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## Dazzling Ghostland: Sheridan Le Fanu's Phantasmagoria

*David Annwn*

As the third chapter of Sheridan LeFanu's *Uncle Silas* (1865), cuts to the fourth, there occurs a most remarkable moment in 19th century literature of horror.

Maud Ruthyn, the youthful protagonist, is thinking over her encounters with members of the Swedenborgian religious sect:

Two or three of them crossed in the course of my early life, like magic lantern figures, the disk of my very circumscribed observation.(1)

She is dwelling on her recent encounter with Mr Bryerly, a Swedenborgian and thinking of her walk with him past her mother's sylvan tomb and his consoling words regarding the afterlife.

Leaning on my hand, I was now looking upon that solemn wood, white and shadowy in the moonlight, where, for a long time after that ramble with the visionary, I fancied the gate of death, hidden only by a strange glamour, and the dazzling land of ghosts, were situate;(2)

For a moment, in Maud's lulled consciousness, it is as though the border between life and death has become permeable, subject to comings and goings. At the turn of the page and chapter, we jump to:

ON A SUDDEN, on the grass before me, stood an odd figure—a very tall woman in grey draperies, nearly white under the moon, courtesying extraordinarily low, and rather fantastically.

I stared in something like a horror upon the large and rather hollow features which I did not know, smiling very unpleasantly on me; and the moment it was plain that I saw her, the grey woman began gobbling and cackling shrilly—I could not distinctly hear what through the window—and gesticulating oddly with her long hands and arms.(3)

Does our consciousness, as readers, move in upon the vision here or does this tall image seem to rise out of the land of the dead towards us? Perhaps both simultaneously, because this moment is a nexus of conflicting spatial urges and affronts to these. Maud, it is clear, is partly drawn to the dazzle of the land where she now believes her mother resides. Her gaze is wide-focussed, being drawn through the mid-ground into the distance, and death seems an inviting and far off prospect, but this attraction receives a powerful rebuttal by the abrupt appearance of Madame de la Rougierre, an immoral adventuress, in the foreground, 'before me'. She will manifest a much more immediate and violent threat of death in the novel. The impact is intensified by the sudden-ness of the figure's appearance and lack of mediating detail of her approach. Her spectral form reminds of Brian Jarvis's words about the looming and lurching of visions in Etienne Gaspard Robertson's Parisian phantasmagoria lantern show:

[...] 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, ...lunged towards a terrified spectator.(4)

At the beginning of this passage, Maud is ‘Leaning on’ her ‘hand,’ fancying that death’s gate is ‘hidden only by a strange glamour’. The scene is strangely unnerving. This is, after all, too early in the novel for the reader, like Maud, to be confident of Mr Bryerly’s motives. His being openly linked to magic lanterns hints at illusion. Maud is in a state of fancy, of reverie, and we remember Coleridge’s designation of Gothic novels as mechanisms inducing reverie. Like a reader of romances, her character is under a spell, as the words ‘strange glamour’ indicate; Walter Scott, in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, 1830, writes ‘This species of Witchcraft is well-known in Scotland as the glamour, or *deceptio visus* [...]’.(5) Surely, though, the motif of the wood, death-gate and visionary guide give rise to other uneasy resonances; we remember Dante Alighieri here, the persona in his *Inferno* being led through a ‘selva oscura’ by that seer and spiritual guide, Virgil, to the gate of Hell.

It is clear that Le Fanu has positioned each stage of this prelude to Rougierre’s appearance very precisely: the initial magic-lantern analogy and Maud’s sense of her own limited perceptions linked to the vision of the dead are deployed with great care. If the distinctively dark-clothed Swedenborgians remind Maud of lantern-slides, this association is reciprocal. The young woman’s closeted upbringing has produced a sharply-honed attention capable of a very tight focus on objects before her. It has also, initially, produced a passivity of observation like that of a watcher at a phantasmagoria or a reader of romances. As readers ourselves, we are shocked at the spectacle because our receptive minds have been subtly and powerfully focussed through the reverie of her gaze.

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The connection between Rougierre’s abrupt entrance and pre-cinematic technology is one that Le Fanu is also keen to emphasise later in the novel:

But the door opened suddenly, and, like a magic-lantern figure, presented with a snap, appeared close before my eyes the great muffled face, with the forbidding smirk, of Madame de la Rougierre.(6)

Elsewhere, in the famous country churchyard scene, Rougierre mortifies Maud by shouting:

I am *Madame la Morgue*—Mrs. Deadhouse! I will present you my friends, Monsieur Cadavre and Monsieur Squelette. Come, come, leetle mortal, let us play [...].(7)

Ghosts, witches and skeletons amongst the moonlit graves were the stock-in-trade of Robertson’s Directoire lantern show. With her cries of ‘Ça ira, ‘ça ira’ and ‘Lanterne’ (meaning ‘To the lamp-post, to lynch them,’ during the Terror), and her nominal association with red, both blood and over-use of rouge (Mrs Rusk nick-names her Madame de la Rougepot), this character evokes Le Fanu’s worst nightmare: the sanguinary excesses of the Revolutionary mob and, particularly, those ‘unnatural’ bloodthirsty women attending the guillotine. At times she seems literally to become an optical component from Robertson’s show, with all the macabre distortion and animation of one of his slides:

Her great mouth was open, and her eyes absolutely goggled with eagerness. She was devouring all that was passing there.(8)

And just like one of Robertson’s trick slides, she can change, in a twinkling, into even more disturbing forms:

She was transformed into a great gaping reptile.(9)

Rougierre's grinning venom, her head so suddenly revealed as bald, her vigorous danse macabre and cry of 'Mrs Deadhouse' are not easily forgotten and rest uncannily in the imagination. Amongst her literary offspring is the bald and dancing, Mephistophelean Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, a novel where the secular aloes bloom 'like phantasmagoria in a fever land' and riders vanish 'one by one' and reappear 'again and they were black in the sun and they rode out of that vanished sea like burnt phantoms.'(10) Le Fanu's villain casts a long shadow. Harold Bloom declared that McCarthy's Judge Holden is 'the most frightening figure in all of American literature'.(11)

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Le Fanu's novels and stories focus upon the phantasmagoria more than those of any other purveyor of literary horror and suspense in the English-speaking world, indeed more than any other writer outside of the accounts of the professional showmen themselves. For over 27 years, Le Fanu used the phantasmagoria and magic lantern for a gamut of different effects in his writings; there are at least 17 direct references to these media, including detailed allusions to the lanternists' techniques, equipment and proto-history. There are also many further implicit references, perhaps up to a hundred, found in his extended imagery of monstification, illusions and shadows.(12) There are at least four times as many of these references in Le Fanu's oeuvre as in the writings of other mature novelists of the period. Charlotte Brönte, Thomas Hardy (who had his own Gothic period of chilling tales) Charles Dickens, George Eliot all used a handful of such motifs. Additionally, in the case of authors who published a substantial number of novels, references to pre-cinematic technologies tend to be clustered exclusively in two or three of their works; this is certainly true of Hardy, Eliot and Dickens but with Le Fanu, the references span each stage of his work from the early stories into the 1870s. Some of the most crucial and intense moments of mystery and terror are expressed in terms of the ghost-lantern.

If Stephen King's novels had featured as obsessive a proclivity for cinematic techniques like 'slo-mo', tracking and dolly shots, this would have received substantial critical attention. Yet Le Fanu's continued and intense interest in early visual technology seems to have been overlooked. Far from being stock images randomly dropped in for effect by an overworked serial writer, these phantasmagoric tropes perform crucial functions in the novels: understanding Le Fanu's allusions to these pre-cinematic media change the ways we read his work and alert us to a complex, inter-related mesh of reference. It also helps illuminate other seemingly puzzling aspects of his work.

For example, in his superb introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Uncle Silas*, W.J. Mc Cormack probes the reasons for Le Fanu's link from Maud's visions of her father to Chateaubriand's glimpses of his own sire in *Mémoires d'Outre Tombe*: 'Here too the narrator's father walks in a room so as to appear and disappear from and into the darkness.'(13) Mc Cormack then goes on to connect the title of the French author's book (translated as *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*), with Emmanuel Swedenborg in that 'it encapsulates the basic tactic of Swedenborgian phantasmagoria, the dreaming-back of life in death.' He then refers to 'the phantasmagoric schemer Silas.'(14) In making such links, Mc Cormack is, perhaps only partly consciously, touching upon further technological associations. Because another reason for that opening episode, the irregularly-shaped, 'long room' (so like the refectory-site of Robertson's convent show), the reappearing and disappearing father emerging 'like a portrait with a background of

shadow' and the link to Chateaubriand, is to set up the network of magic-lantern associations in the novel as a whole. For it is the Chateaubriand of the *Mémoires* who visits Robertson's show and tells us the phantasmagoria is situated somewhere in the cloisters of a convent in Paris 'after the Community of Capuchins had been pillaged.'(15)

These structural tropes linking Rougierre to the lantern of fear, accompany her through the whole novel. Her 'quaint old Bretagne ballad' tells of phantasmal metamorphoses and the song supposedly originates in that same Breton landscape which Chateaubriand called a 'phantasmagoria'.(16) As a prelude to his show, Robertson told of its ancient lineage back to the Eleusinian mysteries. Rougierre gazes like 'the Eleusinian priestess on the vase' at Maud. Elsewhere Maud feels that she has been led into a chamber and 'shown a specter' by the Woman of Endor. One of Robertson's most popular slides was the Witch of Endor. As Le Fanu knew, Walter Scott, in his *Letters of Demonology and Witchcraft*, 1830, described the ghost raised by the Witch of Endor as a 'phantasmagoria'.(17) One reason that Silas seems 'phantasmagoric' is that, at times, he seems a living memorial of the lantern-show, his spectral form 'pointing to the door imperiously with his *skeleton finger*' could not be more like one of Robertson's slides.(18)

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Three other examples will reveal a span of such references. In *The Cock and Anchor* (1845), Le Fanu starts to reference the lantern of horror openly. In this scene, Lady Stukely hearing of how she's secretly reviled by her ostensible suitor, Sir Henry Ashwoode, emerges from her hiding-place in a recess:

She opened her mouth, but gave utterance to nothing but a gasp—drew herself up with such portentous and swelling magnificence, that Ashwoode almost expected to see her expand like the spectre of a magic-lantern until her head touched the ceiling. Forward she came, in her progress sweeping a score of china ornaments from the cabinet, and strewing the whole floor with the crashing fragments of monkeys, monsters, and mandarins, breathless, choking [...].(19)

It is, of course, a moment tinged both with pathos and humour: a mockery of Gothic conventions, such as the lady's concealment, the gasp in the recess and the likeness of a spectre. Yet this spectre is here linked to the swelling ghostly projections of the lantern ghost-show. The 'spectre's' association with 'crashing fragments of monkeys, monsters, and mandarins' is no random detail either, for one idea that Le Fanu returned to was the notion of the magic-lantern's chaotic fragmentation of experience.

