since making its cinematic debut, it has been slated by both critics and fans alike. For any director, this truly is the stuff of nightmares....

***Sorcha Ní Fhlainn***

***Night of the Eagle* (Dir. Sidney Hayers) UK, 1962**  
Optimum Home Entertainment, 2007

A minor masterpiece of British horror cinema, Sidney Hayers's *Night of the Eagle*, though less well-known than Jacques Tourneur's *Night of the Demon*, may fairly be considered a companion piece to that 1957 classic of the supernatural. Made in 1962 and based on Fritz Leiber's novel *Conjure Wife* (first published in 1943, and filmed the following year as *Weird Woman*), *Night of the Eagle* tells the story of Professor Norman Taylor, a medical college lecturer who, as the saying goes, appears to have it all: a brilliant career, a happy marriage, a beautiful home, a nifty two-seater, and handsome as hell to boot.

When we first meet the professor (played by Peter Wyngarde), he is intoning the words "I Do Not Believe" as he inscribes them on a blackboard for his students, the objects of his disbelief being the supernatural, witchcraft, superstition, and the psychic, all of which, he says, demonstrate "a morbid desire to escape from reality" which can only exist in an atmosphere of belief. After nailing his colours to the mast in such uncompromising fashion, it is quite clear that Professor Taylor, like his fellow sceptic Dr. John Holden in *Night of the Demon*, is well on course for a rude awakening.

Although Taylor remains oblivious to it, his recent appointment and likely promotion has stirred resentment within the faculty, and in particular amongst the faculty wives, whose favourite pastimes appear to be malicious gossip and games of bridge liberally sprinkled with spite. Taylor's wife, Tansy (Janet Blair), is well aware of the bad vibes attracted by Norman, and is doing her best to deflect them by means of voodoo ritual, having become convinced of its efficacy during a recent trip to Jamaica. But when Taylor discovers a shrivelled-up spider and then a charm pinned inside the lapel of one of his jackets, he goes through the house, amassing a pile of ritualistic fetishes which he then forces Tansy to burn, despite her claim that she will not be responsible for what happens to him if she is made "to give up her protections."

Needless to say, things start going horribly wrong almost immediately. Norman receives a heavy-breathing 'phone call from one of his students, and is nearly run over by a van on his way to work. He is then accused of assault by the student, Miss Abbott, and threatened with a gun by her would-be suitor, a surly oaf named Jennings. Having managed to demolish the case against him, Taylor returns home, during a heavy rainstorm, to find that a tape-recording of one of his lectures has been posted to him anonymously. Despite Tansy's fears, he starts to play the tape. Suddenly, the 'phone rings again, the electricity fails, and strange sounds are heard, including a screeching and beating of wings outside the house. But when Taylor opens the front door, there is nothing to be seen...

In addition to the obviously similar title - why *Night of the Eagle*, instead of *Conjure Wife*, if not to suggest some kinship with *Night of the Demon*? - Hayers' film also centres on an aggressive rationalist forced to reconsider his position, while the tape-recording of his voice serves much the same function as the runes in Tourneur's film, being passed from person to person and attracting all sorts of disagreeable attention from things that go screech in the night. And, interestingly, the climax of *Night of the Eagle*, in which Margaret Johnston's witch is crushed by a falling stone eagle, is virtually identical to the fate suffered by the original Karswell in M.R. James's *Casting the Runes*, making one wonder if Leiber had the latter story in mind when writing *Conjure Wife*.

While stylistically Hayers may lack the subtlety of Tourneur, his hammer-and-tongs approach is well suited to the material, ensuring that the pace never slackens as Taylor is rushed headlong into his confrontation with the Unknown. Particularly memorable are the sequences in which Tansy returns from the sea in a catatonic state; her attempted murder of Norman, in which she betrays Flora's possession of her; and the attack of the eagle itself, bursting through a heavy door in its pursuit of Taylor, a remarkably effective piece of trickery considering the date of the film and its obviously limited resources.

The performances, too, are first rate. Wyngarde, who had scared the hell out of audiences the year before as the ghostly Quint in Jack Clayton's *The Innocents*, is perfectly cast as Taylor, a man just a little too successful, a little too handsome, a little too suave, for his own good. (Dammit, the man wears silk shirts, and suits that don't look ... well, they look foreign, if you know what I mean. And that oh-so-tasteful signet ring on his little finger – rum, you know, decidedly rum.) Wyngarde portrays Taylor's growing sense of unease and panic with great conviction, culminating in the famous shot when, cowering in his classroom, he staggers back against the blackboard, inadvertently rubbing out the word "Not" from his original declaration.

Janet Blair, whose previous films had mainly been undistinguished Hollywood musicals, also gives a marvellous performance, her large, expressive eyes and thin lips perfectly conveying the combination of dottiness, anxiety and determination of the loyal-until-death (and beyond) Tansy. Margaret Johnston is splendidly frustrated and deranged as Flora, uttering the line used as the film's American title ("Burn, witch, burn!") with a venomous relish which makes one regret that she made so few films in her distinguished career. The only disappointment with regard to the cast is the criminal waste of Kathleen Byron; so terrifying as the sex-crazed Sister Ruth in Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus*, in *Night of the Eagle* her role doesn't even amount to that of a red herring. Reginald Beckwith, seen overindulging in the funny-voice department as the medium in *Night of the Demon*, is considerably more restrained here, which is not a bad thing.

While the whodunit structure of Hayers' film mitigates against Johnston creating as memorable a figure as Niall MacGinnis's Karswell (whose villainy is on display from the very beginning, and whose motivation – fear – is more intriguing than Flora's petty spite), in one important respect *Night of the Eagle* may be said to be superior to *Night of the Demon*, and that is in the depiction of its protagonist. Whereas Holden is finally convinced that Karswell's supernatural powers are real and acts accordingly in order to save his own life, at no time does one believe that this is a man whose most cherished convictions have been overturned and who now feels the devil breathing down his neck; indeed, Holden seems too dull and unimaginative to feel anything, let alone real fear. Taylor, on the other hand, is a much more emotionally engaging – and engaged – character, and is properly put through the wringer. Afraid first for his wife, then for himself, his beliefs are finally shattered as he is reduced to a dishevelled wreck hiding in his own classroom. In short, Norman Taylor is made to feel fear, and in a good horror film, fear is the key.

**John Exshaw**

***Peeping Tom* (Dir. Michael Powell) UK, 1960**  
Optimum Home Entertainment, 2007

There is a regrettable sleight of hand practiced by certain script-writers to explicate character motivations and psychologies within their fictions. When blind alcoholic Mrs Stephens (Maxine Audley) offers compulsive filmmaker/killer Mark Lewis (Karl Boehm) the prescient advice that “All this filming isn’t healthy” (as only an imbibing blind person interpreting the psycho/sexual motivation and consequence proposed by cinema can), it is a cautionary warning needlessly signposted. Audience members, lured into the theatre because of *Peeping Tom*’s lascivious title, or dutifully attending because of Michael Powell’s association with it, would undoubtedly have to be blind or perceptively negligent not to register the line’s thematic importance. The script is littered with such wearisome dialogue, seemingly burdened with the task of offering nothing more than smug irony or witty allusion, prompting no further reflection beyond duly noting its presence. Indeed, during the production of the film, Michael Powell was supposedly convinced he was making his masterpiece, and it would seem that as a consequence, the entire project was dutifully misshapen, bent on conveying in word and image a self-contained, reflexive and depressingly controlled narrative that requires nothing from its audience outside of bearing witness.

Of course, having been pulled from cinemas by cautious distributors, *Peeping Tom*’s original theatrical run of just five days didn’t afford many discriminating patrons or passive entertainment junkies the opportunity to sample for themselves a film deemed “vile” and “sick” by those critics lucky enough to have seen it. Indeed, the savage response from said critics was so unanimous and extreme that it all but ended director Michael Powell’s long-standing reputation and career, “forcing” him towards early retirement and a spell in Australia (poor man). The film practically disappeared, and legend has it that it might well have continued to languish in obscurity but for the intercedence of Martin Scorsese, who in 1979 gave \$5,000 out of his own pocket to bankroll a new print. Scorsese then duly wielded his influence to have the film shown at The New York Film Festival, knowing that all he was going to get in return for his charity was a print of the sick flick for himself and the dubious honour of having “Martin Scorsese Presents” written above the poster. God bless you, Marty.

Mark Lewis (Karl Boehm) is the peeping tom of the title – property owner, scooter licence holder, duffel coat wearer, professional focus puller, cine-enthusiast, murderer of women, and owner of one of those director chairs that has your name written on the back; the list is endless. Mark sublets rooms in his family home at a very reasonable price, but running a property is just not enough. He is employed as a focus puller in a film studio by day and also earns some pocket money moonlighting as a photographer of saucy pictures evenings and weekends. In any spare time left to him, Mark is compelled to complete a documentary of his own making. Principle photography is on-going and relentless, and supposedly documents Mark’s enquiry into aspects of fear which requires him to film certain women who suffer a curious paralysis brought on by narrative causality, when Mark turns his murderous weapon upon them. The weapon in question – a concave mirror with a camera mounted on a tripod with its middle leg extended, housing a customised knife – is obviously the result of hours of trial-and-error product research and development and has nothing to do with any Freudian subtext of an assaulting or penetrative gaze, via a displacement of sexual desire...The genesis of Mark’s psychosis, it seems, can be found in the traumas of his childhood, when he was subjected to the continuous surveillance and sadistic harassment of his scientist father, who was characteristically negligent of the contingencies such experiment, folly, and perversion incur. Part of this obsessive surveillance involves Mark submitting to being filmed by his

father, who is played by none other than Powell himself, in just one of the film's innumerable and laborious examples of self-reflexivity. Throughout the course of the film, adult Mark begins a tentative romance with the girl downstairs, Helen Stephens (Anna Massey), who lives with her mother, the aforementioned blind alcoholic seer, Mrs. Stephens. The film wrings a fairly tepid drama from these three main characters' interactions and also boasts a rather unremarkable police investigation that intermittently surfaces, presumably to propel the drama towards its inevitable conclusion.

### **"I like to understand what I'm shown"**

*Peeping Tom* is a dissatisfying and somewhat depressing film but not necessarily because of its seedy locations, scenes of violence, or fatal denouement, in which Mark turns his murderous weapon upon himself and films his own suicide (presumably, the ultimate example of the film's self-reflexivity). Rather, the most dissatisfying thing about *Peeping Tom* is the ever-present suspicion that the work is fractured in concept and execution, and is not in fact a work ahead of its time, as so many people have claimed, but one that is hopelessly out of step with its time. *Peeping Tom* was, of course, made when there seemed a growing schism in popular British cinema, marked by the emergence on one side of the free cinema movement with its *cinéma vérité* aspirations, and on the other by the box-office success of such frivolous fare as the *Carry-On* films, Dirk Bogarde's "*Doctor*" series, and Hammer's gothic horror cycle. While it could be argued that Powell's aesthetic had always operated tangentially to popular British cinema, defining itself in opposition to dominant notions of realism, it could also be argued that, unlike a lot of Powell's other films, *Peeping Tom* fails to manifest the extraordinary and fantastic within a plausible verisimilitude. The film suffers from its multiple cross purpose ambitions, the most glaringly obvious being Powell's desire to make a supposedly modern-day horror film that reveals the latent complicity between the spectator and certain acts of terror, and his wish that said diatribe would prove popular with said audience (i.e. "Don't you feel guilty about all this voyeurism in cinema but isn't this a classic movie?")

The film also fails to engage convincingly with its subject matter or its audience because it attempts to marry too many disparate components and styles together. Its cornucopia mix of murder, gallows humour, psychology for beginners, and farcical elements (those movie production scenes are painful to watch) evince an air of desperation. Powell's desire to shock his audience is undermined by his clawing desire to entertain and dazzle them. The film's internal incongruities are manifold; playing the pained nuance of psychosis against a piano score that cues the emotional content of a scene as if it were counterpoint to a pantomime, or incongruously pairing Karl Boehm's Mark (all nervous Peter Lorre in *M*) and Anna Massey's Helen (all golly and gosh Cliff Richard wholesomeness), are just two examples of the film's muddled approach and conceit. *Peeping Tom*'s most compelling moments are silent and oblique; moments in which Mark rubs his lips against the lense of his cine-camera, or holds his hands before him as if he were either framing a scene or imagining a lover opposite him are gestures writ large that subtly convey a chasm between small inner thoughts and the available modes of imaginative expression.

Unfortunately, the self-reflexivity of *Peeping Tom* hinders such imaginative or interpretive dynamism operating elsewhere in the film, be it in the script, the acting, the framing, or the editing. As such, *Peeping Tom* becomes purely illustrative. When Mark screens a silent home movie for Helen (which stars a young Mark, tormented by his father), her compulsion to "understand" what she is viewing necessitates her asking a series of questions which Mark obligingly answers. Ignoring any elaboration of how this scene is

edited, and how Powell shifts the audience from a primary to a secondary spectator (from looking at a home movie to watching Mark and Helen looking at a home movie), the information parlayed between the two characters is obviously used as a cohesive narrative device that contextualises Mark's psychological dysfunction. More significantly, while the visual grammar of home movies is comparatively small compared to commercial cinema; in partnership with the piano score, Powell's decision to supplement the purely visual aspects of this silent home movie with Mark and Helen's running commentary, and his decision to cut away from this footage to capture their reactions, are deliberate attempts to mask the arbitrary continuity of this "home" movie in favour of the grand and controlling narrative of commercial/professional cinema, and as such, are efforts to minimise any ambiguity, misunderstanding, or personal interpretation that arise when audiences view such raw primary data.