In 'The Spectre Lovers'(1851), a villager encounters a strange procession:

It was owing either to some temporary defect in Peter's vision, or to some illusion attendant upon mist and moonlight, or perhaps to some other cause, that the whole procession had a certain waving and vapoury character which perplexed and tasked his eyes not a little. It was like the pictured pageant of a phantasmagoria reflected upon smoke. It was as if every breath disturbed it; sometimes it was blurred, sometimes obliterated; now here, now there. Sometimes, while the upper part was quite distinct, the legs of the column would nearly fade away or vanish outright, and then again they would come out into clear relief, marching on with measured tread, while the cocked hats and shoulders grew, as it were, transparent, and all but disappeared.(20)

The alliterating ‘p’s of ‘painted pageant...’ supply an auditory correlative of the column of figures. It also provides the idea of a sequence of slides giving the impression of movement. This is one of the most detailed fictional evocations of the back projection from a magic lantern (fantascope), casting images from slides through a screen onto a column of smoke. Robertson created this smoke by setting light to blood, vitriol, aquae fortis and old magazines, a technique which would surely have convinced his audience that they suffered a ‘temporary defect’ of ‘vision’, their eyes streaming, their minds full of fire and brimstone. The blurring and the eerie visual dismemberment of the Le Fanu’s phantom soldiers is strictly faithful to accounts of the show.

This image is anticipated in the tale ‘Spalatro’ (1843), where a girl of ‘preternatural loveliness in limb and feature, but pale and bloodless as the dead’, emerges from a ‘light, semi-transparent vapour, which rolled and eddied in cloudy volumes.’(21) A pale, ‘bloodless’ girl emerging from ‘vapour’ and the ‘vapoury’ column so like a phantasmagoria – the echoes are unmistakable. By the time of *House by the Churchyard* (1861), and by an uncanny law of multiplication, a character’s ‘sensorium’ is described as ‘still all alive with the images of fifty phantasmagoria’

filled up by imagination and conjecture, and a strange, painfully-sharp remembrance of things past--all whirling in a carnival of roustering but dismal riot--masks and dice, laughter, maledictions, and drumming, fair ladies, tipsy youths, mountebanks, and assassins: tinkling serenades, the fatal clang and rattle of the dice-box, and long drawn, distant screams.(22)

This ghost-show is out of control, reproducing itself manically. Le Fanu doesn’t always distinguish between popular magic-lantern shows, the itinerant lantern-shows specialising in slides of ghosts and the highly sophisticated phantasmagoria à la Robertson, but by the time of *Carmilla* (1872), he was ready to display his knowledge of two very different repertoires of visual spectacle.

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Terry Castle writes of the metaphorical displacement whereby, in literary works, the human brain itself became a phantasmagoria, the word itself increasingly being identified with ‘states of delirium and psychic alienation’.(23) She goes on to propound a theory of spectralisation of the mind. We see clear examples of these ideas in Le Fanu’s work. When Ashwoode sees the looming figure of Lady Stukely, his mind is distorting her image. Maud’s mind, inured to a lonely childhood has become a kind of magic lantern which projects the disk of her ‘observation’.

In writing of the preternatural stirring of Edgar Allen Poe’s character, Rowena, in ‘Ligeia’, Castle comments: ‘a mental image seems to come to life, fantastically, *in the flesh*. The phantom becomes a reality.’(24) This is not, though, the usual pattern in Le Fanu’s work. Maud in *Uncle Silas*, sees certain characters in, as it were, phantasmagorical terms. In the case of Mr Bryerly, Maud is at first deceived but in the case of Rougierre, she is not. In fact, the reality of Rougierre’s evil nature is much worse than the threat envisaged by Maud’s ‘lanternist’ imagination. Additionally, nowhere in Poe’s writing does a character become a grotesque tell-tale phantasmagoria slide of themselves in the way that Maud’s French nanny and Silas do.

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What is the wider literary context for such intense synergy between novels and phantasmagoria in Le Fanu's work? We look in vain for references to pre-cinematic visual media in other works of what has been called 'Irish Gothic': Regina Maria Roche's *Children of the Abbey* (1796), Mrs. Kelly's *Ruins of Avondale Priory* (1796), and Mrs. F. C. Patrick's *The Irish Heiress* (1797). Yet other Irish writers and writers resident in Ireland seemed to find a particular affinity in the tropes of visual technologies. From Edgeworthstown in 1798, Maria Edgeworth writes to her aunt Sophy:

The scenes we have gone through for some days past have succeeded one another like the pictures in a magic-lantern, and have scarcely left the impression of reality upon the mind. It all seems like a dream, a mixture of the ridiculous and the horrid. "Oh ho!" says my aunt, "things cannot be very bad with my brother, if Maria begins her letters with magic-lantern and reflections on dreams.(25)

Edgeworth subsequently used magic lantern analogies to hint at the fashionable transience and grotesquerie of life in the 'Big Houses' of Ireland in *The Absentee*, *Ormond*, *Leonora* and *Helen*. Such was the convergence of optical and literary media that Marguerite Power, Countess of Blessington, titled her book of social glimpses *The Magic Lantern* (1823).

Some of the most notable Gothic and horror literary productions of 1790-1820 reference the burgeoning optical media. In Mrs Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), 'vessels, glided upon the scene and passed away, as in a camera obscura'.(26) The literary circles around William Godwin the author of *Lives of the Necromancers* himself were identified with phantasmagoria. Godwin's friend, Hazlitt was fascinated by magic lantern shows or 'phantasmagorias' and he drew on them and on the new science of electricity to give animation and movement to his essay profiles. In *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* published posthumously in 1798, Mary Wollstonecraft, Godwin's wife wrote that 'A magic lamp now seemed to be suspended in Maria's prison [...]'.(27)

Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary Godwin wrote in her journal for 28 December 1814: 'Go to Garnerin's Lecture of electricity, the gasses, and the phantasmagoria'.(28) Balloonist Jacques Garnerin's cabinet de physique and lantern of fear obviously made a considerable impression on the future author of *Frankenstein*. In that novel, she writes of marvellous philosophers who,

penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens: they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and *even mock the invisible world with its own shadows*.(29) (my italics)

This is not to mention the Robertson-inspired titling of *Fantasmagoriana*, the anthology of ghost stories which proved so influential in the famous writing contest which first provoked the creation of *Frankenstein*. In *The Last Man*, 1826, Mary Shelley as she was now named, drew upon her knowledge of the spectacle, writing that 'futurity, like a dark image in a phantasmagoria, came nearer and more near, till it clasped the whole earth in its shadow'.(30)

The settings of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, centring on a Capuchin church, monastery, graveyard and convent, surely anticipate Robertson's future placement of his Fantasmagorie in the Capuchin convent adjoining the Place des Piques. One of Robertson's most feared slides was a version of Lewis' Bleeding Nun. Robert Miles cites Matilda's magic mirror bordered with 'strange and unknown characters' used to

conjure up a ‘real-time’ image of Antonia, bathing, and comments ‘As such, one might say that the magic mirror signifies the veil of textuality that mediates’.(31) I’d go much further: Lewis’ mirror, its smoke and occult characters is an obvious trope of the magic lantern and, in particular, the phantasmagoria.

After all phantasmagoria-mania was to last more than 20 years in Paris and London. Books such as *Phantasmagoria: Authentic Relations of Apparitions and Visions* (1805), *Phantasmagoria, or the Development of Magical Deception* (1803) and articles such as Nicholson’s ‘Narrative and Explanation of the Appearance of Phantoms and other Figures in the Exhibition of the Phantasmagoria’ (1802) were commonplace.

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In terms of direct contextual influence though, Le Fanu had no further to look than one of his admired literary models, Walter Scott. In *Guy Mannering* (1815), *The Antiquary* (1816), and *The Maid of Perth* (1823), Scott utilises magic lantern and phantasmagoric imagery. The Scottish novelist also called Godwin’s novels ‘philosophical phantasmagoria’.