Regrettably, *Peeping Tom* is not really interested in its audience's desire for, or inclination towards, understanding via personal interpretation. For Michael Powell, *Peeping Tom* may well have been a personal artistic triumph, despite it being a commercial failure, but like any number of films before and after it, it provides an audience with little more than incidental viewing; how appealing a prospect or satisfying an experience that is depends on each person.

There are many historical contexts that might allow for an appreciation of *Peeping Tom* beyond an arbitrarily positive or negative review. Its socio-cultural place within British cinema up to and following its brief 1960 appearance coupled with the vitriolic scorn the film provoked from contemporary critics bears remarking on, by somebody else, some other time, some other journal, take your pick. Undoubtedly, the matter-of-fact thematic inclusion of child abuse and sexual perversion within a genre where murder is commonplace brought the film certain notoriety in its time, and has lent credence to many subsequent proposals regarding *Peeping Tom*'s distinguished status as a film that is "ahead of its time" – an accolade which in itself displays an unsophisticated notion of artistic worth which flatters our present-day notions of sophistication and taste. Since resurfacing from obscurity 27 years ago, the film has been dutifully catapulted into the canon of cinema masterpieces, a dubious honour bestowed upon films curiously grouped in tens and hundreds, by those who have nothing better to do with their time. Simultaneously, *Peeping Tom*'s ascendancy up the cultural ladder is in no small part because the film apparently lends itself as co-operative cadaver for dissection under certain film theorists' microscopes, who seem bent on charting the mechanisms and implicit meanings of cinema's incessant "gaze". Given the argument's assertion that all cinema engages with issues of spectatorship, the attention bestowed upon *Peeping Tom* in this regard seems hopelessly arbitrary and over-determined, but that's film theory for you.

Curiously, though perhaps not really all that surprisingly, the extras on the DVD replicate many of the film's original assumptions about its audience. As one would expect, the extras (which include two featurettes, an introduction by Martin Scorsese, and an interview with Thelma Schoonmaker) bandy the usual trite laudatory proclamations about *Peeping Tom*'s ahead-of-its-time status; its brave subject matter; its "astonishing" self-reflexivity; its influence on a generation of film makers (plus Brian de Palma); its brave tackling of themes of violence and audience complicity; and so on and so forth. Fittingly, for a film as stiflingly controlled as *Peeping Tom*, author Ian Christie's feature commentary maintains an absurdly deliberate pace as though didn't want to give too much of the plot away, and bless him, frequently presumes to describe on-screen action as if it were an aid for the visually impaired. Needless to say the perceptively negligent are catered for also; Michael Powell would have approved.

**Paul Cronly**

***The Mind Benders* (Dir. Basil Dearden) UK, 1962**  
Optimum Home Entertainment, 2007

Now, here's a curiosity. Made by a notable British director, Basil Dearden, and with a cast headed by a major British star, Dirk Bogarde, *The Mind Benders*, an unsettling Cold War horror movie, is rarely seen, seldom discussed, and often, I think, forgotten. Unjustly, though – while the film is far from perfect, it certainly merits its new DVD release, and I was very glad to see it.

Set amongst a group of Oxford scientists who conduct experiments on human isolation and sensory deprivation, the film opens with the suicide of project leader Professor Sharpey (Harold Goldblatt), a great scientist and, we are told, a leading left-winger, pacifist, and CND activist whose experiments in an isolation tank have reduced him to a kind of zombie, devoid of free will. Naturally, the potential of these experiments as a brainwashing tool captures the interest of the government, who send in their own military scientist Major Hall (John Clements) to investigate; it also attracts the attention of unspecified foreign powers, to whom Sharpey seems to have been selling secrets. Hall oversees a new experiment on Sharpey's colleague Dr Longman (Bogarde), which succeeds in turning him from an uxorious family man to a philandering misogynist.

Bogarde is excellent, as is Mary Ure as his doting, pregnant wife, but what's really chilling about this film is Clements's underplayed performance as Major Hall, the very embodiment of stolid Englishness – a kind of bland, upstanding normality which contrasts brilliantly with Bogarde's twitchy sneering – who is nevertheless willing to conduct unethical, inhuman scientific experiments in the name of the national interest. This is no phallic, megalomaniacal mad scientist of the Frankenstein/Quatermass variety but apparently a fundamentally decent man able comfortably to live with the ethical blankness required of the Cold Warrior. This is symbolically adumbrated in a wonderfully effective scene where Hall wanders through the dreaming spires of Oxford and then cuts behind them to a square of Modernist labs in which Sharpey and Longwood conduct their experiments. Now, in 1962, cricket matches and psychological torture all exist on the same continuum of Englishness.

The film's serious flaw is in its pacing. What should have been a tight, nasty little number is at least twenty minutes too long. While the experiment itself, with Bogarde floating in an isolation tank, hallucinating and screaming, is terrifying, the film takes ages to get there. Those scenes meant to establish the domestic idyll of the Longwood marriage seem languorous and out of place, as if they had meandered in from a Douglas Sirk melodrama. The closing part, in which Longwood recovers his former personality when he delivers his own baby son, is simply a cop-out, conveniently glossing over the film's many troubling themes through a reinstatement of family values.

That said, *The Mind Benders* serves as a welcome reminder of a time when there really was a British film industry, and when even its generic product could offer an audience worthwhile moments. A couple more of those moments, to close: who can resist the lure of Wendy Craig as a Bohemian good-time girl in a catsuit? An amazing piece of casting, you might think, but it works, somehow. Best of all, this is a film that actually made me shout at the television, "Bloody hell, it's Roger Delgado!" Yes, that's right, *Dr Who* fans: the original and genuine Master has a cameo role as a scientist with the wonderful name of Dr Jean Bonvoulois. Hooray!

***Darryl Jones***



***The Host (Gwoemul)* (Dir. Bong Joon-ho) South Korea, 2006**  
Optimum Asia

Many aspects of the premise of *The Host (Gwoemul)* will be familiar to viewers of a number of cinematic genres. As a 'monster movie' it draws from East Asian influences such as *Godzilla (Gojira, 1954)*, as well as Hollywood outings such as *King Kong (1933)* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954)*. Similarly, as an ecological parable, it is reminiscent of Larry Cohen's *The Stuff (1985)*, in which an occurrence of toxic waste causes an ecological disaster that is played out with gleeful B-Movie absurdity. Finally, *The Host's* individual take on instances of monstrous terror is also indicative of its links with the work of Steven Spielberg, in particular *Jaws (1975)*, *Jurassic Park (1993)* and *War of the Worlds (2005)*, an influence that is further apparent in the film's portrayal of varying types of dysfunctional families, from which children are cut off. The related trope of the child in peril is a mainstay of Spielberg's work; it is also at the centre of Bong Joon-ho's film.

*The Host* focuses on the Park family as they are thrown into a battle to rescue Hyun-seo (Ah-sung Ko) who is abducted by a mutated amphibious monster that emerges from the Han River. After Hyun-seo's capture, the disparate family are brought together to mourn their loss, but her father Gang-du (Kang-ho Song), Grandfather Hie-bong (Hie-bong Byeon), Uncle Nam-il (Hae-il Park) and Aunt Nam-joo (Du-na Bae) are reunited only to be quarantined by draconian government officials in biohazard suits. Gang-du soon receives a mobile phone call from the missing Hyun-seo, who is trapped (surrounded by corpses) in the creature's lair in the sewers of the Han. They escape in a desperate bid to save her, and are pursued by the inefficient yet heavy-handed authorities, who instigate widespread panic by circulating the lie that the creature and the family are contaminated with a virus, thereby adding to the public's existing fears over the SARS outbreak.

This reference to SARS is one of many aspects of the film that reflects its aspiration to offer a critique of contemporary Korean society. The creature has spawned and mutated due to the dumping of formaldehyde into the water system under orders from an American scientist working in South Korea (a premise that is drawn from an incident in February 2000 in which Albert McFarland, a mortician employed by the US Forces in Korea (USFK), directed his staff to dispose of 120 litres of embalming fluid down a drain at a US Army base at Yongsan in the centre of Seoul). There are also signs of a revolutionary spirit when Nam-il uses the Molotov cocktails that he learnt to make as a student demonstrator to battle the creature. Another prominent criticism can be seen in the depiction of the state authorities who are without exception portrayed as totalitarian, opportunistic and (in part due to American influence) corrupt. In these ways, *The Host* functions as a socially-informed monster horror, in which the creature acts as a catch-all metaphor for whatever social injustice the viewer chooses to give primacy.

This social awareness adds a layer of cultural commentary to *The Host*, but it also proves effective as an aesthetically-accomplished genre movie, which boasts impressive cinematography, editing and special effects and has an outstanding score. However, there are some other aspects of the film that are spectacularly and jarringly unnerving, and which relate to the codes and conventions of the horror genre. One of these is the often bizarre tonal shift employed by Bong Joon-ho, who seems to revel in not letting the audience settle into generic comfort zones. For example, after a well-delivered and fast-paced opening sequence in which the creature wreaks havoc after emerging from the river (reminiscent of the

introduction of the invaders in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*), the next scene involves an absurd depiction of the grieving family as they meet at a shrine to the victims of the creature. They begin by crying together, before writhing on the floor of the mourning centre and punching and kicking one another in a fit of histrionics as the media gleefully film and photograph them. What begins as pathos quickly becomes ridiculous, a satirical portrait (almost a self-contained comedic sketch) of the media's appetite for recording the grief of those affected by mass trauma. \*\*\*\*SPOILER BEGINS\*\*\*\* Later, the Grandfather makes an emotional plea that Gang-du's siblings be tolerant of their dim-witted brother, only to be killed because of the hapless Gang-du's inability to count in a scene that mixes a balletic slow motion action scene with cartoonish slapstick. \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

These tonal shifts help generate an unsettling yet intriguing feeling that the narrative may not follow the generic conventions of the monster movie, and it is in the disavowal of such conventions that *The Host* is at its most effective. \*\*\*\*SPOILER BEGINS\*\*\*\* For example, the impetus behind much of the plot is the need to save the vulnerable Hyun-seo from the lair of the monster, a driving force that is a mainstay of so many popular dramas as to appear mundane. When she is seemingly killed in the last act of the film and is held in the arms of her family, it is palpably easy to imagine an impending *denouement* in which she regains consciousness, thus fulfilling the quest that fuels the narrative and restoring balance to the disrupted family dynamic. *The Host* offers no such resolution, instead killing off Hyun-seo and in the process offering a challenge to the absurdities of narrative closure and the 'Hollywood ending' on which we are weaned. \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

However, this refusal to follow generic narrative conventions is not merely a means of making the film stand out from the crowd; rather, the brutality of the film's resolution draws attention to the notion of responsibility and consequence that can be traced back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). As in Shelley's novel, the creature is born out of man's disregard for nature and it is significant that it is an arrogant scientist that engenders the beast. This is further accentuated when the creature is stirred by onlookers at the banks of the Han River who throw fast food and beer cans into the water in order to attract its attention. Once provoked, the creature's wrath is mighty and it is demonized by the public and the authorities, becoming a scapegoat for the wrongs of the world. Director Bong Joon-ho has stated that the creature's aggressive behavior results from the fact that it is in pain from the effects of the chemical mutation. The scene in which the lake-siders throw garbage at their discovery is reminiscent of the angry mob scenes in numerous cinematic adaptations of Shelley's novel; in each case, the arrogance of man leads to the destruction of innocent lives: just as Frankenstein's creation kills the beatific William and Elizabeth, the child and new bride of the Frankenstein clan, the creature kills Hyun-seo. Perhaps the most significant link to *Frankenstein* though, is the central theme of responsibility that runs throughout both *The Host* and *Frankenstein*. Just as Victor turns his back upon his family to indulge in his obsessions, refusing to answer the letters and pleas from Elizabeth, the family of *The Host* also struggles to maintain their responsibilities to others. Each character is challenged to face up to the threat of the creature's relentless hunger (itself born out of an irresponsible act) and must also begin to try and fend for others in a dangerous world. For example, one of the most touching elements of the film involves Hyun-so taking a vagrant child under her wing after his brother is killed by the beast, an act that lies at the moral centre of the film and underlines the concept of facing up to the social discrepancies that are depicted throughout. Whereas in many other monster-themed films the creature seemingly comes from nowhere to attack an unwitting populace, the 'monster' of *The Host* comes from within society itself.

Significantly, the last scene reveals that Gang-du has become the guardian of the vagrant child and that he is also now responsible for the shop formerly run by his father. The film ends with him turning off a television showing the US media's response to the crisis and sharing a meal with his new son, metaphorically turning his back on media spin and connecting now in human terms. Tellingly, although others seem to have deserted the Han, Gang-du's home and business remain and it seems that he refuses to abandon his link to the river and perhaps the creature itself. In this way, although much of the film concerns the attempts of society to expel the creature as scapegoat, its closing moments underline the plea for acceptance and the scrutiny of social injustice and ultimately suggests that the by-products of blinkered individualism are monstrous to behold and thoroughly resilient.

***Keith McDonald***

**1408 (Dir. Mikael Håfström) USA, 2006**  
Dimension Films

*1408* is that rarest of cinematic creatures: a post-1980 Stephen King adaptation that's actually quite enjoyable. The film, based on the eerie short story of the same name from King's 2002 short-story collection *Everything's Eventual*, is directed by Swede Mikael Håfström, and marks an improvement on his previous English-language effort, the distinctly unimpressive Jennifer Aniston vehicle *Derailed* (2005). *1408* is, for the first hour at least, a gripping and unnerving viewing experience which provides a couple of good scares and an intriguing, if somewhat less than original, premise.

The title refers to the number of a hotel room in the fictional New York-set Dolphin Hotel (add the numbers together to see the less-than-subtle result). Mike Enslin (John Cusack) is a burnt-out novelist who makes a dubious living churning out spurious guides to the supernatural with titles like "Ten Haunted Bed and Breakfasts" and "Ten Haunted Lighthouses". When he receives a mysterious postcard bearing the simple message "Don't enter 1408", he promptly becomes unhealthily fascinated by the room; and after the ubiquitous microfilm-viewing scene (apparently required by law in films of this type), he inevitably discovers that guests may check in to Room 1408, but they don't check out. 1408 is, you see, the most haunted hotel room ever, the site of countless murders and suicides, and as such completely irresistible to a man who is desperate to prove – or rather disprove – the existence of life after death following the death of his young daughter. King fans have been here before, of course, with room 237 of *The Shining*'s Overlook Hotel, and in some respects, it could be said that Room 1408 is the cosmopolitan (yet pedestrian) cousin of its more illustrious predecessor, even briefly featuring an axe-wielding maniac as in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) which similarly, of course, focused on a tortured male writer. *1408*, however is a rather more wry, conventional film, the success of which rests largely upon the immensely likable performance by Cusack, who is the only person onscreen for much of the running time. It is also at times quite funny, particularly in the opening scenes in which the tedious life of the jobbing writer is outlined, with a decidedly unglamorous book-signing sequence proving particularly amusing.

Once he arrives at the Dolphin, and manages to bluster his way past Mr Olin, (Samuel L. Jackson), the hotel's manager, who is understandably reluctant to allow any more deaths in the room on his watch, Enslin and his trusty tape recorder sceptically settle in for the night. Needless to say, the deeply-dated wallpaper and bad carpet are not the only horrors he'll be exposed to over the next few hours. The rest of the film is mainly an extended chamber piece, in which the increasingly terrified protagonist is subjected to all manner of supernatural torments all aimed at making him commit suicide (only the least horrifying of which is a demonic clock radio which repeatedly plays The Carpenters' 'We've Only Just Begun' at full volume). Though the film inevitably descends into over-the-top theatrics, there are some undeniably effective moments here, and many of the most unnerving things about *1408* are also the most simple. There is a door that cannot be opened; a malfunctioning air conditioner; a crying baby next door; and a clock which doesn't so much tell the time as provide a countdown to madness. The most effective scene of all involves one of Enslin's increasingly desperate attempts to communicate with the outside world by waving out the window. The pay-off is as jolting as it is agreeably bizarre, and yet it is also one of the simplest optical tricks in the entire film.

Inevitably, Enslin must confront his personal demons during his time in the room, despite the fact that the only apparent escape route is death. After a while, then, the film basically becomes one of those typically Hollywood big-budget morality tales in which great personal trial is the only way to come to terms with terms with immense grief (the Puritans have a lot to answer for). Nevertheless, Cusack carries the whole thing with style, and his abrasive, sarcastic protagonist helps draw us into the action. Similarly, in what is basically an extended cameo, Samuel L. Jackson does much to help create a sense of atmosphere before we even enter the room. Ultimately, while this film certainly doesn't reach the heights of either *Carrie* or *The Shining* in the ever-expanding league of King adaptations, it is still considerably better than the likes of *Dreamcatcher* or *Maximum Overdrive*, which also inspire thoughts of hell, but for rather different reasons...

***Kelly Grant***

***Black Sheep* (Dir. Jonathan King)** New Zealand, 2006  
Live Stock Films / New Zealand Film Commission

Given the famous ratio of sheep to people in New Zealand, it was perhaps only a matter of time before *Black Sheep* came along, a film that pits infected zombie-sheep against the human population they so greatly outweigh. Inevitably, Jonathan King's debut film has garnered comparisons with the early work of Peter Jackson, previous holder of the title of New Zealand's comedy-horror splatter king after the trio of *Bad Taste* (1987), *Meet the Feebles* (1989) and *Braindead* (1992), before coming of age with *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) and transforming himself into the awards-magnet behind the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003). Certainly, King seems intent on trying to capture the offal-laden spirit of Jackson's demented earliest work, even collaborating with renowned effects house Weta Workshop which has developed hand-in-hand with Jackson's career; but ultimately, *Black Sheep* falls short, and fails to conjure up enough shocks or gross-out humour to function as a successful comedy-horror. Crucially, there's only so much mileage to be derived from the central gag of the sheer innocuousness of zombie-sheep, and the film really struggles to stretch this premise out to a lean 87 minutes.

The film opens with an apparently idyllic scene in rural New Zealand; a panoramic shot of the landscape reveals a flock of sheep, which are being herded by young Henry Oldfield, his father and childhood friend Tucker. Watching on is Henry's older brother, Angus, unable to take part in the bloke-ish bonding because of his callipered leg. Angus promptly demonstrates his resentment for this fact by killing, skinning and stringing up the carcass of Henry's pet sheep, Dudley, and draping himself in the dead animal's pelt. Young Henry is suitably upset when he encounters this sight, but things are made considerably worse when the brothers receive word of their father's death in a farming accident moments later. Cut to fifteen years later, and the adult Henry (Nathan Meister) finds himself trapped in a taxi on a country road, surrounded by a flock of sheep and suffering an 'ovinophobia'-induced panic attack while trying desperately to get his therapist on the phone. He's en route to his childhood home to finalise the sale of his half of the family farm to Angus (Peter Feeney), who has grown up to be an aggressive and mercenary pioneer in the agricultural sciences, spearheading research into the genetic modification of more profitable sheep, the fruits of which he is about to reveal to potential investors. Angus has not contended with the arrival of Grant (Oliver Driver) and Experience (Danielle Mason), a pair of meddling animal rights activists intent on exposing his methods. They promptly steal one of the failed experiments and inadvertently unleash the ur-zombie-sheep on the flock. Grant is promptly bitten, and begins to transform into a sheep-human hybrid, and the rest of the flock gradually become infected. Meanwhile Henry and Tucker (Tammy Davis) team up with Experience to uncover the sheer extent of Angus' dastardly dealings (which involve a 'unique' method of combining sheep and human DNA) and attempt to put things right and avoid the same fate as Grant.

Clearly, there is scope here for an effective social satire on scientific experimentation, but this issue remains muddled throughout the film because of King's attempts to poke fun at two extremes of the debate: Angus's disregard for the ethics of genetic modification (and idiosyncratic interpretation of animal husbandry); his cohorts' careless disposal of biohazardous waste material in a sinkhole on the farm; Grant's rejection of vegetarian ideals once he begins transforming into a sheep-human hybrid (and his lingering guilt that the meat he eats "wasn't even organic"); and Experience's New Age beliefs and her environmentalist concerns about the role played by animal flatulence in the depletion of the ozone layer (an elaborate fart-gag at the film's climax puts paid to *that* particular concern by revealing the

effectiveness of methane in dispatching zombie-sheep). Instead, the film seems to tread a careful middle-ground that seeks to restore to farm-life the more traditional Henry, who is opposed to both Angus' agricultural sciences and Experience's favoured organic farming. The problem with the attempt at mercilessly lampooning both scientific carelessness and misguided environmental activism is that it effectively undermines any real coherence to the satire and to the related cultural commentary that seems inherently to underpin a film (however comedic) that takes genetically-modified zombie-sheep as its subject. Admittedly, King attempts to undermine such readings of the film in a particularly telling moment, when Experience's appeal to Tucker for support in her conservationist campaign falls on deaf ears. Her efforts, as she puts it, "to deconstruct the colonialist paternalistic agrarian hierarchy that disenfranchises the Tangata Whenua and erodes the natural resources of Aotearoa", reflect precisely the kinds of discourses that the cultural critic might seek within the film; but these are exactly the kinds of interpretative categories that King's script seems determined to dismiss.

All of which would be fine, if the film managed successfully to poke fun at these to any real effect; but this simply isn't the case, and all too often it relies on hackneyed jokes and unfunny one-liners (when one character starts transforming into a sheep-human hybrid, for example, he refers to another as a "baaaaaaa-stard"). Tone, pacing and action sequences all fall flat, so that by the time the infected flock of sheep finally start chowing down on Angus's business associates, the resultant frenetic massacre fails to make up for the tedious build-up to what is essentially a one-note gag. The resolution, too, is all-too-easy, restoring order to the farm; to the lines between man and sheep; and to Henry's addled mind. In the end, *Black Sheep* just doesn't have the courage of its convictions to poke fun at *everything*, and fails to prove sufficiently inventive or outrageous. The New Zealand comedy-horror crown still remains safely in the care of Peter Jackson, at least for now.

***Jenny McDonnell***

## MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

### *Bioshock*

(Game Developer: Take 2 Interactive) Rated 18s

Multi-Platform - Game reviewed on the Xbox 360

So there you are, on a plane trip home, gazing at a picture of your proud parents, when suddenly the engines splutter, then fail, and the plane crashes into the ocean. By pure chance you survive, spluttering up through the seawater and dodging detritus, burning fuel and the bodies of your fellow passengers. Glancing around, you notice a stone monolith rising from the sea and swim towards it. Shivering with the cold, you climb up a broad set of steps and into the entrance only to discover a

large room with a bathysphere – a kind of miniature submarine – sitting below a large, tattered banner with the word “Welcome” written on it. Now, any sane person would sit down in the room, maybe try and light a fire and wait for help, but not Jack the character whose persona you adopt at the beginning of *Bioshock*. As Jack, the player enters the bathysphere and starts the journey to Rapture, an underwater city built by industrialist Andrew Ryan in an attempt to create a utopia which facilitates unfettered expression in art, music, engineering and science. About 15 seconds after you arrive in Rapture (after a visually stunning journey), you begin to realise that naturally, something has gone very badly wrong. It could be the destruction wrought on the entrance chamber, or the voice coming across the radio telling you that you’ve made a terrible mistake. Or, and more likely, it’s the woman crawling on the roof who has hooks instead of hands...

This is the opening to *Bioshock*, one of the few horror genre games to be released on a next gen console: in this case, Microsoft’s XBOX 360, which is pushed to the very limit of its processing power in order to produce the stunning graphics on display in the game. Indeed, following a few minutes of Full Motion Video (FMV), the game seamlessly gives control of the character to the player, a changeover executed so smoothly that many first time players may only realise gradually that they’ve actually been in control of the character for the last few minutes. The merging of FMV into gameplay graphics flawlessly has been a Mecca for many development teams and this is one of the few instances where it works beautifully.

Plot wise, *Bioshock* is ahead of the pack in comparison to many other First Person Shooters (FPS). Most other games in the genre rely on limited, predictable plots which serve the graphics and the players desire to shoot things more than the story itself (such as the *Timesplitters* series and *Black*, a game that deliberately went out of its way to eschew plot, instead relying on high end graphics and gameplay to sell it). Throughout *Bioshock* however the player is encouraged to explore his or her surroundings and to find out how and why the great experiment that was Rapture failed, a tactic which leaves one feeling particularly engaged with the overall story. There are also several major plot twists that will leave you feeling genuinely surprised. The back-story of Rapture is introduced incrementally, with hints of murder, bribery and genocide played out via radio messages and by means of recorded diaries made by Non Playable Characters (NPC’s) (in a similar way to *Doom 3*’s use of PDA’s to advance the plot).

When you first arrive in the city you’re guided by helpful Irish man named Atlas (whose characterisation represents some of the best voice acting seen in a game to date). Atlas, the leader of a resistance group within Rapture, is desperately trying to get his wife and child out of the city and away from the control of



insane industrialist Ryan. Ryan has somehow seized control of the city by deploying his so-called ‘Splicers’, residents of the city driven insane following their continuous use of genetic enhancements known as Plasmids. It’s these enhancements that form a major part of the gameplay, with the player able to pick and choose Plasmids with which to augment themselves, from enhanced strength for melee combat to firing wasps out of your forearm (yes, really, and it’s the most fun you’ll ever have with Wasps, trust me...). These enhancements are unlocked through the injection of ADAM, a genetic material extracted from corpses and then injected into living tissue, with alterations to genes allowing the growth of enhancements. ADAM is gathered by the Little Sisters, young girls who carry large needles to extract blood from dead bodies, and who then drink it in order to extracting the ADAM (nasty, eh?). The Little Sisters are valued commodities within the world of *Bioshock* with splicers and resistance members hunting and killing them to extract the ADAM to enhance their abilities. The Little Sisters, however, are not without their defences. These take the form of ‘Big Daddies’, lumbering monsters (dressed in a divers suit’s and carrying rivet guns) that attack ferociously whenever a Little Sister is attacked. The Big Daddies are some of the most formidable enemies you will encounter during the game and when they occasionally appear in pairs it’s time to start worrying.