Irish, English and Scottish sources aside, Gary William Crawford wonders

if Schiller's work could have influenced Le Fanu, directly or indirectly, in his writing of the five tales that comprise his "In a Glass Darkly." Schiller's work is essentially a dramatization of the questions, "Are ghosts real? or deceptions? Is there, or is there not a God?" These questions run the rough much of the Gothic novel and the Victorian ghost story, and most prevalently, in Le Fanu. These questions are addressed by Henry Ferris, in his article "German Ghosts and Ghost-Seers," and I have no doubt that Le Fanu at least read this article because it chronicles certain people's experiences of ghosts after drinking quantities of green tea. Hence Le Fanu's tale "Green Tea."(32)

Of course, the most obvious sign of Schiller’s influence is precisely the prominence of lanternists throughout Le Fanu’s work; additionally, we can go considerably further. In Schiller’s *Der Geisterseher/ The Ghost-seer*, the Prince of \*\*d\*\*, earlier the victim of a hoax, a *Lanterna Magica* show masquerading as a conjuration of spirits, says:

When everything ahead of me and behind me sinks to nothing – the past lies behind me in dreary monotony like a kingdom turned to stone – when the future has nothing to offer me [...] What comes before me and what will follow me I see as two black impenetrable veils [...].(33)

I have shown elsewhere that this is one of E. A. Robertson’s main sources for the prefatory speeches to his show in Paris.(34) Such is the density of synergetic exchange between visual and literary media 1830-40 that Le Fanu, as well as reading these words, might easily have heard a version of them accompanying phantasmagoria. It is worth comparing the above passage to the words of Le Fanu’s Richard Marston in *The Evil Guest* (1851), as he looks into a fire, seeing the ‘phantoms of murdered time and opportunity’:

“The human mind, I take it, must have either comfort in the past or hope in the future,” he continued, “otherwise it is in danger. To me, sir, the past is intolerably repulsive; one boundless, barren, and hideous

Golgotha of dead hopes and murdered opportunities; the future, still blacker and more furious, peopled with dreadful features of horror and menace and losing itself in utter darkness [...]”.(35)

Soon after, Marston’s obsessive vision is consciously linked to Schiller and the phantasmagoria:

“Sir, this is a monstrous and hideous extravagance, a delusion, but, after all, no more than a trick of the imagination; the reason, the judgment, is untouched. I cannot choose but see all the damned phantasmagoria, but I do not believe it real [...]”.(36)

The tale is rife with the iconography of lantern shows, the flashing of images on minds, the viewer’s passivity, the images’ disembodiment and the closing of the spectacle with a falling curtain:

Mrs. Marston heard him and saw him, but she had not the power, nor even the will, herself to speak or move. He appeared before her passive sense like the phantasm of a dream. He stood up at the bedside, and looked on her steadfastly, with the same melancholy expression. For a moment he stooped over her, as if about to kiss her face, but checked himself, stood erect again at the bedside, then suddenly turned; the curtain fell back into its place, and she saw him no more.

The revenant presence of the recently deceased, a staple figure in Robertson’s show where Robespierre and Marat were ‘resurrected’ nightly, is at the centre of Le Fanu’s tale: the dead Wynston Berkley becomes ‘the hero of the hellish illusion.’ Like the figures projected on the screen at the Capucine convent in 1799, ‘though dead,’ Berkeley ‘is invested with a sort of spurious life’.

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Can we extrapolate from Le Fanu’s obvious fascination with the phantasmagoria to hazard that he had personally witnessed such shows? The first appearances of such spectacles in Ireland pre-date his birth by many years. In February, 1802 the premiere of the Irish phantasmagoria took place at Astley’s Royal Amphitheatre, Dublin. Its success led successively to a ‘new phantasmagoria and ‘New Ghosts’’. In 1804 one of the ghost show’s pioneers, Philipsthal opened his spectacle at the Little Theatre, Capel Street, Dublin.

By the time Le Fanu was eight, Jacques Charles, incorporating the discovery of dissolving views (gradual super-imposition of images), and moving slides opened his Dublin ‘Lectures on Apparitions and Ghosts’. A major feature of this latter show was figures projected in ‘a film of smoke’ produced by burning charcoal and incense, giving ‘an aerial appearance to the spectres’.(37) Le Fanu could easily have witnessed later spin-offs of these phantasmagorias in the Dublin of his university years. He also viewed Meyerbeer’s opera ‘Robert le Diable’ at the Theatre Royal. This is important contextually because, as Gavin Selerie has pointed out, Le Fanu, in *Haunted Lives*, focuses on Meyerbeer’s church-yard scene:

In which Bertram summons forth the ghosts of nuns damned for their licentious conduct. Laura’s, the novel’s heroine, is absorbed in this ‘moving picture’.(38)

E.A. Robertson’s real name was Robert, and this ‘moving picture’ takes place in the ruins of a convent, the nuns’ ghosts rising from their coffins led by the Abbess. It is as though the Irish author is transfixed by the phantasmagorical associations of this scene in the opera.

Le Fanu also visited London in 1838 and was given tickets to the Haymarket by Sheridan Knowles.(39) The Haymarket had, by this time, been associated with phantasmal visual displays for over 30 years.(40) Douglas Jerrold's 'A Gallantee Showman nor, Mr Peppercorn at Home', a play about a magic lanternist had opened at the Strand the year before. A gallantee, gallanty or Savoyard showman was the type of projectionist who roamed the country, magic lantern on his back, often with a music instrument to accompany his shows and an assistant with a monkey or other creature trained to do tricks.

The gallantee spectacle was a highly mobile cultural force. These itinerant shows were cheap and linked with the life of beggars, Romanies, tramps and quack healers. The travelling magic lantern was fairly light to carry from village to village, and because slides often got lost or broken in transit, and the programme altered according to the showman's state or whim, the sequence of images was often chaotic, surprising and sometimes muddled. There were no quality controls and many mountebanks and amateurs took up the 'art of light.'

That highly-polished form of magic-lantern show called the phantasmagoria was mainly an urban phenomenon: its milieu was large venues in Paris, London, Berlin, Madrid, Dublin, Edinburgh and other major cities. The shows were expensive and attracted the more well-heeled customer. (Josephine Bonaparte and Chateaubriand saw Robertson's show.) Because of the array of different equipment needed: several heavy fantascopes lanterns, large screens, smoke and liquids, a glass harmonica, a gong and a metal sheet to roar, when struck, like thunder, the phantasmagoria were fixed performances, with a strong processive, ritualistic sense and a replicable schedule of images (however chaotic-seeming their airy demons and their power to send the audience into a disordered frenzy). The phantasmagorists issued programmes for their performances and Robertson's Programme Instructif is still extant.(41) Perhaps up to ten stage-hands were needed to run the show: ushers, a ventriloquist, a master of ceremonies to give a spoken introduction and live actors to walk through the audience in masks to augment the impact of projected ghosts. The lantern-display was often preceded by a cabinet de physique, or science exhibition which needed more organisation and staff to arrange the equipment. Robertson himself was no roving fairground huckster - he styled himself as a sceptical and philosophical scientist.

In the first chapter of his famous vampire novelette, *Carmilla*, Le Fanu describes Laura's feverish view-point of a local priest and maids, inside the aristocratic milieu of the castle nursery, a 'large room', where 'the scanty light' shines through

its shadowy atmosphere through the small lattice. He kneeled, and the three women with him, and he prayed aloud with an earnest quavering voice for, what appeared to me, a long time. I forget all my life preceding that event, and for some time after it is all obscure also, but the scenes I have just described stand out vivid as the isolated pictures of the phantasmagoria surrounded by darkness.(42)

Helen Stoddart has written of this moment that Laura's 'memory is constituted at this point by a series of lucid tableaux mordants', employing a theatrical metaphor.(43) Yet, Le Fanu could not be more insistent on the distinct impression of a lantern-show here; the ray of light, the lattice, the praying figures and Carmilla's preceding appearance seem elements of a phantasmagoria. Robertson's show contained slides of static, praying figures as well as scenes of reverence for young girls, as in the resurrection of the poet Young's daughter. In using such imagery, Le Fanu is clearly looking back to the age of the large, urban-based phantasmagoria: the pictures are clearly 'isolated' in darkness and successive (not chaotic and random); yet this 'isolation' of images also anticipates the work of the photographic chronophotographers, Marey and Muybridge, just a few years later. This description is clearly linked to

the orderly procession of the 'pictured pageant of a phantasmagoria reflected upon smoke' in 'The Spectre Lovers', yet it lacks the smooth and eerie continuity of the spectral cavalcade.

Le Fanu was increasingly at pains to distinguish the phantasmagorists from the lantern journeymen of a different age. Further into *Carmilla*, he provides the most colourful and detailed vision of a gallantee man in fiction:

It was the figure of a hunchback, with the sharp lean features that generally accompany deformity. He wore a pointed black beard, and he was smiling from ear to ear, showing his white fangs. He was dressed in buff, black, and scarlet, and crossed with more straps and belts than I could count, from which hung all manner of things. Behind, he carried a magic-lantern, and two boxes, which I well knew, in one of which was a salamander, and in the other a mandrake. These monsters used to make my father laugh. They were compounded of parts of monkeys, parrots squirrels, fish, and hedgehogs, dried and stitched together with great neatness and startling effect. He had a fiddle, a box of conjuring apparatus, a pair of foils and masks attached to his belt, several other mysterious cases dangling about him, and a black staff with copper ferrules in his hand. His companion was a rough spare dog, that followed at his heels, but stopped short, suspiciously at the drawbridge, and in a little while began to howl dismally.

In the meantime, the mountebank, standing in the midst of the court-yard, raised his grotesque hat, and made us a very ceremonious bow, paying his compliments very volubly in execrable French, and German not much better. Then, disengaging his fiddle, he began to scrape a lively air to which he sang with a merry discord, dancing with ludicrous airs and activity, that made me laugh, in spite of the dog's howling.(44)

This is the most extraordinarily elaborate and grotesque description, hinting that, as well as viewing contemporary phantasmagoria, Le Fanu had also consulted the myriad humorous prints available of lanternists with animal heads or of groups of beasts mounting their own lantern-show. Given Le Fanu's framing of the tales we know that the action of *Carmilla* is situated in the 1750s or 60s and this is one of the roving lantern-men common in Europe:

These early exhibitors of the magic lantern are recorded, unnamed, in contemporary pictures and engravings or casually noted in the literature of the time. Tobias Smollett – in his third novel, *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, first published in 1753 – writes of the 'traveling Savoyards who stroll about Europe, amusing the ignorant people with the effects of the magic lantern'. Such a person travelling around the country with a monkey appears in the fable by the French novelist Jean Pierre de Florian [...].(45)

In a number of tales and prints, the monkey turns the table on their gallantee man, and takes on the role of projectionist. The man's hunch-back, multifarious accoutrements, foils, masks and 'fangs' associate him with Punchinello, his 'buff, black and scarlet' outfit and criss-cross belts to Harlequin, both of them Commedia dell'arte figures. The carnivalesque and 'grotesque body' as Bakhtin has defined them are relevant here.(46) Punch and the magic-lantern entertainments could appear side-by-side in some attractions such as in Picardy puppet shows which

always began and begin with the dance from Punchinello heritage from the 18th century. To the 19th century and the beginning of, the marionnettists added to the spectacle of the elements of magic lanterns, of the puppets 'métamorphoses'.(47)

(*The House by the Churchyard*, features a woman dressed like a puppet and references both phantasmagoria and magic-lantern shows.) The mountebank's 'execrable' mixed languages hint at archaic, chaotic energies, a picaresque wanderer, jack of all trades and none.

By the late 1860s the magic lantern had largely moved out of the streets and into domestic settings so the gallant man was a presence of the past. We know of Le Fanu's readings in Goethe's *Faust*, not least because of references to Mephistopheles in *Carmilla* and Marguerite in *Wylder's Hand* (1864); in part II of that poem, the deluded scholar feels himself 'king of a thousand salamanders' and watches the vision of a chariot illuminated by:

the myriad starry gleam  
as caught in the a magic lantern's beam(48)

Such links of the dark arts to the magic lantern cannot have passed by the Irish author without notice. For Le Fanu, as well as including the hybrid monsters, the alchemical pairing of salamanders and mandrakes, stresses the lanternist's links to folk magic; as well as carnivalesque associations, his white fangs and hunchback both link him to the world of animals and deformed seers: it is he who causes *Carmilla*'s displeasure by noting her pointed teeth. Le Fanu is obviously fascinated by this mercurial Autolykus (a Greek name meaning 'lone wolf', ergo his 'fangs'), with his bag of natural remedies. He is glimpsed crossing from the outside world into the castle's courtyard with a dog at his heels like the Tarot Fool. We note also the lanternist's 'box of conjuring apparatus', and this reminds us that the magic lantern was originally conceived as a valuable tool for magicians. In a text which Le Fanu can have hardly missed: *Letters on Natural Magic: Addressed to Sir W Scott* (1832), David Brewster writes:

The magic lantern, containing in a small compass its lamp, its lenses, and its sliding figures, was peculiarly fitted for the itinerant conjuror, who had neither the means of providing a less portable and more expensive apparatus, nor the power of transporting and erecting it.(49)

The key connection between magicians and the magic lantern, though, is linked to that image that started this study: the conjurer's or phantasmagorist's supposed power to raise the dead and display revenants or mortals with the appearance of resurrection.

The hybrid catalogue of 'parts of monkeys, parrots, squirrels' of the showman's caparison in *Carmilla* remind one of 'riot--masks and dice, laughter, maledictions, and drumming, fair ladies, tipsy youths' of *The House by the Graveyard*, and both passages feature references to 'mountebanks, masks and laughter'. It's no accident either that both extracts also recall the 'crashing fragments of monkeys, monsters, and mandarins' of *The Cock and the Anchor*.

That the phantasmagoria can prove a metaphor for the mind's playing back mental events of the past is a truism of Nineteenth Century studies but, by *Carmilla*, Le Fanu grasped that the phantasmagorist is, essentially, a montageur, a maker who wrenches fragments from their natural context and re-combines them in new orders. Le Fanu's gallant man is a figure with archaic origins in conjuring and chaos. E.A. Robertson, the famous type of a phantasmagorist was an Enlightenment montageur par excellence, stealing the arguments of his prefatory speeches from Schiller, Voltaire, Sterne and Rousseau and filching images for his slides from Matthew Lewis, Füssli and Young. Yet his 'magic' was 'instructif' and his diablerie came complete with programme.

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Sixty years separate Sydney, Lady Morgan née Owenson's extensive review of the earliest double-effect dioramas and Bram Stoker's description of Dracula's first arrival on English soil, illuminated by a 'fleeting diorama of light and shade'.(50) Both Irish writers were obviously fascinated by the incipient visual media, in Stoker's case, even using pre-cinematic tropes into the age of cinema proper. In the intervening years, Le Fanu's literary production manifested itself as the single most important body of phantasmagoric fiction in English. Fads for naming books after lantern shows and phantasmagoria came and went but never had an author evoked the paraphernalia and history of the ghost show so insistently. W.B. Yeats was seven when Le Fanu died. It has been mooted that Yeats' poem 'The Stolen Child' owes much to the older writer's *Laura Silver Bell* (1872). It could also be the case that Le Fanu was also responsible for the transmission of other important images into modern Irish literature. Daniel T O'Hara writes that 'Yeats believes that poetry and phantasmagoria are one. 'The poet is never the man who sits down to breakfast,' he reminds us in 'A General Introduction for My Work,' 'there is always some phantasmagoria.'"(51)

To give his references credibility and power, Le Fanu delved into the origins of the magic lantern showman. He understood the impact of projection on smoke, spectral slides and dissolving views, sequentiality and the attributes which defined the phantasmagoria. He knew how to produce macabre literary 'close-ups' of villains' faces and quick metamorphoses like trick lantern slides. Over the 1860s, Le Fanu became known for his increasingly solitary life-style. If the experience of isolation could modify perceptions like those of Maud Ruthyn into states resembling that of the phantasmagoria watcher's reverie, why not those of the fabled reclusive existence of Le Fanu, the 'Invisible Prince' of Dublin?

As early as 1800, the Marquis De Sade, in the *Reflections on the Novel*, argued for Mathew Lewis' dominance of the Gothic field, stating 'Perhaps at this point we ought to analyse these new novels in which sorcery and phantasmagoria constitute practically the entire merit [...].'(52) For Coleridge, in terms of the Gothic, the literary romances and lantern shows were both analogous. 'Phantasmagoria' referred to books and optical shows the same. As Andrew McCann writes 'in Coleridge's own critical writing,' ideas of the primary imagination, and its superiority to the more disordered and random products of 'fancy'

are deployed as a way of denigrating forms of popular literature. Just as Wordsworth uses the term 'phantasma' to describe the anarchy of Bartholomew Fair--'a phantasma,/ Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound!' --Coleridge uses a language of spectacular illusionism, evocative of the 'phantasmagoria', to describe Gothic novels like Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. He associates them with the narcotic effects of the market for mass cultural forms, rather than with the morally and socially regenerative effects of the imagination.the immaturity of the 'bodily eye'--'the most despotic of our senses'--from the 'intellectual eye' [...].(53)

Le Fanu would never accept such a dichotomy of 'primary imagination' and 'fancy' but he might well find such an association of literature with lantern show seductive. The author as phantasmagorist then, and Le Fanu as the projectionist, the mastermind behind the greatest lantern-inspired ghost-show ever known? Did Le Fanu suspect that, ultimately, an author like himself shared deep affinities with urbane lanternists like Robertson? The analogy cannot have passed him by. Is this why the imagery of these spectacles, instead of being deployed as a scatter of fleeting signifiers as in most literary works of the 19th century, intruded upon and multiplied so potently inside his writings?

There is no doubt that Irish history is inscribed deeply throughout Le Fanu's fiction yet, in the end, writing in that dark room in Merrion Square, did life itself, all the long travails of invasion, Lord Melbourne's 'betrayal' of Irish Protestantism, mutual hatred and savagery, that nightmare of history from which Stephen Dedalus would say, fifty years later, he was trying to awake, seem, like a magic lantern show, a metaphor for more expansive but hidden realities? Is it any accident that, as Nina Auerbach writes, Le Fanu's *Carmilla* has proved so rewarding a filmic source for Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), Roger Vadim's *Blood and Roses*, Roy Ward Baker's *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), Harry Kümel's *Daughters of Darkness* (1971) and Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983)?(54) Or is this application of the phantasmagoric analogy into the world of cinema just too convenient, one metaphor too far?