One of the major plot arcs within the game (and one which seeks to elevate the cultural idea of videogames) is the moral choice placed in front of the player regarding the Little Sisters. In order to progress through the game, you need to extract ADAM from them. There are a number of Little Sisters within each section of the game, each one guarded by a Big Daddy. Once you successfully kill her protection, the player is given the choice of either killing the Little Sister for a large amount of ADAM or free her from the parasite that gives her the ability to generate the ADAM and receive a much smaller amount for greater rewards later in the game. No matter which one you choose, the player must grapple with a struggling Little Sister who repeatedly cries ‘No!’ as you either extract the parasite or kill her, either option being vaguely disturbing. The architects of these choices are Atlas (who encourages you to kill the Little Sisters, citing that they’re no longer human and as such it’s ok) and Dr. Tennenbaum (who created the Little Sisters from girls abandoned in an Orphanage on Rapture and who now wants to give them back their lives).

Graphically, *Bioshock* is stunning, with the water effects in particular far beyond anything previously seen. The Art Deco look of Rapture also adds a wonderful feel to proceedings, with the fact that the game world is so fully and realistically imagined adding much to the overall experience. However, some criticisms can be made. The game itself is remarkably easy, largely because the player hardly ever dies, a result of the large number of health packs and EVE (a substance which allows you to use Plasmids) scattered across the levels (for example, when playing the end of game boss I had 8 health packs and 4 EVE injections left *after* I had beaten it. For those of you who don’t know the game, this is a lot!). If you do get killed, the character is soon respawned in a handy resurrection chamber. These are generally just a few hundred metres away from you at any one time and take much of the challenge out of the game. When you die you know you don’t have to reload a level and fight those same pernicky bad guys, maybe having to change your attacks to finally make your way through. In *Bioshock* you could die for every bad guy you kill and still complete the game in a few days (but it would be very annoying...). In addition, there is no feeling of achievement in having unlocked or found additional Plasmids with the splicers that regularly attack you never changing in appearance or in the number of bullets or wasps needed to kill them. This lack of change in character models or attacks does leave the player feeling that they have made little progress in the game). Attempts are made to enhance the life of the game such as a

using a research camera to unlock enemy weaknesses. This doesn't really work, as you can still work your way steadily through the levels with or without it and as the camera is not an essential part of the game it is easily forgotten. More could have been done with the player's enhanced powers, especially ones such as telekinesis (whose use is remarkable similar to that of the gravity gun in *Half Life 2*). Nor is *Bioshock* particularly frightening: whilst it does have an occasional creepy moment, the excess of ammunition, health and EVE means that the player never feels particularly threatened or apprehensive. The game is also let down by a lack of replay value. Whilst it does have multiple endings and large game areas to explore, the linear nature of the plot and the lack of any multiplayer modes do let the game down. Generally though, *Bioshock* is in most respects an excellent game with its few minor flaws doing little to affect the player's enjoyment.

### ***Eoin Murphy***

*Bioshock:*

Graphics: 10

Sound: 10

Gameplay: 8

Replay Value: 6

Average Score: 8.5

### ***The Darkness***

(Developer: Take 2 Interactive) rated 18s  
Multi-Platform – reviewed on the Xbox 360

21st birthdays are great. You get a big party, all your friends are invited, there's lots of food and drink and all kinds of craziness ensues! Such as: a botched attempt to extort money which results in your mob boss Uncle hunting you down for revenge, at which point you discover you are possessed by an inherited Demon called 'The Darkness' that makes tentacles grow out of your back and little monster things attack your enemies, all the while trying to steal your soul. All in all it's not the best way to celebrate your birthday...

*The Darkness* is based on the Top Cow comic of the same name by Marc Silvestri, Garth Ennis (of *Judge Dredd* and *Preacher* fame) and David Wohl. In the game you play Jackie Estacado, an orphan adopted from St. Mary's Orphanage at the tender age of 12 by his mob-connected uncle Paulie, who, rather than shower him with affection, trains him to be a contract killer for the family. However, unbeknownst to Jackie, his great-great-grandfather made a deal with a Demon during World War 1 in order to save his own life with the inevitable caveat that when one of his descendants hits the grand old age of 21 'The Darkness' will take possession of him and use him to unleash evil unto the world. This turns out to be poor old Jackie, who luckily manifests the Demon when he needs it most. The only bright spark in Jackie's life is his girlfriend, Jenny, who is also his only friend from the orphanage (you should see what happens to the rest of them...). Add to the mix corrupt cops, a Chicago crime family and Darklings (the aforementioned Monster things that attack your enemies) armed with mini guns and chainsaws and you've got *The Darkness* in a nutshell.

The game is a first person shooter, which opens with a sequence involving a high speed car chase through a tunnel. This works really well as a beginning, dropping the player straight into the action as the unfortunate Jackie is sent out to kill a construction yard foreman who's also been running a rival drug pushing operation. The player has two main offensive styles in the game. The first is the standard FPS method of arming yourself to the teeth. With dual wielded handguns (with the left trigger equating to your left hand and the right trigger to your right hand) and Uzi's, shotguns and machine guns all available, Jackie is well fit and able to defend himself. Within the first hour of gameplay, Jackie begins to manifest 'The Darkness' opening up a number of demon inspired attacks, including summoning Darklings, demonic guns and being able to generate blackholes. 'The Darkness' itself is activated by a button tap resulting in twin demon heads on tentacles leering over your shoulders. The demon heads can be used for a number of purposes including stealth attacks (including eating gangsters faces), opening doors and devouring killed enemies hearts to unlock further demon powers. The Demon heads are strangely good fun, especially when they occasionally bicker over which one gets to eat one of Jackie's victim's hearts. When the tentacles are activated, they gain Darkness powers by remaining in the shadows. If you stray into the light too much you'll hear a sizzling sound and the tentacles start to get agitated. Leave it to long to shoot out a light or get under cover and the tentacles will retract and take longer to regenerate.

As well as the more linear main storyline, Jackie can undertake side missions, unlocked by talking to Non-playable characters. This unlocks additional content and serves to break up the main story line adding a bit more depth to the game and the character of Jackie. The side missions are also quite varied:

they include being dared by an old woman to pick coins off a railway track before getting hit by a train to stopping a local hood from harassing a man who plays the harmonica in the subway.

One of the highlights of the game lies is summoning Darklings to attack your enemies for you. The Darklings come in four types, and each type has their own distinct personality. The berserkers for instance carry out melee attacks and also have a tendency to urinate on their victims...Whilst not overly intelligent and occasionally difficult to direct to targets, the Darklings are fun to use and also serve as easily replaceable cannon fodder which takes the heat off Jackie for a while. Other nice touches include the use of a pager to pass on information and keep in contact with both friend and foe alike and the fact that Jackie can use pay phones to unlock additional content.

The graphics in *The Darkness* are top notch, if not quite up to the same level as those in games like *Bioshock* or *Mass Effect*. Facial models are still of high enough quality that when the Demon heads growing out of your back eat someone's face your character actually grimaces slightly – a nice touch. Voice acting is also quite good although after awhile the rather exaggerated Italian American accents (especially of those of the senior citizens) do grate somewhat.

*The Darkness* is a good, solid action game that does exactly as it says on the tin. It's entertaining and whilst it probably won't win any awards and has little to offer in the way of innovation (after all, it is now becoming standard practice in FPS games to add additional powers to the main character, as also seen in *Far Cry*, *Quake 4*, *Bioshock*, etc) *The Darkness* has the excuse of deriving this plot point from the long running comic-book series on which it is based. This is an enthralling game with an interesting plot that really makes you want to experience what happens next. Horror elements are at its core of the game and whilst the game play itself is seldom overtly frightening there are definitely movements that will have you wincing in sympathy with Jackie's plight.

### ***Eoin Murphy***

*The Darkness:*

Graphics: 8

Gameplay: 7

Sound: 8

Replay Value: 7

Average Score: 7.5

***Hack/Slash – First Cut***

Writer: Tim Seeley

Pencils: Stefano Caselli

Colourist: Sunder Raj

(Devil's Due Publishing 2007)

What do Camp Crystal Lake, Elm Street and Haddonfield have in common? Good cheese? Excellent schools? A fully stocked knife shop? If you'd answered monstrous serial killers who just can't be stopped no matter what you hit, stab or shot them with then you'd be right!

Serial slashers have been a part of the movie industry for decades, harking back to the original slasher film *Black Christmas* (released in 1974, four years before *Halloween*) which saw a group of sorority girls taunted over the phone and then hunted down and killed. It was movies of this much-maligned subgenre which first introduced the idea of 'The Final Girl', the last survivor of a slasher attack who heroically sees off the monster only (generally) to die in the opening sequence of the sequel in order to start off a whole new series of murders.

Films such as *Scream* have taken this trend and revamped it, with the Final Girl taking an even more active role in the hunt for the slasher, regularly fighting back and making sure that the serial killer who's tried to eviscerate her for the last hour and a half really is dead and won't have wandered off after having been run over by a combine harvester.

*Hack/Slash* takes this idea a step forward and has Slasher attack victim and quintessential final girl Cassie Hack actively hunt down Slashers before they can reap massive body counts. She does this with the help of her partner Vlad (who could pass for a Slasher himself and acts as the muscle.)

Cassie was a quiet child at school who got teased because her mother was the lunch lady. Her mother, rather than reassure the girl and meet with her teachers to work out a solution, decided instead that the best course of action was to kill the kids involved and cook them for dinner. Unsurprisingly, the school wasn't pleased and contacted the police, at which point Mrs. Hack put her head in a pot of boiling soup and drowned herself.

Now, unsurprisingly even more unpopular, Cassie soon found herself having to fight her own undead mother who had returned to finish what she started. Suffice to say Cassie found herself feeling a tad guilty and after a while decided that she had to hunt down and stop Slashers before they can really raise the body count

*Hack/Slash* begins with an excellent concept: what happens when a Final Girl decides to pre-emptively fight back? Unfortunately, the execution of the idea is a lot less effective, relying largely on the depiction of partial nudity and on over the top scenarios. The first story in this collection involves an undead, mentally disabled vet's assistant who can bring pets back from the dead and use them to attack those that betrayed and murdered him. Aside from the moral implications of having someone who is mentally disabled as your first villain, using undead pets isn't exactly terrifying. For a start, any cat that's been buried under the ground for six months isn't going to be in much condition to attack a fully grown

human. Even if it did manage to crawl its way into the house the worst thing it could do would be get your clothes slightly sticky and smelling unpleasant (something most cats can do when they're alive...).

The comic also spends a lot of time focused in on the partial nudity of its female cast. Whilst this is a long standing tradition within Slasher films, it feels wrong in the comic book context, with the writers and artists seeming to focus on titillation rather than creating a strong and innovative story, something which is needed not only to sell issues but to keep the reader interested. There are only so many partially dressed women you can look at before you start to get bored. With the inherent flexibility of the genre, a lot more could have been done with both the story lines and in subverting genre clichés, instead of relying on the depiction of sexy schoolgirls and improbable deaths.

The tongue in cheek approach employed by *Hack/Slash* is most effective in the final story of the collection, which features cameos from other comic writers, including Steven Niles who wrote *30 Days of Night* (the film version of which was released in November 2007) and Robert Kirkman (the writer of *The Walking Dead*, reviewed in Issue 1 of the *Irish Journal of Horror and Gothic Studies*.) Each one of the cameoed writers and artists is butchered at a convention by a comics obsessed slasher (who has something in common with Kuato from *Total Recall*).

*Hack/Slash* feels like a concept that could have made an interesting contribution to the horror comic genre by taking the final girl concept to the next stage of its evolution, but instead, its light hearted approach to Slasher films reads more like that used in hackneyed and unimaginative films like *Jason X* rather than that seen in classics like *Halloween* (the John Carpenter version not the awful Rob Zombie version). It leaves the reader (at least this one) feeling drained and just a tad disappointed.

If you're after a light hearted read with plenty of half-naked females on display, try *Hack/Slash*, but if you want more depth from a horror comic try reading something genuinely challenging and thought-provoking like Alan Moore's *From Hell* (which also has plenty of nudity and all the Freemasons you could shake a stick at!) instead.

**RICO RAMIREZ (Buenos Aires Correspondent)**

## *Doomed*

IDW Publishing, 2007

Artists: Various

Based upon stories by Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, David J. Schow and F. Paul Wilson

*Doomed* is a modern-day attempt to emulate the pleasures and the terrors of 1950s horror comics such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Shock Suspense Stories* (a wonderful collected edition of the latter was released by Gemstone publishing last year: I highly recommend it). Created by artist Ashley Wood and editorial director Ted Adams, *Doomed* the comic book debuted last year and this collected edition reprints the first four issues. Fittingly, many of the best stories in the anthology are adaptations of tales by Robert Bloch and Richard Matheson, two of the 1950s finest and most influential horror fiction practitioners. Because Bloch and Matheson wrote most of their short stories of the period for the then thriving magazine market, their tales tend to be slick, tightly plotted, and sharply punctuated by suitably ironic, gruesome, or chilling conclusions. At their finest, such tales are like the horror equivalent of a triple espresso, and, happily, their recent adaptations in the *Doomed* comics tend to be handled with style and aplomb: little has been lost in translation. The starkly atmospheric black and white artwork which illustrates each adaptation suits the mood and the timbre of the source texts much more closely than more obviously gruesome colour artwork would have done.

The collection kicks off in fine style with the excellent “Blood Son” – based upon Matheson’s story of the same name – which is about a disturbed young boy who believes that he is a vampire. It’s an interesting companion piece to Matheson’s most famous vampire story, the classic novel *I Am Legend* (1954), and the adaptation here by Chris Ryall and Ashley Wood captures the spirit of the original text perfectly. Each issue of the comic book features one tale each by Matheson, Bloch, Schow and Wilson, and of the more modern authors, Wilson’s work generally comes off best here. Still perhaps best known for his novel *The Keep* and the famously dodgy Michael Mann film adaptation of the same name, Wilson has for several decades been writing short stories as good as anything the genre has to offer – tales such as “Soft”, “Buckets” and in particular, “Foet” come to mind – and it’s good to see his work getting some much deserve exposure here. Wilson has an ability to simultaneously evoke both pity and revulsion which is showcased to great effect here in the story “Faces”, which is about a horrifically deformed and terribly lonely mutant woman who commits brutal acts of murder, and is in many ways reminiscent of Matheson’s 1953 classic “Born of Man and Woman”. Wilson’s original story haunted me long after I read it at an impressionable age, and whilst Rufus Dayglo’s artwork here isn’t quite as horribly evocative as the images Wilson’s prose conjured up (how could it be?), it’s nevertheless a pretty good effort. Another standout Wilson adaptation here is the gory “Pelts” which has also recently been adapted for the small screen as a Dario Argento-directed instalment of the “Masters of Horror” television series.

Spatterpunk pioneer David J. Schow’s work also provides the basis for four of the stories here, and these are probably the weakest in the collection, perhaps because Schow’s slyly self-referential and often densely humorous source stories are a lot less linear and more self-indulgent than those of the other authors featured, and therefore rather more difficult to approximate in comic book form. Still, “Visitation”, adapted by Ivan Brandon and Andy MacDonald, is a solid, atmospheric little tale, even if ultimately a tad predictable.

The adaptations of Matheson which stand out most in the *Doomed* series, and in particular “Legion of Plotters”, his brilliant tale of a man so insanely irritated by the petty annoyances caused by people around him that he comes to believe that it is all part of a vast conspiracy designed to drive him mad. As someone who has a particular loathing of people who loudly eat vast tubs of popcorn in the cinema, or who incessantly sniff whilst on the bus, I can empathise. The ironic final words of Matheson’s original – “No motive found for wild attack” remain as grimly amusing here as they were half a century ago. “Children of Noah”, which also ends on a grim note, is another effective adaptation.

Robert Bloch was generally a somewhat less accomplished writer than Matheson, despite his vast output, and his characteristic fondness for weak puns is seen here in the Alfred Hitchcock presents-style tales “Fat Chance” and “Ego Trip”, both of which conclude with rather obviously ironic reversals of fortune. Nevertheless, one of his better stories does provide the basis for what is probably the most chilling tale of the collection, “Final Performance”, which concludes with a memorably devastating revelation, greatly helped by Chris Ryall’s stylised, shadowy artwork.

Ultimately then, this is a compelling, immensely readable collection – a real treat both for those already familiar with the authors and the stories featured, and a fitting introduction for those who are not. *Doomed* inevitably makes one think of other writers whose work would be suitable for comic book treatment: I for one would love to see the same accomplished team tackle stories by the likes of Dennis Etchinson, Shirley Jackson and Ray Bradbury, for instance. Roll on volume two!

***Kelly Grant***



## TELEVISION REVIEWS

### *Dexter*

Showtime: FX, 2007

Given the immense popularity of forensic detective shows such as the *CSI* franchise and *Bones*, and the frequency with which serial killers provide the basis for the case-of-the-week in each, it was perhaps only a matter of time before someone had the bright idea of combining the serial killer and the forensic detective into one character. The result of this inevitable generic crossover is Dexter Morgan, blood spatter specialist for the ever-busy Miami Police Department by day, vigilante serial murderer by night, hero – or rather, anti-hero – of the new series *Dexter*, which has just finished its first season on the FX channel.

Loosely based on the novels by Jeff Lindsay, the show is an entertaining, blackly humorous and, at times, notably gruesome viewing experience which threatens to veer into sentimentality rather more often than the gleefully misanthropic source texts. Much of the humour in the opening episodes comes from the inevitable conflict between Dexter's murderous proclivities and the cheerful 'normal' exterior he has erected to try and hide his true nature from those around him.

Having been found at a bloody crime scene many years before by his adoptive father, a cop named Harry who soon realised that his son was, at heart a killer, Dexter has been counselled since childhood to disguise his true, emotionless nature at all costs. To that end, his apparently charming, helpful character is nothing but a smokescreen for the emotional vacuum beneath; although as the series progresses it becomes clear to the viewer that Dexter experiences a great deal more emotion than he is willing to allow himself to admit.

Given that he is portrayed by Michael C. Hall, who also played conflicted gay undertaker David Fisher in the series *Six Feet Under*, the fact that Dexter is a closeted serial killer becomes all the more ironic, particularly given that many of his scenes early on in the show concern his relationship with his emotionally damaged girlfriend Rita (former *Angel* regular Julie Benz), whose desire to keep their relationship strictly platonic fills him with immense relief. The parallels between this and Hall's last major role are obvious; and with his *almost*-handsome-but-also-kind-of-creepy bland good looks and ability to adopt a suspiciously nonchalant expression at the drop of the hat, he was a fitting choice for the role.

Like Hannibal Lecter, who in Thomas Harris's later, weaker, novels preferred to eat the rude and those who had committed terrible crimes themselves, Dexter is a poacher turned gamekeeper who uses his contacts within the police department to track down human predators much less discerning than himself. Those he catches –who include child murderers and people traffickers – are drugged, wrapped in cling film, and carefully dismembered before being dumped in the ocean. Dexter is nothing if not neat. Presumably, given that our sympathies and perspective on events always lie with Dexter, we are meant to think that murder is sort of ok, once it's bad people who suffer. *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* this is not.

Apart from his relationship with Rita and her two young children, Dexter's most significant point of human contact is with his foul-mouthed sister Deborah (the excellent Jennifer Carpenter, best known as the demon-afflicted college student in *The Possession of Emily Rose*), an ambitious, goofily enthusiastic homicide detective within the same department who, more often than not, insists that her big brother help her solve whatever case is at hand. Like Rita, she too has no inkling of Dexter's true feelings (or lack of them) perhaps because his occasionally stiff, vaguely inappropriate responses to the world around him aren't all that different from that of the average non-serial killing male. The only one who suspects him at all is the hyper-aggressive Sergeant Doakes, who generally yells, "What the fuck are *you* looking at, Morgan?" in a hugely entertaining fashion at least once per episode, and, unlike everyone else, finds Dexter's penchant for hanging blown-up pictures of blood spatter over his desk rather suspicious.

The main story arc of the first season concerns the police department's attempts to snare the 'Ice-Truck Killer', so called because he freezes his street-walking victims before cutting them up into neat little parcels which are then left for the police to find. The moment he comes upon the first such crime scene, Dexter realises that he has finally met his match, and a steadily escalating war of wits between the two killers commences as it becomes clear that the Ice Truck Killer knows a great deal more about Dexter's troubled past and unacceptable urges than Dexter himself does. To cap it all off, he's actually even neater than Dexter, and that really bugs him.

Storyline aside, the look of the show is fantastic, with the always sunny scenery and buzzing atmosphere of America's most Latin city providing a startling backdrop to all kinds of gruesome misdeeds. Almost all the men – including Dexter – wear garish, brightly coloured shirts, and, like Crockett in *Miami Vice*, Dexter also has a boat of his own, though sadly, no alligator, although this would surely save some time when it came to disposing of his victims. The opening titles are worth watching in themselves, as glossily sinister and slightly nauseating close-up is employed to make the simplest of actions – grinding coffee beans, cutting into bacon – seem somehow violent and murderous.

Whilst the show tends to lose some of its momentum when dealing with non-ice truck killer cases, or with the troubled personal lives of some of Dexter's colleagues – a soap opera touch notably absent from the source text – it still differentiates itself from the ordinary pack of detective shows by dint of the comedy derived from the bluntly witty, expletive-laden dialogue (it is undoubtedly significant that alone of his police department colleagues, Dexter hardly ever swears). Another point of interest lies in Dexter's attempts to blend in with everyone else, as well as by the manner in which his upbringing and relationship with Harry, his adoptive father, is continually referenced by regular flashbacks to his youthful indoctrination (complete with bad wigs and dodgy fashions). Indeed, one of the most interesting things about the show is the gradual insinuation that Harry, who has, after all, encouraged a very disturbed child to vent his violent urges on criminals, rather than send him for psychiatric help, may well have been as much of a monster as his troubled charge. It's a realisation that Dexter himself comes to in the closing episodes of the season. However, some viewers may be annoyed by the show's rather pat contention that severe childhood trauma automatically creates a future serial killer (so *that's* how it's done!).

The conclusion of the Ice Truck killer arc, and the manner in which the Morgan siblings become entangled in the killer's cunning plan is compelling, if somewhat predictable (indeed, anyone with an ounce of deductive reasoning will have figured out who the Ice Truck Killer is long before those onscreen limp to the same realisation). Still, the odd weak instalment aside, the interesting premise, witty dialogue,

and unusual character interaction make *Dexter* well worth watching for those who like their humour black and their blood spatter bright red. For the next generic crossover, may I suggest that TV executives consider creating a show about a maverick pathologist who also works as a top chef? Or a vampire turned district attorney? The possibilities are endless...

***BERNICE M. MURPHY***

### ***Twin Peaks* (1990-1991)**

ABC/Universal Home Entertainment (Season One)/Paramount Home Entertainment (Season Two)

In April 1990, the plastic-wrapped corpse of Laura Palmer floated onto our television screens, buoyed up by a quirky supporting cast of eccentrics. Propelled by the increasingly offbeat investigation of this absorbing murder-mystery, the first season of *Twin Peaks* (the brainchild of Mark Frost and David Lynch) was an undisputed phenomenon. But when the second season began in September 1990, the show's initial appeal seemed rapidly to diminish. Frustrated by the lengthy and increasingly obscure nature of the investigation into Laura Palmer's death, viewing figures began to decline; and after the unveiling of her killer (under pressure from alarmed studio executives), only the most ardent of fans braved scheduling reshuffles to find out how *Twin Peaks* would survive the resolution of its headline-grabbing McGuffin. After just two seasons (comprising a pilot and twenty-nine episodes in total), *Twin Peaks* ended in June 1991 with the bleakest of cliff-hangers, leaving those members of the audience that had faithfully seen it through to the bitter end gagging for a third season, a craving that the much-maligned feature-length prequel, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992) failed to satisfy. Now, after prolonged distribution problems (which have meant that the second season has still not seen a release in the UK and Ireland), *Twin Peaks* is finally available in its entirety on Region 1 and a selection of mainland European releases on Region 2 DVD. And so it's time at last to brew some damn good coffee, sample another slice of cherry pie and relive the show that gave backwards-speaking dwarves their day in the sun.

*Twin Peaks* started life as a basic whodunit. In the idyllic small town of Twin Peaks ("where a yellow light still means slow down, not speed up") the body of high-school student Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) is discovered, wrapped in plastic; another girl, Ronette Pulaski (Phoebe Augustine), is missing. When she turns up across state lines, bloodied and apparently in a dissociative state, Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) is dispatched to lead the investigation, working with Sheriff Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean) and his team of local law enforcement officers. Guided by Tibetan philosophy and the interpretation of his dreams and visions, Cooper goes about the process of gathering clues to Laura's murder (most infamously those offered by the figure of The Man From Another Place (Michael J. Anderson), the oft-parodied backwards-talking dwarf, who would later star in *Carnivàle*). This was eventually to lead to the unfolding of a larger mystery: that of the Black Lodge, a metaphysical manifestation of what Truman identifies as "the evil in these old woods" which surround the town (a gothic trope which has haunted American culture as far back as Hawthorne). But such prosaic summaries simply can't do justice to the impact *Twin Peaks* had in its hey-day; and in particular, the pall cast by the characterisation of BOB, an evil spirit housed within the Black Lodge.