Le Fanu's spiritual beliefs became as complicated and hedged about with doubts and anxieties as his social ideology. An enemy of Catholic politicisation, he nevertheless came, in time, to admire Jesuit asceticism. Beset, as he regarded he was, by Fenianism and Liberalism, he was also never able to renew his belief in orthodox Christian sureties. Ardent scepticism aside, in the light of the evidence presented here, one cannot help but wonder whether, like his Swedenborg-inspired Maud, her maker Le Fanu sensed that his fictions of horror were but glimpses of deeper secrets and that, he, in precisely that sense had always been a phantasmagorist:

This world is a parable – the habitation of symbols – the phantoms of spiritual things immortal shown in material shape.(55)

1. Sheridan Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas* (Oxford World Classics, 1981), 14.
2. Ibid., 15.
3. Ibid., 16.
4. Brian Jarvis, 'Anamorphic Allegory in *The Ring*, or, seven ways of looking at a horror video', <http://irishgothic horrorjournal.homestead.com/ring.html>, accessed 15 March 2009.
5. See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol IV, fourth impression (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 198.
6. *Uncle Silas*, 64.
7. Ibid., 32.
8. Ibid., 25.
9. Ibid.
10. Cormac Mc Carthy, *Blood Meridian or the evening redness in the west* (London: Picador, 1990), 52.
11. <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780679641049&view=excerpt>, accessed 18 March 2009.
12. I have traced another ten such references just in *Uncle Silas*.
13. *Uncle Silas*, viii.
14. Ibid.
15. <http://www.archive.org/stream/collectedworks11hareuoft-djvu.text>, accessed 10 March 2009.
16. Ibid.
17. Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 156.
18. *Uncle Silas*, 314.
19. <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E850000-007/text035.html>, accessed 18 March 2009.
20. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ghost\\_Stories\\_of\\_Chapelizod/The\\_Spectre\\_Love](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ghost_Stories_of_Chapelizod/The_Spectre_Love), accessed 18 March 2009.
21. W.J. Mc Cormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 65.
22. <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E850000-007/text045.html>, accessed 18 March 2009.
23. Castle, 158.
24. Ibid, 161.
25. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Life\\_And\\_Letters\\_Of\\_Maria\\_Edgeworth/Vol1/Letter25](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Life_And_Letters_Of_Maria_Edgeworth/Vol1/Letter25), accessed 18 March 2009.
26. <http://ebooks.du.ac.in/etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/r/radcliffe/ann/italian/chapter23.html>, accessed 18 March 2009.
27. <http://ebooks.du.ac.in/etext.adelaide/w/wollstonecraft/mary/w864m/>, accessed 18 March 2009.
28. Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. Feldman & Scott-Kilvert (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 56.
29. [http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/frankenstein/frank\\_modern\\_2.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/frankenstein/frank_modern_2.html), accessed 19 March 2009.
30. Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 257.
31. Gothic Technologies: 'Visuality in the Romantic Era, Introduction: Gothic Romance as Visual Technology', <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/gothic/intromiles.html>, accessed 5 March 2009.
32. 'Schiller's *The Ghost Seer* in Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly*', <http://groups.google.com/group/J-Sheridan-Le-Fanu/browse-thread/thread/017243c527bc2818>, accessed 12 March 2009.
33. Friedrich von Schiller, *The Ghost-seer*, trans. Andrew Brown, Hesperus, London, 2003, pp. 80-1.
34. David Annwn, 'Returning to Fear: New Discoveries in Robertson's Fantasmagoria', *The New Magic Lantern Journal*, Vol 10, Number 4, Autumn 2008, 59-64.
35. [http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/evil\\_guest.html](http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/evil_guest.html), accessed 12 March 2009.
36. Ibid.
37. Mervyn Heard, *Phantasmagoria, The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern* (Hastings: The Projection Box, 2006,) 154, 173 & 203.

38. Quoted in the superb *Le Fanu's Ghost* (Hereford: Five Seasons Press), 37. See also 34-8.
39. Mc Cormack, 54.
40. Heard, 149.
41. Laurent Mannoni, *Light and Movement, Incunabula of the Motion Picture* (Fruili: Giornate Del Cinema Muto, 1995), 118-119.
42. Sheridan Le Fanu, *In a Glass Darkly* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 211.
43. Helen Stoddart, 'The precautions of nervous people are infectious: Sheridan Le Fanu's symptomatic Gothic' in *Gothic Concepts in literary and cultural studies*, ed. Botting & Townshend (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 108.
44. *Carmilla*, 228-9.
45. John Barnes, 'The History of the Magic Lantern', *Servants of Light, The Book of the Lantern* (Ripon: The Magic Lantern Society, 1997), 27.
46. See Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror; Gothic Literature and Film* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 132-3.
47. 'Laflor and the Amiénois de Cabotins', [Http://speedylook.com\\_and\\_the\\_Theaters\\_AmiA9noisdeCabotins.html](http://speedylook.com_and_the_Theaters_AmiA9noisdeCabotins.html), accessed 19 March 2009.
48. Author's translation.
49. Sir David Brewster, *Letters of Natural Magic, Addressed to Sir Walter Scott* (London : John Murray, 1846), 76.
50. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 120.
51. Daniel T. O'Hara, <http://www.vgronline.org/articles/1991/summer/ohara-poetry-phantasmagoria/> accessed 19 March 2009.
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55. *Uncle Silas*, 424.

## Helen Adam and the Feminist Gothic Imagination

*Cindy McMann*

The Berkeley Renaissance of the mid- late 1940s saw concerted attempts by writers and artists to renew a sense of imaginative possibility in art throughout the San Francisco Bay area. Critic Michael Davidson states that in the wake of the Second World War, poets in the Bay area felt “a need to discover some sort of vital contact” both between people and between poetry and human beings. For Robert Duncan and his circle of friends and fellow artists, vitality was sought through “a revival of the romantic tradition.” The romantic vision of the circle of poets who gathered around Duncan and poet Jack Spicer was strongly rooted in a sense of the mystical powers of poetry, and of a vision of the poet as partaking of a secret knowledge. Davidson writes that for Robert Duncan, “the romantic tradition represents more than a historical period or canonical body of texts. It represents an ancient quest for knowledge that, for a variety of reasons, has been suppressed or marginalized.”(1) He found in Scottish-born poet Helen Adam and in her eerie gothic ballads the incarnation of the occult aspect of that tradition.

Helen Adam arrived in San Francisco with a body of suppressed and marginalized knowledge. When she entered the environment of the Berkeley Renaissance, through a poetry workshop hosted by Duncan in 1953, her highly traditional ballads of the supernatural were received as “the link with the forgotten romantics.”(2) Adam’s work shares Duncan’s drive for romantic revival in its confidence in the transformative powers of poetry, as she shares with other writers of the San Francisco Renaissance a poetics which Charles Altieri sees as an “*immanentist* vision of the role of poetry”(3) wherein poetry becomes an avenue by which the material and spiritual worlds can be recognized as interpenetrative. Adam’s work added to Duncan’s project a gothic preoccupation with how the world of the mundane and the darker, hidden energies of the numinous universe intersect. Kristin Prevallet notes that Adam’s relationship with Duncan’s circle “sustained her passion for folklore, ritual, and the ways of the ‘old religion’ (witchcraft),” just as that circle “incorporated the significance of ancient folklore, primitivism, and magic” into their approach to poetry.(4) Likewise, her extensive knowledge of the occult was welcomed in a group very much interested in the hermetic.

Despite (or perhaps because of) her upbringing by a minister, Adam’s spiritual leanings were decidedly un-Christian. Her notebooks evidence a wide range of learning about magical theory and practices, folklore, and mythology. From these notebooks, it appears she was most drawn to ancient Egyptian and hermetic traditions, although she culled from other classical Greek, Roman, medieval, and contemporary Scottish sources as well. Her “reputation as an expert tarot card reader” was well-known among her friends, as was her interest in reading dreams. She was also well-versed in various techniques for raising spirits and demons. One particularly frightening passage in her notebooks contains an incantation to raise the demon Azrael, under which read the words, “are those his eyes there in the flames.” Her ability to curse is recounted by Prevallet in an anecdote about her threatening a critic who disparaged Duncan, “if I ever meet this character I am going to put a spell on it to rot its bones,” although whether she intended to raise any demons to do so is unclear.(5)

Adam’s poetry translates her interest in occult philosophy from notebook to verse. Her representations of the occult are highly romantic in the way they bypass the rational, academic discourse with which her notebooks treat the subject of the supernatural. Her works, however, evince both a playful subversion of romanticized fantasies of occult philosophies and a desire to make them relevant for the present day, particularly where gender roles are concerned. Adam’s embrace of the supernatural does not function as

an escape from present reality to some otherworldly fairy realm, but is made relevant to a contemporary struggle over gender inequalities. A great part of the subversion of her project centers on her use of conventional representations of wicked women, particularly the figure of the witch. Her poetry imagines a context where women's occult power is re-envisioned for a modern audience. Her own assumption of the role of "good witch" (6) within her community of friends and her use of powerful, supernatural women in her poetry demonstrates the viability of the image of the witch as a symbol for the reclamation of spiritual power that is specifically women's. In Adam's work women's mystic power is seen as having real consequences for those who threaten to limit it, and serves as a site of resistance to people or precepts that seek to deny that power to women. Utilizing the gothic ballad as a landscape where tradition and innovation intersect, Adam's poetry adopts and politicizes the figure of the witch to advance feminist ideals of women's autonomy and freedom.

Helen Adam's presence within the West Coast literary scene provided a link to the past for writers like Duncan who were interested in exploring a mythic lineage of poets, just as her work provided a model for those who sought to re-energize conventional forms of poetry. "Many poets of this time," notes Prevallet, "perceived rhymed verse, fairy tales, and folk songs not as dated, but as essential to the living community that they were creating through their art and writing." The benefits of recovering and "reconceiving" traditional poetic forms, she argues, were twofold, allowing the poets of the Duncan-Spicer circle "not only to rescue poetry from academic readings but also to assert themselves into the trajectory of genuine poetic practice."<sup>(7)</sup> The link to ancient knowledge and past forms of poetry that Adam embodied was conceived as a two-way street, where the effect of recollection on the present was primary.