BOB is the stuff of nightmares, a primal force of evil, and a shadowy figure that recurs in Laura Palmer's secret diaries as an abusive figure that has tormented her from a young age. His appearances are often sudden and fleeting, and invariably range in effect from deeply unsettling to absolutely terrifying, especially when he invades seemingly benign domestic spaces. In one of the most memorable examples, Maddy Ferguson (Laura's cousin, also played by Sheryl Lee) has a vision of him in the Palmer living room, crawling over couches and tables directly towards her, and directly into the camera. It's a moment that signifies better than any *Twin Peaks*' effectiveness in bringing murder into the home (where Alfred Hitchcock, embarking on his own televisual exploits in 1955, once claimed it belonged). It also provides as clear an indication as any that the real horrors of *Twin Peaks* lurk in apparently the most mundane places. The site of Maddy's vision was later to become the place in which *Twin Peaks* yielded its secret,

when BOB strikes a second time in one of the most disturbing and sadistic scenes ever to have been screened on a commercial network (and the relatively conservative ABC at that). **[SPOILER BEGINS]** As Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) stands in his living room, looking in the mirror, his reflection is revealed to be that of BOB; in a devastating twist, then, we realise that BOB's human host is Laura's own father, previously presumed to be a run-of-the-mill eccentric who deals with his daughter's death by singing show-tunes and dancing like a manic Gene Kelly. These attributes are put to unsettling and surreal effect as we witness Leland/BOB chasing his latest victim around the room (after delivering a couple of bone-crunching blows to her face) and taunting her, before sweeping her into a tight embrace and twirling her about the living room, and brutally murdering her. In the space of a few minutes, then, the nightmarish BOB is unmasked and granted a more human – and infinitely more disturbing – face. **[SPOILER ENDS]**

If *Twin Peaks* had dealt exclusively in the dark and nightmarish realms which BOB occupied (and which its feature-length prequel *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* showcased, many would say to its detriment), there's a good chance it would never have gotten past the pilot stage. Indeed, a feature-length version was hastily put together for the European market, which remains something of a curio in Peaks lore. It revealed a mortal BOB to be the killer, before he was dispatched by 'Mike' (Al Strobel), the one-armed man who would prove to be an integral feature of the mythology of the Black Lodge eventually developed over the course of two seasons. (This remained undeveloped in the European pilot, but some related footage from its coda – in which Agent Cooper encounters Laura Palmer and The Man From Another Place in the Red Room – would subsequently feature in *Twin Peaks* itself, in the form of Cooper's dream.) The darkest aspects of the series – the murders and domestic secrets that shook *Twin Peaks* – were inextricably linked with this elaborate mythology, but were counter-balanced by the eclectic supporting characters and black humour that also characterised the show. At heart, it remained an elaborate soap opera (mirrored in the first season by its show-within-a-show, the fictional *Invitation to Love*), and *Twin Peaks* gleefully parodied soap-land excesses: for example, early in the second season, Cooper was filled in on what had happened since he was shot in the cliff-hanger to Season One:

**Truman:** Lucy, you'd better bring Agent Cooper up to date.

**Lucy:** Leo Johnson was shot, Jacques Renault was strangled, the mill burned, Shelley and Pete got smoke inhalation, Catherine and Josie are missing, Nadine is in a coma from taking sleeping pills.

**Cooper:** How long have I been out?

**Truman:** Six hours.

Throughout its run, *Twin Peaks* played with the conventional soap opera format and themes, regularly featuring such melodramatic excesses as the reintroduction of characters presumed dead; recurring story-lines involving love triangles and questionable patrimony; and soap-land's favourite affliction, amnesia – from Benjamin Horne's (Richard Beymer) re-enactment of the Civil War to Nadine Hurley's (Wendy Robie) regression to her teenage years and acquisition of superhuman strength, apparently leaving her husband Big Ed (Everett McGill) free to pursue a relationship with his own teenage sweetheart Norma Jennings (Peggy Lipton). Some of the more unconventional characters, like the infamous Log Lady (Catherine Coulson) and Major Garland Briggs (Don Davis) would also prove to be key players in the Black Lodge mythology; others, such as odd-ball Pete Martell (played by Lynch regular

Jack Nance) and FBI agent Gordon Cole (David Lynch himself) would turn strange quirks and character traits into much-needed (and well-loved) comic relief.

It was these supporting players that came to the fore in the second series after the revelation of Laura's killer, but with very mixed results. A number of guest directors were brought in while Lynch busied himself with the Palme d'Or-winning *Wild at Heart*, while the screenwriters struggled to keep the narrative on-track as it attempted to establish the wider mythology to which BOB belonged. Some of the new storylines seemed to meander a little too much (worst of the bunch was a noirish subplot involving Laura's biker boyfriend James Hurley (James Marshall) and a *femme fatale*, which briefly left the town of Twin Peaks behind); others have taken on a cultish appeal of their own, most famously David Duchovny's dragged-up pre-*X-Files* turn as DEA Agent Denise/Dennis Bryson. And others still represented the best of *Twin Peaks*' off-beat sense of humour, as when the chronically-deaf Gordon Cole falls for waitress Shelley Johnson (Mädchen Amick) – “the kind of girl that makes you wish you spoke a little French” – only to discover that he can hear every word she says, a memorable light touch amidst the gathering gloom of the show's final episodes. Ultimately, all roads would lead back to the Black Lodge after Cooper's former partner at the FBI Windom Earle (Kenneth Welsh) turned up in Twin Peaks, intent on using its secrets as a means to take his revenge on Cooper. Once the show found its way back on track, the stage was set for its devastating finale, with Lynch back at the helm for the final episode in which Cooper must face the mysteries of the Black Lodge in an extended sequence which remains a visceral *tour de force* of televisual surrealism. By now, though, the series had been axed and with no third season to redeem the fate of Cooper, *Twin Peaks* ended finally on the most dismal of notes.

Ultimately, *Twin Peaks* could never have maintained its initial success. The effectiveness of its immediate selling-point (the murder of Laura Palmer) would eventually prove its downfall, and once the identity of Laura's killer was revealed, the show struggled to regain its focus until it was all too apparent that the plug would be pulled. Despite this apparently ignominious ending, though, and seventeen years after it made its provocative debut, Twin Peaks remains an inescapable touchstone for gothic and supernatural programming. Its influence in paving the way for the likes of *The X-Files* (to which many members of the cast and crew graduated), *American Gothic* and *Carnivàle*, for example, is obvious; the success of the format of *The X-Files* in particular is unthinkable without the pioneering force of *Twin Peaks*. Its legacy can also be traced to just about any show that dramatises the nightmares that lurk beneath the veneers of suburban and small-town America, most memorably perhaps *Six Feet Under*, and most recently, the inexplicably popular *Desperate Housewives* (another ABC show). It displayed its Peaks-isms long before Kyle MacLachlan was added to the cast, by using as the focus for its first season the mysteries behind the unexpected suicide in the first episode of Mary Alice Young (a role originally intended for Laura Palmer herself, Sheryl Lee, but eventually played by Brenda Strong – who also had a minor role in *Twin Peaks*). But no television show has proven up to the task of fully capturing the darkly humorous and nightmarish spirit of *Twin Peaks*, or replicating the initial shockwaves that it generated when it premiered. Its reappearance now on DVD provides a welcome opportunity to revisit the show that has remained such a pervasive influence on our television screens; what emerges finally may be a flawed work, certainly, but one which remains compulsive viewing.

**JENNY McDONNELL**

***Torchwood***  
(BBC Three, 2006)

A controversial spin-off of the science fiction cult classic *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood* (the name itself is an anagram of *Doctor Who*) has its origins firmly within the mythology of the ‘Who-niverse’, a fondly held collection of traditions deriving from its cult parent programme. However *Torchwood* has a level of adult content - violence, profanity and scenes of a sexual nature - that have never be seen on *Doctor Who*. While *Doctor Who* is a drama, it also is firmly aware of its family and child-friendly audience. *Torchwood*, with its mixture of adult comedy and violence, is in many respects more comparable to American science fiction television shows such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

The plot of *Torchwood* revolves around a team that work “Outside the government, beyond the police” protecting modern day Wales and the world at large from the dangers of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The series is based in Cardiff where the show, like Russell T. Davies’ re-vamped *Doctor Who*, is filmed. The explanation for the high level of paranormal activity is neatly resolved as the city stands on a rift in time and space. The team is led by the charismatic Captain Jack Harkness (John Barrowman). Little about his past is given away to the audience or the other team members in the series but from his stint on *Doctor Who* we know that he is a Time Agent from the 51st Century who was a conman until he reformed his ways as the Doctor’s companion, during the first instalments of the re-imagined series. He is the leader of Torchwood 3, the third branch of the Torchwood Institute, instigated by Queen Victoria to defend Britain from supernatural forces after she met with the Doctor in the Scottish highlands in the *Doctor Who* episode “Tooth and Claw”. The team is made up of five operatives: Jack Harkness (Barrowman), Gwen Cooper (Eve Myles), Dr Owen Harper (Burn Gorman), Toshiko Sato (Naoko Mori) and Ianto Jones (Gareth David-Lloyd). A character by the name of Susie Costello, played by Indira Varma, featured prominently in the advertising as part of the team but was sensationally killed off at the end of the first episode. This device of killing off a “lead” character early in the narrative was also used in the pilot episode of the television series *CSI* as well as, most famously, in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Psycho*. By killing off an apparent lead at the beginning, the audience’s preconceptions are altered and left unsettled leading them to believe that their other preconceptions about the show could also be proven wrong in the subsequent episodes. *Torchwood* is therefore presumably supposed to be anything but predictable

Cardiff Policewoman Gwen Cooper (Myles) is introduced to the team in the first episode and provides a point-of-view for the audience. Her corruption and eventual transformation into a character similar to Susie (Varma) is an evolving thematic arc of considerable importance to the overall plot. When Gwen joins the team she is a no-nonsense every-woman whose honesty and earnest determination to uncover the truth is noted by Captain Jack Harkness. She shows genuine guilt at having to keep the secret of her new profession from her boyfriend. By the end of the series, she has told lies and acted unscrupulously to the detriment of others in the team in order to get her own way, just as Susie had done. Her new position, immersed in the paranormal alters her completely, and infringes on her personal life as she embarks on an affair with her co-worker Owen Harper (Gorman).

Many of the episodes in the first series show an awareness of common horror tropes, with the appearance of ghosts, monsters, vengeful fairy spirits (in the episode “Small Worlds”), cannibals (in the episode “Countrycide”) and unknown forces doing harm. Characters include a ghost (in the episode “Random

Shoes”), a half-woman/half machine (in the episode “Cyberwoman”) and a seductive, sex crazed alien (in the episode “Greeks Bearing Gifts”). There is an existential bent to the programme as well, with the theme of the meaning of life and the afterlife being a common thread through the first series. It could be argued then that in many respects *Torchwood* provides a more gothic, pessimistic contrast to the happily optimistic *Doctor Who*. The character of Captain Jack Harkness is shown to be immortal in the pilot episode but throughout the series he frequently faces near-death situations with a manic energy. The characters also frequently display symptoms of depression, Jack’s suicidal inclinations being just one example. *Torchwood*’s *mise-en-scene* is also much darker and it grimmer than that of its parent show. However it retains a strong sense of black humour and parodic self-awareness throughout.

*Torchwood*’s post-watershed time slot allows the show a far more adult content, than the more family orientated *Doctor Who*. This important difference has attracted criticisms from some of those attached to the mythology and feel of the original show. *Torchwood*’s differences from its parent programme are many but its emphasis on the sexuality of its characters have brought it the most controversy. By dint of its perennial status as tea-time family viewing, sexuality in *Doctor Who* is generally only alluded to via tongue-in-cheek jokes or wry insinuation. Sexuality in *Torchwood* is, however, a main theme, with at least one character engaging in sexual activity during each episode. Each character is represented as bi-sexual at some point and same-sex encounters as well as liaisons with supernatural beings happen in almost every episode. Much has been made in the media of the fact that the hero of the show, Captain Jack Harkness, is played by the openly gay actor John Barrowman (series creator Russell T. Davis is also gay). Their involvement in the show, as well as the frequent bi-sexual themes of *Torchwood*, have garnered it a large and dedicated fan base among the gay and lesbian community, as well as criticism from more conservative quarters.

*Torchwood* mines the traditions of horror and gothic literature and film in inventive ways. Typical horror tropes are utilised with great enthusiasm, if with varying success. Its reception has been mixed. Touted as an adult *Doctor Who*, some have been disappointed by the constant emphasizing of specific themes such as sexuality over those of the story. There has also been much praise for the series, and it has garnered enough viewers for a second series, which is now underway. However, in terms of entertainment, the show has been unable to recreate the essential chemistry between the characters in the same way as *Doctor Who* has done between the Doctor and his successive companions, Rose Tyler and Martha Jones. The show also suffers from its attempts to distance itself from *Doctor Who*, often pushing the storylines and characters in ways which seem forced and overdone. With the addition of the character of Martha Jones from *Doctor Who* to the second series of *Torchwood* there is hope that the creators will be able to redefine the storyline to be more coherent and focused. Until then, with its willingness to tackle dark sexual themes and to include gothic influences, *Torchwood* remains a unique experience in the history of British science fiction television, if not an entirely successful one.

**RUTH PATTEN**



**Maybe Tomorrow: *Supernatural's* Restless Men and (Un)predictable Girls**  
(Seasons 1 & 2, UTV)

I've been itching to review *Supernatural* for quite some time now – not, I hasten to add, because I believe it to be the epitome of the dizzy heights and impenetrable depths which small-screen Gothic and horror can attain – very much to the contrary. My nagging desire to subject *Supernatural* to the scrutiny of a review springs from my vivid sense that it shouldn't be allowed to get away with what it's currently getting away with.

Every Friday night, armed with a determination to nobly sacrifice myself to the cause of Gothic studies, I doggedly sit through yet another episode of what usually turns out to be dull, pedestrian drivel. Much of my recurring irritation springs from *Supernatural's* unflagging commitment to the violent death (usually, somewhat arbitrarily, by spontaneous combustion) of blond, scantily-clad ladies of a narrowly defined body shape and age group. Of course, this, I hear you cry, is what horror is and always has been all about! To my mind, however, much of the pleasure and excitement in watching a TV show that utilises Gothic tropes, plot lines and iconographies frequently arises from its willingness to subvert, challenge or mock this central narrative component. *Supernatural*, for all its massive budget and sporadic well-informed knowingness, doesn't even try to do any of these things, and the result is repetitious and often just plain boring. Indeed, the very predictability of the fate of any unfortunate blonde who wanders into the camera frame serves to turn the programme into something resembling a self-parody, condemned to repeat eternally the empty gestures by which it defines itself. "Look look!" it seems to cry at every available opportunity, "I am a horror show, I am, I am!"

Above and beyond this flagrant insecurity, there is another problem. Perhaps if they were offered up for their own sake, the various yellow-haired conflagrations might be visually arresting and even mildly disturbing. Instead, however, the gynocides are invariably hurried over at the start of an episode and employed, in retrospect, in the service of prompting bland, unconvincingly rough-edged men (Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles as Sam and Dean Winchester, respectively) who, incidentally, pack some serious – and possibly compensatory – weaponry) to avenge the deaths of their womenfolk. Most of the time, they do this by killing as many "bad guys" as they possibly can, bad guys whose status as "demons" or occasionally gifted psychics leaves one with the uncomfortable feeling that a profound xenophobia and mistrust of difference (whether gender or otherwise) underlies the programme's basic premise.

This premise, briefly, is that two brothers, improbably surnamed Winchester (the fire-arm related irony is not lost on me – if it's intended, it is undoubtedly one of the few genuinely frightening aspects of the show) become demon hunters when the younger brother's girlfriend dies in the previously mentioned incendiary manner. It transpires that their father became a demon hunter after their mother also died in similar fiery circumstances, which nearly caused the death of same young brother, who has long hair, some ham-fisted sensitivity and, we find out, psychic powers. Having worked with their über-macho dad in their youth, the younger brother rebels and goes off to college, only to be convinced by the aforementioned death of his girlfriend to take up the cause again. This involves lots of manly arguing and ego-clashes until, following a car crash, Daddy makes a pact with a demon to save the life of the older brother (who has a cheeky twinkle in his eye and some patchy stubble), sacrificing his own life in the process. Orphaned and now mightily pissed off, the two boys, speeding from one crummy small-town

Southern motel to the next, go it alone in the dangerous world of killing demons with guns and exorcising ghosts with, er, guns.

One particularly fine example of their *modus operandi* is provided (in a Season 2 episode entitled “Simon Says”) by a conversation during which the brothers discuss someone who needs to be “taken out” because of his dangerous psychic abilities. It goes more or less like this:

**Hairy Psychic Brother:** But how is he any different to me?

**Cheeky Stubby Brother:** Because he’s killed people.

**Hairy Psychic Brother:** So have I.

**Cheeky Stubby Brother:** That was different. Those people were evil.

**[Silence]**

It almost doesn’t matter that I only hallucinated Stubby Brother adding, “They deserved to die” – the point is that pretty much anything other than wholesome, gung-ho, gun-toting, *white* Southern manliness is fair game in *Supernatural*, and nowhere is this attitude more in evidence than in the show’s portrayal of the real enemy – women. In general, *Supernatural* suffers from the blind spot regarding the fair sex which afflicts so much of the male “buddy” genre in TV and film. Apparently taking Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* as a how-to guide rather than a damning critique of such attitudes, the programme only introduces the female of the species if it requires someone to be saved, shagged, or killed. This attitude manifests itself most frequently, indeed with wearying regularity, in a plot line which involves the pouting little madam that they’ve shown up to rescue turning out to be the very source of evil they’re duty-bound to eliminate.

In one episode (Season 2, “Hunted”), for example, Sam (Hairy Psychic Brother) meets a nice girl who seems to have the same powers as he does, and who he tries to protect from some monstrous force killing other preternaturally gifted young folks. While he and his bro’ are off investigating the latest body, however, they forget about her briefly, and when they show up belatedly at her house, her fiancé’s been eviscerated, and no-one loses any time in realising (or should that be “assuming”?) that she’s the one behind it all, cruelly tricking poor little innocent demon hunters into thinking that she was just another helpless victim. In almost exactly the same way, in the very first episode of Season 2, “In My Time of Dying,” while Dean (Cheeky Stubby Brother) is in a coma following the previously mentioned car crash, he has an out-of-body experience which effectively turns him into a ghost, wandering around the halls of the hospital, bemused that no-one can see or hear him, and meets yet another sweet young thing, who seems to be in the same predicament. While sensitive Sammy, convinced that Dean is trying to communicate with him, tries to save him from being sucked unceremoniously into the next life, it is suddenly revealed that this young lady is in fact a “Reaper”, just breathless at the thought of harvesting Dean’s well-muscled soul. Conveniently, unlike the largely silent girls who obediently burst into flame on a regular basis, all of these more independent types are almost consistently dark of follicle. Well, we couldn’t have ambiguity, now could we?

Apart from this worrying tendency to code everything and anything as Other, *Supernatural* simply fails to unsettle its audience in any kind of lasting way. If you're looking for a profoundly unnerving small-screen avatar of pure evil, you could do worse than look to Gary Cole as the Sheriff in Sam Raimi's *American Gothic*, or William B. Davis, the Cigarette-Smoking Man in *The X-Files*. In comparison, grim sepia lighting, flickering credit sequences, and novelty contact lenses just don't really cut it: we've seen it all before, and in far more memorable circumstances. At the very least, it's difficult to be scared of something that we know can be reduced to a cowering heap by some salt, a handful of ashes and a holy-water hand-grenade (I kid you not – tongue very far away from cheek, the Monty Python crew nowhere in sight).

More importantly, perhaps, the reason why *Supernatural* is so spectacularly flaccid in this all-important region for a horror show is because the main characters themselves are so rarely afraid, so infrequently in real danger, and almost never inscribed within the narrative of fear presented by an individual episode. If nothing else, we know that they can always fall back on an impressive arsenal (both projectile and occult) hidden in the booth of their boy-racer fantasy of a beat-up car (a 1967 Chevy Impala apparently – I'm wondering if there's some sort of vampire joke in there somewhere), a welter of secret codes and conspiratorial glances, and an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things demonic. They are, in other words, safely isolated from the evil which permeates their environment, and they want to keep it that way, as evidenced by the fact that they never renounce their ability to just drive away from demon-infested locations, malevolent beauties and potential ball-and-chains alike, their own psychological issues handily worked through in the process of performing their violent exorcism.

Before dismissing the series entirely, I'm quite willing to admit that episodes like "Route 666", "Home," and "Hell House," from Season 1, and Season's 2's "No Exit," do contain some memorable images and are not wholly ineffective as horror offerings. These episodes are replete with haunted houses, murderous phantom trucks and undead serial killers, satisfying a clued-in audience that the makers of the show (Eric Kripke *et al*) have at least done their homework. Marshalled here is an impressive array of references to Stephen King, Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson and *The X-Files*, to name but a few. Kripke himself names Neil Gaiman, *An American Werewolf in London* and the theories of anthropologist Joseph Campbell among his influences. A few good episodes and some canny use of its uncanny predecessors do not, however, save *Supernatural* from coming across as *The Littlest Hobo* with the lights turned off. Confirmed bachelors, the Winchesters, it seems, have no desire to be settled. Unfortunately, as they roar off in a cloud of dust at the end of each episode, they invariably leave unconsummated, or even dead, our own perfectly reasonable desire to be unsettled.

**DARA DOWNEY**

## *Jekyll*

Hartwood Films/BBC/Stagescreen Productions (2007)

“We’d like you to review *Jekyll*,” the Coven said. *Jekyll* ...? Ah, yes, *Jekyll*. BBC. Updated version. James Nesbitt ... “It’s with James Nesbitt,” I said, thinking that would settle the matter. “Yes,” they said. “No, no, you don’t understand. I saw the trailers, it’s with *James Nesbitt*.” “Yes,” they said, “We know.” “But don’t you see, in order to review it, I’d have to watch it!” How much clearer could I make it? But they were remorseless, as is the way with covens. “Yes,” they said, then added, “We understand it won’t be easy.” Which was kind of them, I suppose, but ... Jesus creeping shit, I’ve got to get out of this! “Look,” I nearly shouted, pointing at Witch No. 1, “you yourself said you despise James Nesbitt and all that he represents!” “That’s true,” she conceded, but said no more. Then, I’m ashamed to admit, sheer panic took over. “But *it’s James Nesbitt*! You know, the one from up North who’s always doing that I’m-just-one-of-the-guys act when you know what he’s really thinking is, I AM IT! I am God’s fucking gift to women and don’t they just love me! Yeah, baby, YEAH! I’d rather sandpaper my scrotum for three hours than watch James Nesbitt for one!” But, as you’ll have gathered, it was all to no avail. Remorseless, that’s the only word for it.

Still, I thought later, how bad could it be? Well, bad enough, obviously, but Stevenson’s story is short, so the adaptation couldn’t be any longer than an hour, could it? An hour-and-a-half, at the most, like that recent, godawful version of *Dracula* the BBC did ... Then the DVD arrived in the post. *Jekyll*. Season One. Running time: 330 mins. approx. *Season One! 330 minutes! Three hundred and thirty minutes!* God’s balls, what sort of bad karma was I reaping here? I grabbed the calculator. Five and-a-half hours. Five and-a-half hours ... of *James Nesbitt*! Right, you’ve asked for it, you’ve *really* asked for it! One fair and impartial review coming up...

Tom Jackman (played by guess who) has been feeling not quite himself lately. And when he’s not quite himself, Tom does bad things. Very bad things. Like smoking. And drinking. And having sex with women. He may even eat take-away pizzas while watching football on the telly, though we’re not actually shown that. As Tom is a happily-married New Man and a dab hand at changing nappies, such Neanderthal tendencies naturally upset him, so he does the only thing possible under the circumstances. He leaves his family, rents a dingy flat, and straps himself into a chair whenever he feels he might do anything Bad. When we first meet him, Tom is interviewing a girl named Katherine Reimer (Michelle Ryan), who claims to be a psychiatric nurse but dresses like Lara Croft. Katherine gets the job of monitoring Tom’s mood swings and warning him when they’re due. Good Tom communicates with Bad Tom by Dictaphone, so they can keep abreast of things. Important things, like where did you park the car before you wiggled out and ended up in bed with that prostitute?

Tom, who used to work as a scientist for a firm called Klein & Utterson, becomes aware that he is being followed by a black van – you know, the sort with tinted windows that sinister people like to drive. He also visits his family from time to time, though he feels unable to tell his wife, Claire (the pulchritudinous Gina Bellman), why he has left home. One night, during one of his Bad moods, Tom is approached by the occupants of the van, who are indeed sinister (they must be, they wear suits), and are led by an American called Benjamin Lennox (Paterson Joseph), who is polite in a sinister kind of way. The sinister people

seem to want something, but Bad Tom is not in the mood so he throws one of them through a window before shinning up a nearby building like a monkey.

Eventually, Bad Tom gets to learn about Claire and the kiddies and goes to pay them a visit, introducing himself as Cousin Billy. When Good Tom learns about this, he leaves angry messages for Bad Tom, warning him to stay away from his family. He also discovers that Claire has hired a pair of lesbian private investigators to follow him, and from them he learns that there really was a Doctor Jekyll in Edinburgh in 1886, who allowed a certain well-known author to write his story as a fiction. But any connection with the original Jekyll seems to hit a dead end when it is revealed that he had no descendants. So Tom must look elsewhere to find the answers before Hyde takes over completely...

Needless to say, at 330 minutes, there is a lot more plot than this. An awful lot more plot, which jumps back and forth in time while becoming progressively more and more silly. Any initial curiosity as to how the programme-makers were going to handle a new version of Stevenson's tale quickly evaporates after the first episode, as it becomes clear that what they are really doing, apart from exhausting the viewers' patience with one improbability after another, is using Stevenson as a springboard for a sort of ghastly, politically correct morality play.

Not only do the bad people wear suits, they also work for an all-powerful corporation (possessed of "more money than God"), and it should come as no surprise to learn that most of them are men, including Tom's friend, Peter Syme (Denis Lawson), who of course turns out to be a bad egg. Tom's allies all just happen to be women – and what a prejudice-free cross-section of modern, contemporary Blairite Britain they are. There's Claire, of course, the devoted mother, and Katherine, the perfect Girl Friday (but successful and independent too, no doubt), and the lesbian gumshoes, one of whom is Asian and one of whom is pregnant, and the Muslim amputee tap-dancer who'll only perform in a burka... Okay, okay, I made the last one up, but really! Do scriptwriters feel obliged to work in these ethnic-gender "role models" before they submit their work to the BBC, or does some wretched casting committee twist their arms by saying, "Well, we think we can green-light this, yah? But we were just wondering if it mightn't be more ... you know, if the private investigator couldn't in fact be a woman? Two women, actually. In a relationship, why not? And maybe one of them is, like, Asian, or something ..." Jesus wept, it's enough to make one go out and buy the Collected Works of Bernard Manning.

Given such characters, it goes without saying that the performances are pretty woeful as well, though Bellman deserves some credit for managing to deliver her inane dialogue with a straight face. Michelle Ryan's character, though given a big build-up in the first episode, soon disappears into irrelevance, perhaps because the PC Squad realised she was both white *and* heterosexual. And then there's James Nesbitt. Ah, yes, James Nesbitt – how could I forget? Obviously, one's opinion of Nesbitt's efforts rather depends on one's view of Nesbitt himself because, make no mistake, this series is all about him. If you happen to consider him a smarmy, ingratiating blight in the first place, then *Jekyll* isn't going to change your mind; or, to put it another way, if you find Nesbitt's screen persona creepy, then watching him turn it up several notches to super-creepy isn't as much of a surprise as it might be for those who think he's either (and I take these examples from the script) "A world-class hottie" or "Mr. Sexy Pants". Oh, yes, I kid you not.