In his introduction to Adam's collection *Ballads*, Duncan asserts the mystical power of the ballad to connect its audience to a distant past "of ancient dancers tromping around the moon or against the sun." The ballad is not an escapist form to Duncan, however. He writes that the "ballad in our age of increasing aesthetic inhibition has all the force of the return of the repressed." Repressed cultural knowledge is seen here as recoverable particularly through Adam's ballads because their rhythms have great potential to speak to the subconscious and make us remember the deep cultural significance of poetry. Also valuable to Duncan is Adam's ability to reconnect her audience with "the invisible World" of fantastic imagination which to him is an integral part of the mind that has been undervalued in modern times. Duncan saw in Adam's ballads that "the measures and images of the witch-cult" continue to exist, and he lauded their ability to engage the imagination.<sup>(8)</sup>

Adam's ballads are exemplary of the desire to both partake of literary tradition and subvert the academicism poetic tradition is prone to. Her rigid adherence to the ballad form nevertheless often subverts the "familiar landscape" of the romantic ballad by creating contemporary, more politically charged, contexts for her narratives. The poem "Apartment at Twin Peaks" is demonstrative of her ability to use conventional forms in order to subvert the restrictions on women that convention has typically endorsed. The poem adheres to "stock topoi of romanticism" in its conception of the witch as an image of power and danger for men, but it is set squarely in post-World War II America, and uses the figure of the witch to overthrow the patriarchal culture that created those stereotypes.<sup>(9)</sup>

After detailing the want ad that has led the speaker and her husband to take an apartment, "Reliable people, their reference read./ No drinking, no parties, no smoking in bed," Adam's speaker makes clear to the reader that things are not so respectable within its walls. "My apartment is haunted!" she states, by the ghost of her husband, whose fate points to the discrepancy between the appearance of respectability and reality:

New Year's Eve, and the moon like a flame.  
 From as far as Fresno my girl friends came.  
 I knew my party simply could not miss  
 Though I served my husband as the principle dish. (10)

The speaker's murder of her husband for the "full moon feast" of her witch friends is the culmination of years of slow devouring on the part of the speaker, "My girlfriends worried him close to the bone./ And of course I'd been nibbling for years alone." The witch and the nagging housewife are fused in the poem, but the addition of the supernatural to the stereotypical wife allows her to turn her henpecking into more than a metaphor and free herself from the limitations of her own stereotype.(11)

The gradual wearing away of the husband is Adam's critique of American consumerist culture. The speaker goads him to work for material comforts, asking him, "Don't you want to be the gracious host/ In a lovely home of which you're proud to boast?" It is not only the pursuit of possessions, however, but the possessions themselves that devour him:

After the carpeting he fought and bled,  
 Sloshed by the billows of the water bed.  
 He screamed as he vanished up the vacuum (*sic*) spout.  
 In triple sealed bags it spat him out.

The husband is spineless in the poem, unable to reject the dictates of his culture, even when they are killing him. His endless pursuit of an ideal of masculinity that he has bought into but cannot replicate re-orders the consumer-goods relationship, and makes him a victim of a culture that consumes him. He is more effective as a part of the veneer of respectability than as a human individual, and his inability to either fulfill or transcend the gender role assigned for him makes him a mere accessory in his own life. He becomes the provider in the poem, quite literally, but to do that, he must give up his life.

By contrast, the wife uses social mandates to liberate herself from them. Excess is a feature of the poem that allows Adam to criticize the pursuit of material goods in place of spiritual ones. Adam's speaker is a caricature of the nagging wife, but through her excess, she is also powerfully subversive of the culture that determines gender roles. As a domestic wife, the speaker is trapped by her prescribed role to make a 'nice,' materially comfortable home. That she does not care for the role is evidenced not only by the fact that she kills and eats her husband, but by the lines:

Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief,  
 Any damn husband's sure to bring you grief.  
 Keep him working for his very life  
 To prove he's worthy of a virtuous wife. (12)

The speaker retains her 'virtue' in the sense that she adheres very closely to the values of the culture in which she resides. Rather than defy mainstream American culture by refusing to conform, the speaker decides to fight fire with fire, killing her domestic constraints (i.e. the husband) with a surfeit of the 'ideal' American household, forcing him to attain everything from furniture to "[c]eramic monkeys" to "a pop-up toaster playing 'Home sweet home.'"(13) By playing the role of the good consumer and housewife to excess, she manages to turn the tables on the culture that has placed her in domestic bondage. She is initially trapped by her marriage, but it is through that domestic arrangement that she traps her unwitting captor.

The wife's supreme gesture of rejection towards consumerist culture is her decision to eat its representative. The speaker cooking and serving her husband like a good hostess demonstrates her power over the culture that seeks to limit her freedom. The theatrical violence of the poem, and its depiction of the wild sabbat that follows her husband's death, "I hung his guts in the entrance hall," is a release of raw energy that contrasts the dead life of convention. The couple's adherence to socially acceptable roles, and the outward respectability of their lifestyle belie the violence of the materialist system, "When the walls closed in till they crushed his breast,/ The neighbours envied me my snug little nest./ For the apartment his blood was spent . . ." The wild sabbat that the witches engage in is horrific, but portrayed as playful, ecstatic in its joy, and ultimately liberating for the speaker.

Typical of Adam's heroines, the speaker shows no remorse, and receives no punishment for her deeds. Instead, she redirects blame onto the paper in which she decides to rent the apartment again, "If his ghost goes with it, let the 'Chronicle' take the consequences./ Ha! Ha! Ha!" and cheerfully goes free.(14) The poem uses the figure of the witch to highlight the destructive nature of mainstream culture, and the positive value of releasing oneself from the constraints of socially determined roles. It also demonstrates the capacity of the witch-as-symbol to gain political relevance in contemporary struggles.

Adam's poems, according to Davidson, are populated by "powerful women ruled not by institutional authority (marriage, the nuclear family, traditional religions) but by nature."(15) Adam never denies the conventional association of women with nature and the irrational. Instead, she capitalizes on it, asserting a kind of dangerous power that is specifically women's, and can be used to overthrow systems which oppress them. Her women naturally have mystic power that they claim for themselves without external authorization. They are never depicted learning their craft, but appear as fully competent and formidable wielders of spiritual power.

It is clear from her copious notes, however, that Adam valued the craft of the esoteric. Invocations and recipes for charms in her notebooks are extensive and complicated, requiring a good working knowledge of astrology, herbology, crystals, Hermetic correspondences, and a thorough familiarity with the angels and demons of both Christian and non-Christian religions. One exemplary page of her notebooks explains that a circle to bind a spirit "must be made upon a Wednesday the day of Mercury, at the increase (*sic*) of the moon," and that in it must be written "first the name of the hour in which thou shalt make thy work. In the second place the names of the angel of the hour, third the seal of that angel, fourth the name of the angell (*sic*) that governeth the day & his ministers." The names are followed by an elaborate ritual of purification for the "conjurer," the space in which the ritual is performed, and the pentacle by which the spirit will be invoked, at which point the magic really begins. (16)

That Adam's impressive store of specific magical knowledge never makes its way into her poetry suggests that she considered that this knowledge was not for casual consumption. Over the top depictions of sabbats, prayers without specific invocations, and spells without words demonstrate a desire to retain the mystery of the occult in her poetry. In addition, her work's lack of specificity speaks to a desire to de-emphasize the academic aspects of the occult. Ritual, initiation, and learning do make their way into the poetry, but the processes are depicted less as passing down a body of knowledge from teacher to student than as a realization of innate spiritual powers that have been waiting to be cultivated. Despite her estimation of secrecy and ritual, Adam's work demonstrates a belief that women are witches by virtue of their sex, and not their training in occult practices.

“The Fair Young Wife,” like “Apartment at Twin Peaks,” portrays a heroine’s rejection of a socially mandated role that reduces her identity to the titular epithet. The poem opens, “This is a tale for a night of snow./ It was lived in the north land long ago./ An old man, nearing the end of his life./ Took to his arms a fair young wife.” Unbeknownst to the old man, his blushing bride is a witch with the power to transform herself into one of the “wolves abhorred” who hunt outside their cottage in the forest. The poem recounts the process of spiritual transformation that the wife undergoes, a transformation as dramatic as her physical one. She begins by hearing the wolves outside through the curtains of her new marriage bed and the sound kindles in her a sense of sympathy, “She heard them running, though far away,/ And her heart leapt up like a beast of prey.”(17) That night she has a dream where she envisions herself as one of them, and the dream awakens her to her powers:

She dreamt she walked in the forest shade,  
Alone, and naked, and unafraid.  
The bonds of being dissolved and broke.  
Her body she dropped like a cast off cloak.

Her shackled soul to it’s (*sic*) kindred sped.  
In devouring lust with the wolves she fled.  
But woke at dawn in a curtained bed.  
By an old, grey man, in an airless bed. (18)

Her dream world offers her the possibility to transcend her conventional life, and the mundane world. Alone, the wife is free to develop into a fearless and powerful being, and to find a place where she can feel at home. Adam contrasts the liberation of the vision, where the wife is free to pursue her wildness with her “kindred,” with the ordinary “grey” marital world which shackles and suffocates her.

Adam insists that the world of the wilderness is the “natural” one for the wife, while her ability to actually become a wolf once she has the dream suggests that she confers this power on herself, “She dreamt she walked where the wolf eyes gleam./ And soon she walked, and it was no dream./ She fell on fours from the world of man,/ And howled her bliss when the rank beasts ran.” The wife is not provided with a teacher to impart the secrets of metamorphosis, or with a program of study to undertake to make her transformation possible. Her ability to transform is portrayed as the product of her communication with herself, and of her willingness to reject her given role and become who she really is.

Her life then splits in two, “The morning life, and the mid-night life./ The sun and moon of the fair young wife;” the domestic life which she must, by convention, live, and the authentic one where she can be whole. The very existence of the husband is oppressive, as it prevents the heroine from participating in that which gives fullness to her life. Her wild connection to the woods is inhibited by her placement in a domestic environment which is clearly contrary to her nature. Prevallet notes that one theme of Adam’s work is the volatility of female desire when it is limited; “desire becomes a monster when it is inhibited or threatened in any way.” I would argue that this theme of explosive emotion is linked to the limitation of autonomy. In this poem, the wife prays to the moon, asking, ““Can I lie down at a husband’s will, When wild love runs, and my heart cries, Kill!”” Her fury is directed at her inability to follow her desire, but also to the husband who commands her, and asserts his will over her own.(19)

The resentment of the wife towards her husband has bloody consequences. He tells her one full moon night before they sleep, ““I’ll draw the curtains, and hug you near./ And we’ll lie hid from the moon, my dear.”” The curtained bed becomes a symbol of the hapless husband’s desire to shield her from the

dangers of the wilderness around them. He proposes to keep her from the wolves and the moon to which she prays – cutting her off from her freedom and from her spiritual life. She retaliates by becoming a wolf in his bed and attacking him, “in ravenous play.”

(20) That the wife transforms in her bed and devours her husband, rather than simply abandoning the man, suggests that she must confront and overcome the representative of her captivity in domestic life before she can be free. Becoming a wolf in her bed allows the wife to retake her autonomy from the man who usurped it at the site of her greatest oppression, but to do so, she must use the specifically feminine power that he fears. Davidson asserts that Adam’s heroines “often struggle out of a marriage net in order to have identity as individuals.”(21) Here the struggle over identity is implicitly linked to the struggle for freedom. Identity is only complete in the context of freedom. To become whole, the wife must assert her autonomy by killing that which presumed to govern her, instead of simply abandoning her wifely post and leaving the marital structure intact.

With no initiation but what she gives herself, the wife lays claim to a whole history of mystical powers, and to a community of wolves with whom, presumably, she has shared nothing but the instinct to run and kill. Through her negation of learning and initiation in her poetry, Adam makes mystic power accessible to all women, suggesting that connection with occult forces is made possible not through serious and objective study, but by acceptance of a connection that already exists.

This innate and dangerous power of women is theorized by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar as part of the patriarchal apparatus that denies women identity as individuals. Gilbert and Gubar posit that women have been imaged throughout the history of literature as “eternal types,” what they term “angels” and “monsters.” The function of these types has been to mediate “between the male artist and the Unknown,” either to inspire him to greater spiritual things, or to reify male anxiety about the feminine and all it is supposed to represent. Not essentially different, these angel and monster figures circumscribe women’s identity to a muse function predicated on our lack of subjectivity, “it is just because women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power (like ‘Cyphers’) that they become numinous to male artists,” and emptying any sense of individual identity.(22)

The specifically literary dimensions of the problem, for Gilbert and Gubar, are that “until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image” foisted upon her by masculine literary culture. Gilbert and Gubar draw on Virginia Woolf’s argument that in order to claim an identity outside of what masculine imagery offers, women must kill the angel: “the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art.” They add that “all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the ‘monster’ in the house”(23) in order to transcend both aspects of the patriarchal definition.

Adam, however, takes precisely the opposite track, asserting individualist values by using the idea that the monstrous woman “embodies intransigent female autonomy”(24) as a positive way to overcome the limitations attendant on female imagery. Adam’s women epitomize the symbolic representation of women as assertive, aggressive, and closely allied with nature, but they partake of the same kind of feminist strategy as the WITCH groups of the 1960s. Originally formed in New York under the acronym “Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell,” these protest groups were the first widely publicized feminist circles to see the political potential of the witch as a contemporary symbol of women’s power, a symbol that served as a rallying point in their efforts to take down aspects of the patriarchy ranging from the exploitative practices of food companies to bridal fairs. Their original manifesto makes the link between witches and political action clear, “Witches and gypsies were the

original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression – particularly the oppression of women – down through the ages.” They attributed radical qualities to witches, terming them “aggressive,” “nonconformist,” “independent,” and “revolutionary”(25) in their bid to reclaim the witch as a positive role model for women. Unlike Adam’s heroines, they recuperated the figure of the witch by spinning the negative aspects of feminine stereotypes into positive qualities like independence. Adam anticipates the feminist appropriation of the witch as symbolizing resistance to oppression, but her strategy is less to recuperate the figure than to demonstrate its capacity to obliterate value systems that have worked to demonize it. Her heroines embody the conventional negative typology of the witch to such an extreme that the masculinist value system that encourages women not to identify with witches becomes woefully inadequate as an opponent. Her works asserts that male anxieties about women are not only true and justified, but that conventionally patriarchal strategies of controlling women are in the end ineffectual against women’s powers.

Adam’s women exceed containment both by the masculine figures in her works and by Adam herself. As author, she declines to control her women, refusing to re-place them under the governance of some authority figure at the end of their poems. Not only does Adam not condemn them, she allows her “monstrous” women to create their own value systems, in which freedom and autonomy are the highest ideals. In their insistence on autonomy, they avail themselves of “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place.’” (26) Her characters go gleefully unpunished for their crimes because the more heinous crime in Adam’s works is for anyone to attempt to place limits on a woman’s freedom.

Her ballad “The Queen o’ Crow Castle” narrates just such an attempt in a world governed by female divinity, and operating under laws which hold autonomy for women as the highest ideal. The poem opens by placing the scene under the rule of female divinity, “In the glen o’ Crow Castle the mountain is steep/ Whaur groves o’ the Goddess grow secret and deep./ Groves o’ the Goddess whaur Love doth abide./ There walk the young at the blue even tide.” The Goddess is allied with young love and with life in both a physical and emotional sense. It is here that we meet the hero of the piece, Callastan, who defies the principles of the Goddess by walking alone in the glen and spurning love, “The finest young man in the length of the glen,/ Averteth his face frae the pleasures o’ men.” Callastan does not value the sensual, the earthly, or the feminine, and takes an angel instead of a girl as his companion, “He walks wi’ an angel baith morning and night./ The heavens may lour but he looks to the light.” There is an ambivalence to the heavens’ regard for him. He seems privileged to have an angel for a friend, but his preference of a strictly spiritual companion risks the displeasure of the Goddess. Callastan expounds more specifically on his attitudes towards women in the lines that follow:

“I walk wi’ an angel, his garments are spun  
O’ vanishing rays frae the ultimate sun.  
He smiles when I speak, and his face shines sae clear  
The beauty o’ women I’ve nae need tae fear.

“I walk wi’ an angel, I follow his tread  
By bridges o’ fire over wild gulfs o’ dread.  
I watch while he wrestles celestial despair.  
The sorrows o’ women I’ve nae need tae share.”

The passage illuminates Callastan’s paradoxical attitude towards women – that they are both inferior, and fearsome. The beauty of women is a danger to him, kept at bay while his masculine angel accompanies

him. The sorrows of women are seen by Callastan as inferior next to the “celestial despair” he witnesses in the angel. The hero accepts the construction of femininity as both dangerous, unknowable other, and also earthly, less important counterpart to the entirely spiritual being that is supposed to be the masculine prerogative and goal. By denying those qualities conventionally associated with women, and then proclaiming them to be inferior to conventionally masculine principles, Callastan unwittingly plays a risky game in a land ruled by the feminine.

The heavens align against Callastan at this point, while Aphrodite conspires to have him catch a glimpse of the Queen of Crow Castle at the top of her enchanted tower, and so fall desperately in love. Callastan is unknowingly overpowered by the divine feminine, and while his angel tries to persuade him against his new inclination, the hero makes up his mind to wed the Queen. The angel explains why this is a bad idea, “Seven as husbands ha’ entered her tower,/ Lain in the dark by that lass like a flower./ Always, at morning, the Queen lies her lane/ Nought left o’ the man but a fire brackled bane.” The Queen is ‘possessed’ by a devil, the angel tells him, a spirit who kills any man who tries to spend the night, and Callastan’s desires are inflamed by the chivalric aim of rescuing the maiden from the devil.

Adam immediately deflates the romance of his intentions, however, by making it clear that the hero’s desire to save the girl has much more to do with him than with her. He vows to the angel to confront the devil at any cost, “Though held tae her Deil’s hert I hear her laugh low,/ I’ll strike doun her door wi’ a stunning blow.” He intends to forcibly separate the two, even if this is not what the Queen wishes. In the lines which immediately follow, Callastan again reveals an anxiety that she might not mind the devil, but declares his determination to possess her anyway, “What e’er lurk behind it, I’ll rive doun her door./ Aye though she be ten times the Deil’s mocking whore./ I’ll beat frae her chamber that Prince in his pride,/ And I’ll be the first man tae wake by her side.” The repeated image of him violently breaking down her door like an intruder combines here with heroic desire for combat with the devil to make the rescue mission seem more about war than love. Callastan wishes to succeed where others have failed, a desire which has nothing to do with the Queen. Adam suggests that victory on the part of the hero would be no less oppressive than possession by the devil, and denounces the romantic notion of masculine figures struggling over a woman’s freedom.

The undaunted hero gets some unexpected help from the crows of the castle, who tell him how to defeat the devil, which he and the angel manage to do after a short but fiery battle. The devil’s banishment occasions the poem’s first lines about the Queen’s thoughts, and the mystery behind her “possession” starts to unravel. Their relationship becomes clear when she laments his defeat, “That sun shaking fury she will’na forget./ Till the end o’ a’ love nights her Deil she’ll regret.” Far from being held against her will, the Queen has enjoyed the presence of her devil. She manifests the anxieties Callastan spoke of to his angel – that he will not be rescuing a helpless victim.