Nesbitt's interpretation of Hyde is certainly different but, along with the script, suffers from jarring shifts in tone, from the occasionally disturbing to the frequently ridiculous. Playing Hyde like some demented jack-in-the-box, Nesbitt leers and gurns at every available opportunity, while the character himself often seems to be an amalgam of Hannibal Lecter (identifying people's habits by smell), Dr. Bruce Banner ("Don't annoy me. That's not a good way to go."), and Mike Tyson ("When yuo [sic] sleep I will eat your children"). And it's really neither clever nor funny to have Hyde peer back through time at the original Dr. Jekyll (also played by guess who) and say, "Doesn't look a bit like Spencer Tracy."

Robert Louis Stevenson didn't write *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a vehicle for lame gags, but then, as with the wretched *Dracula*, the makers of Jekyll seem more interested in hijacking a well-known name and using it to flog their disagreeably prudish post-feminist agenda than with doing justice to anything so outmoded as the author's original intentions. And make no mistake, there is something distinctly retrograde in the conceit that the original Dr. Jekyll is turned into Hyde by nothing other than good, old-fashioned lust (even allowing for the fact that Gina Bellman could bring out the beast in any man still in possession of a pulse), as indeed there is in the depiction of the three principal characters. Good Tom, as we have seen, is good because he is New Man, caring, unthreatening, and dull. Claire is good because she is a mother, a status which, being natural to her womanhood, must therefore be exalted and beyond reproach. But Bad Tom is bad, not only because he smokes (obviously!), but because he does ... what exactly? That which is natural to man, but which state, church, and women do their best to curb, control and suppress...

All of which is to give more than enough attention to a series that, in addition to being an insult to Robert Louis Stevenson, is also an insult to the viewers' intelligence. That the BBC actually intends to commission another series is deeply depressing, and I hereby give warning that if anybody comes to the Good John suggesting he review Series II, they'll have to deal with the Bad John first.

**JOHN EXSHAW**

## EVENTS REVIEWS

### **Horrorthon 2007**

The tenth annual Horrorthon, held at the Irish Film Institute from 25th to 29th October was the strongest yet, with a diverse and intelligently chosen line-up programmed by Ed King, Michael Griffin and Conor McMahon. Certainly, attendance seemed to be up on last year, with many of the more popular features selling out hours in advance, and even the traditionally less busy screenings (such as those held last thing at night and first thing in the afternoon) generally being very well attended. In all, twenty-seven films were screened over the five days of the festival, which began on the Thursday evening with a showing of the new vampire movie *Thirty Days of Night* (an adaptation of the graphic novel of the same name) and the only Irish cinema screening of *Saw* director James Wan's latest effort, evil ventriloquist's dummy movie *Dead Silence*. Briefly, and in no particular order, here are some of the festival's highlights.

#### *Motel Hell* (Kevin O'Connor, 1980)

This gory, gloriously camp 80s classic was a real guilty pleasure. Starring Rory Calhoun (standing on his hind legs) as the jovial "Farmer Vincent" whose extra-special fritters contain "all kinds of critters", it's a kind of jolly, silly yet at times gruesomely disturbing reworking of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and was only the first film of the festival in which barbeques would feature prominently. It also provided proof, if proof be needed, that for some reason the sight of a man with a pigs head over his own is very unnerving.

#### *Gamerz* (Robbie Fraser, 2005)

Though not a horror film, the Glasgow-set *Gamerz* was nevertheless an amiable, affectionate homage to the insular, competitive world of the RPG (roleplaying game) and those who play them in which a likeable young cast did their best to overcome an obviously limited budget and just about succeeded. It also taught us that the Scottish for 'skanger' is 'ned', which is bound to come in useful one of these days

#### *Botched* (Kit Ryan, 2007)

Although it starts off like a low-budget rip-off of early Guy Ritchie, home-grown movie *Botched* actually turned out to be something quite different: an energetic, genuinely funny, and gleefully bizarre splatter movie along the lines of *Severance* which deserves to do well both at the box-office and on DVD release. B-Movie stalwart Stephen Dorff stars as a thief ordered to undertake one more heist by his mob-boss employer Sean Pertwee who finds more than he bargains for in an exclusive Moscow apartment block which contains the deranged descendants of Ivan the Terrible. Yes, it's all very silly and over the top, and the largely Irish cast (which includes Bronagh Gallagher and Hugh O'Connor) inevitably sport terrible Russian accents, but the film is nevertheless mostly entertaining and quite funny, and knows not to take itself too seriously. The effects are pretty good too, although the film does (perhaps intentionally) feature the fakest-looking rat I've ever seen on the big screen.

#### *Joshua* (George Ratliff, 2007)

One of the best horror films of the weekend, and indeed, of the year, *Joshua* is probably the finest 'evil child' film since *The Omen* (the original, not the flaccid remake). It's a riveting, intelligent, and at times, morbidly funny psychological thriller in which the arrival of a new baby tears an affluent New York

family apart. The horror here lies in the subtle hints that Ratliff doles out to the audience as to the true nature of his disturbed young protagonist: is precocious ten-year old Joshua merely a troubled young boy struggling to adjust to the new arrival, or is he something entirely more sinister? The performances by Vera Farminga and, especially, Sam Rockwell, as Joshua's increasingly unhinged parents are excellent, as is that of young Jacob Kogan, whose eerie composure and perfect posture only reinforced my long-held suspicion that unusually well-mannered, well-dressed children are evil. This was also the only time I've heard an audience cheer because the small child onscreen has been brutally punched in the face.

*End of the Line* (Maurice Devereaux, 2006)

Low-budget Canadian movie *End of the Line* begins with a fantastic premise – the followers of a deranged cult leader simultaneously begin to exterminate non-believers once the signal to begin Judgement day is sent – and for much of its running time is a fairly taut, exciting film. It does however fall apart completely in the last ten minutes or so, and one can't help but feel that something went very wrong in the editing room: a crucial subplot (which deals with the reason why the cult members are so susceptible to the demands of their leader) appears to have been removed entirely, and the conclusion is very muddled indeed.

*Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987)

"If it bleeds, we can kill it!" What more can one say about the deliriously over-the-top 1987 action/horror flick except to note that, unbelievably, two of the cast (Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger) would later become US Governors and director John McTiernan has recently been sentenced to jail for perjury?

*Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958)

It was wonderful to see a full house for the Sunday afternoon showing of this beautifully restored print of the 1958 classic. Preceded by an interesting introduction from Hammer scholar Robert Simpson, this was a real delight to watch, and it wasn't difficult to see why Christopher Lee's (largely non-speaking) performance as the imposing, blood-shot-eyed count made him a star. Tightly plotted it ain't, and trying to figure out which country (or countries) the film is actually set in is a challenge in itself, but that is all part of its old-school charm. The climatic face-off between Dracula and Van Helsing (Peter Cushing) and the Count's subsequent disintegration are worth the price of admission alone.

*Shrooms* (Paddy Breathnach, 2007)

Whilst it was great to have an Irish film as this year's surprise screening, it was clear within the first ten minutes that the derivative, dull *Shrooms* was going to disappoint. It suffered first of all from the fact that it was actually the *second* film of the weekend in which a van load of bland American teenagers travelled into the woods, took drugs, had bad trips and were picked off by a mysterious killer: David Arquette's cheesy but enjoyable *Trippers* (shown on Saturday) had almost exactly the same basic premise, albeit without the Irish setting and with rather more energy. There were some initially interesting elements here, such as the (woefully unfulfilled) suggestion that some particularly pertinent local horrors (abusive clergy, brutal reform schools) would come into play, occasional flashes of stoner wit (as in the talking cow scene), and some serviceable special effects, but this will definitely not be the break-out hit that Irish horror cinema so sorely needs, and the 'shocking' final twist has already been better employed elsewhere – most notably in the nasty French horror hit *Haute Tension* a few years back. Unfortunately, this was one of the biggest disappointments of the weekend and indeed I have yet to encounter anyone who actually



liked *Shrooms*, which in itself bodes ill for its box-office prospects. Those interested in horror films in which fungi play a prominent part would be much better off watching the 1963 Japanese classic *Matango: Attack of the Mushroom People* instead...

*Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007)

Horror/Indie flick *Teeth* aroused more gasps of horror and groans of dismay from the (male) members of the audience than any other film at Horrorthon 2007. It's a funny, likable, and audacious black comedy about a clean-living young high-school student named Dawn who has been born with a bizarre mutation: a razor toothed vagina. The premise may be notably over the top, but this is actually a remarkably intelligent, likeable film buoyed by a highly sympathetic performance from leading actress Jess Weixler. There are some unforgettable scenes here, such as the most memorable cinematic trip to the gynaecologist since David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*. Along with *Joshua*, this was probably the best film of the entire festival.

*Stuck* (Stuart Gordon, 2007)

This was actually the second effort by *Reanimator* director and long-time Horrorthon favourite Gordon in this year's festival: the first was "The Black Cat" a Masters of Horror episode which featured a barnstorming turn from his regular collaborator Jeffrey Coombs as a deranged Edgar Allan Poe. Loosely based upon a real-life incident, *Stuck* stars Stephen Rea as a sad-sack loser whose already bleak existence becomes even more excruciating when he's mown down by a monstrously self-obsessed young woman (Mena Suvari) who leaves him trapped in her windshield rather than risk getting arrested for drunk driving. It's rather more naturalistic than some might have expected from Gordon – Rea's trip to the job centre at the beginning of the film is notably bleak, and we get some sense early on of the pressures that help Suvari's character make the choices that she does – but there's still plenty of gore on display, and Rea's unbearably painful predicament will arouse wincing of sympathy in even the most hardened viewer. Whilst it may well have been more effective with a leaner running time – perhaps as another episode of Masters of Horror – this is still a taut, compelling film anchored by two excellent leading performances, and along with his forthcoming film, the David Mamet-scripted *Edmond*, it suggests that Gordon remains someone to watch with interest.

*Planet Terror* (Robert Rodriguez, 2007)

The concluding film of the festival, *Planet Terror* was everything that Tarantino's wordy, pretentious *Death Proof* tried to be, but wasn't – an exhilarating, hilarious, and inventive thrill ride which actually managed to approximate the tone and 'everything goes' attitude of the exploitation movies it so affectionately pays homage to. Appropriately, it was preceded by the first Irish screening of Horrorthon programmer Ed King's horror/comedy short *The Blaxorcist*, in which the spirit of Godfather of Soul James Brown has to be exorcised from a young white girl by the "Blaxorcist" of the title... "Get up ah! Get on up!" See Jenny McDonnell's leading article in the Film Review section for more on *Planet Terror*.

**Bernice M. Murphy**

### David Lynch in Dublin, 20th October 2007

Throughout his career, David Lynch has been notoriously reticent about discussing the meaning of his films: any enquiry as to what a film might be about is more likely than not to meet with a deadpan “It’s about 120 minutes”. In recent years, although he has remained tight-lipped about specific interpretations of his work, he has become more forthcoming about the methods through which he approaches filmmaking. 2006 saw the publication of *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, Lynch’s paean to the role played by Transcendental Meditation in his creative process, and he has recently embarked on a mission to promote Transcendental Meditation through his charity, the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, and by touring with 1960s *troubadour* Donovan. In October of this year, the unlikely pairing made an appearance in Dublin, in an event co-hosted by the School of Drama, Film and Music, Trinity College Dublin, and the David Lynch Foundation. The performance took two parts, a Q&A with Lynch followed by a live set of Donovan’s greatest hits (including Lynch’s favourite, “Season of the Witch”). Demand for tickets proved so great that the performance was broadcast live into another lecture hall, setting up the most uncanny aspect of the event when audience members in the “overflow hall” were also given the opportunity to put questions to Lynch, by broadcasting their disembodied voices into the main arena.

On paper, the pairing of Lynch and Donovan is clearly an odd one, but in truth the even stranger combination seems to be that of Lynch with Transcendental Meditation, an impression that was reflected by many of the questions audience members put to the filmmaker. In essence, it seems difficult to reconcile the dark, nightmarish vistas of most of his work with the mantra of pure bliss and enlightenment that he propounds through his meditative practices. But in Lynch’s terms (as he puts it in his book): “the filmmaker doesn’t have to be suffering to show suffering. You can show it, show the human condition, show conflicts and contrasts, but you don’t have to go through that yourself. You are the orchestrator of it, but you’re not in it.” This is what Lynch claims Transcendental Meditation allows him to do: to dive within his consciousness and capture ideas which in turn translate into his striking cinematic language. The two, then, are fundamentally connected for Lynch, and practically all of his answers during this Q&A session returned to his commitment to Transcendental Meditation and the possibility of achieving “pure bliss”, the phrase that peppered his responses, appearing almost mantra-like. He remained less forthcoming on other aspects of the filmmaking process: for example, a question as to which of his own films was his favourite met with a tight-lipped refusal to claim a favourite child (but an admission that “*Dune* is the nastiest little child”). Nonetheless, he did take the opportunity to promote his other favourite topic du jour, his newfound preference for digital video over film (employed in his most recent work, *INLAND EMPIRE*).

Lynch comes across as an impassioned and entertaining speaker, delivering his responses in a manner that will be familiar to anyone who recalls his turn as FBI Regional Bureau Chief Gordon Cole in *Twin Peaks*, and his enthusiasm for his topic is almost palpable. As an insight into the mind and creative processes

behind some of the most unsettling films of the last thirty years, this performance did prove fundamentally compelling; and although some may be put off by the seemingly unfashionable New Age dimension that this introduces to the man Mel Brooks once described as “Jimmy Stewart from Mars”, it should actually come as no real surprise, merely adding yet another layer to the enigmatic world of David Lynch.

***Jenny McDonnell***