Adam’s representation of Callastan’s spiritual aide as an angel and the Queen’s as a devil figures the struggle for the Queen’s liberation in terms of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. In typical Adam fashion, she aligns her heroine with the side that women have conventionally been assigned to anyway, but uses the identification as a site of resistance to limitations on women’s autonomy. The Queen is what Callastan feared of women, but his moral judgement of women and his identification with the angel mean little, since his values run contrary to the values of this world.

The poem continues:

The Queen o’ Crow Castle leads doun intae night

Callastan her new love that creature o' light.  
 They move in the mirk as the moon and the sun,  
 Compelled tae their love since the planet first spun.

The man and the woman are naked and lone.  
 His angel awa, and her Deil overthrown.  
 Who then prevaieth, who taketh that tower?  
 Hushed is the night, and the lass, like a flower.

The elemental differences between the Queen and Callastan are stressed in their moment of union. Her sensuality, which has throughout the poem been inextricably linked with her spiritual relationship with the devil, leads him from his purely spiritual life, just as her association with darkness leads him from the light. Once the two are alone and without supernatural friends, the question of autonomy comes to the fore again, suggesting that Callastan's victory is not final, and has not entitled him to the possession he imagined he would have. The real battle is not the one between angel and devil, but the mortal one that will decide who gains control over the life of the Queen. The crows utter warning that, "*Rash is the mortal who plucketh that flower,*" but the hero does not take heed. The poem closes:

Smoke reeking black on the blue morning sky.  
 Over his ashes her gorged corbies fly.  
 Mair than the Deil must a man overthrow  
 Wha weds wi' the Queen o' the Castle o' Crow.  
*Great cry her corbies, they reel as they go.*  
*Great is the Queen o' the Castle o' Crow.*  
*Great is the Queen. Kra, Ha! o' the Castle o' Crow! (27)*

Prevallet sees the poem's ending as "a sinister subplot" of the crows to "seize the castle for themselves" in order to "attack and eat the fair Castellan (*sic*)."(28) I would argue, however, that the poem makes clear that it is not the crows, but the Queen who has prevailed. Callastan's burnt body links him back to the other seven suitors, suggesting that the same power that did away with the seven would-be husbands is still at work. The real extent of the Queen's power is revealed only in the final lines. The devil is permitted because she wishes him to be there, but the same is not true of the seven suitors, or of Callastan. To wed a man is, in this poem, to be overthrown, and the Queen is having none of it. The terrible things that befall Callastan – his being compelled to fall in love with a woman loved by a devil, and then burnt to a crisp, even after victory seemed assured – are the result of the same crime against the feminine. Callastan's initial disregard for women in favour of his angel, and his consequent about-face in wanting to possess one woman, are really two sides of the same coin – devaluing women.

Adam diminishes the importance of the conventional struggle between good and evil by rendering the battle between angel and devil essentially meaningless in terms of plot development, and endowing the Queen with power that transcends their Christianized struggle. The feminine divine is figured in the poem as the larger, inescapable background against which the fight between good and evil takes place. It is not as demonstrative or flashy as masculine power, but it is inexorable. Even the concepts of good and evil are emptied of their significance, since this world operates by an entirely different, feminine, set of values.

In Adam's works, the ability to disregard patriarchal forces that use gender constructs as a way to subjugate women is won by a process of assuming those constructs in order to overcome them from

within. Stressing their complete and excessive embodiment of the negative typology associated with the figure of the witch – an embodiment Adam postulates as natural and innate in women – Adam’s heroines proceeds to demonstrate that this figure transcends the value systems which generate the typology, and answer ultimately only to the laws which women themselves allow. The transformative potential of her critique of the power inequalities of this world lies not so much in her heroines’ violent victories against individual men who seek to limit them, but in their instantiation of, or adherence to, value systems that privilege autonomy for women, and need no external authorization to function effectively.

1. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 58, 127.
2. Kristin Prevallet, "The Worm Queen Emerges: Helen Adam and the Forgotten Ballad Tradition," in *Girls Who Wore Black*, ed. Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002), 30.
3. Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1979), 17.
4. Kristin Prevallet, "The Reluctant Pixie Poole: A Recovery of Helen Adam's San Francisco Years," (1995). <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/prevallet/adam.html> (accessed 22 April, 2009).
5. *Ibid.*; Helen Adam papers (box 21, folder 5, insert notebook 1, page 6); Adam, qtd. in Prevallet, "Pixie."
6. Davidson, 187.
7. Prevallet, "Queen," 26-7; 27.
8. Robert Duncan, Preface, *Ballads*, Helen Adam (New York: Acadia, 1964).
9. Davidson, 181.
10. Helen Adam, *Turn Again to Me and Other Poems* (New York: Kulchur, 1977), 104.
11. *Ibid.*, 106; 105.
12. *Ibid.*, 106.
13. *Ibid.*, 105.
14. *Ibid.*, 106.
15. Davidson, 183.
16. Helen Adam papers, (box 21, folder 5, insert notebook 1, page 9).
17. Adam, *Turn*, 13.
18. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
19. *Ibid.*, 14; Prevallet, "Queen," 29; Adam, *Turn*, 14.
20. *Ibid.*, 15
21. Davidson, 183.
22. Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale, 1979), 17; 20; 21.
23. *Ibid.*, 17.
24. *Ibid.*, 28.
25. Robin Morgan, "WITCH: Spooking the Patriarchy during the Late Sixties," in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City: Anchor, 1982), 428.
26. Gilbert and Gubar, 28.
27. Helen Adam, *The Queen o' Crow Castle* (San Francisco: White Rabbit, 1958).
28. Prevallet, "Queen," 37.

## ¡Yo Soy Godzilla!—The Possibilities and Futilities of Cuban Horror

*Rafael Miguel Montes*

In his 1996 collection, *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film*, Mick Broderick gathers articles discussing the variety of ways in which the traumatic events of 1945 not only impacted Japanese culture at large, but served as the genesis of multiple atomic-age science fiction narratives. Broderick suggests that the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki "evoke powerful and somber associations of holocaust and apocalypse, a microcosm of the twentieth century's staging ground for a global nuclear war." (1) The focus on the cultural and psychological turmoil present within the hibakusha, roughly translated as the people of the day of the explosion, aims to reinforce and perhaps reinterpret Donald Richie's assumption that "no one has come to terms with the bomb--least of all, perhaps, the people upon whom it was originally inflicted." (2) Broderick goes on to cast, albeit in ambiguous terms, the American act as a manifestation of unchecked scientific experimentation primarily directed by two specific impulses: military prowess and perceived occidental superiority.

Chon Noriega's addition to the collection reifies the United States military's penchant for casting the East as the exotic other that merits exploration towards the inevitable goal of either colonization or outright armed engagement. By analyzing films produced relatively soon after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Noriega suggests how the trauma of nuclear terror shapes the cinematic narratives overtly concerned with apocalyptic visions of the island in peril. Using Noel Carroll's formulation of the horror film as an expression of "the sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of depression, recession, Cold War strife, galloping inflation, and national confusion," (3) Noriega investigates this constellation of social and cultural disturbances via Toho studio's 1954 release of *Gojira*.

Directed by Honda Ishiro, *Gojira* enacts a narrative of geopolitical disturbance based on the event which took place less than a decade earlier in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Moved by the human toll paid by the escalation of nuclear weaponry, the producers of the original film intended to create a valuable morality tale revolving around the use of new technologies whose magnitude had not yet been seen or even understood. The diegetic awakening of Godzilla, brought about by American nuclear testing at the Bikini Atoll after the conclusion of the war, served to illustrate the continuation of militaristic threat for the island of Japan. Moved by the continued presence of and potential for nuclear radiation, especially after the March 1954 nuclear encounter between the United States and the crew of the *Daigo Fukuryūmaru* (Lucky Dragon No. 5), a tuna fishing vessel navigating too close to American nuclear testing sites, Honda created a film to underscore the themes of, in the words of Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, "nuclear annihilation, environmental degradation, and the apocalyptic potential of modern science run amuck." (4)

Beyond the realm of the purely scientific, however, Honda's film suggests a working through of the traumatic events surrounding not only the nuclear detonation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by American forces but also the swift resolution to the war and the political reconciliation between the United States and Japan. In an extended reading of the surrender and subsequent occupation of Japan, Yoshikuni Igarashi explores how the historical and political events enacted by the American government and Emperor Hirohito served to create a "foundational narrative of U.S.-Japanese post-war relations." (5) Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, urging the unconditional surrender of Japanese armed forces, constructs what Igarashi deems a melodrama of unbalanced power relationships that will show national "efforts to render understandable the experiences of the atomic bomb and the ensuing

transformation of their relationship.” (6) What is rendered unavailable in the construction of this particular foundational narrative, especially given its accelerated momentum away from enemy towards ally, is the removal of the military and civilian losses suffered by Japan. The attempt to cover over a national memory with a different definition of nationalism arguably revokes the events leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

After the Lucky Dragon incident, it is these barely suppressed memories that arise to the surface: “*Gojira* deliberately evokes the destruction of Tokyo by fire bombing, and by extension urban destruction, the terror of urban warfare among civilians . . . the horror of aerial bombardments that left more dead than the atomic bombings.” (7) It is also these dead, these victims of American military aggression, which Honda wishes to invoke with resurrection of the titular being. Godzilla is the embodiment of Japan’s wartime national trauma. To Ifukube Akira, the music director for the film, the movie represents “the atmosphere of the time period; I even thought Godzilla was like the souls of the Japanese soldiers who died in the Pacific Ocean during the war.” (8) The absence of the dead from the national political narrative is rendered visible, re-presented, in the form of Godzilla. Emerging from the deep, literally and psychologically, his “monstrous [body] became replacements for tangible markers of loss.” (9) According to Igarashi, “memories of the war, even without specific markers, were still ubiquitous in postwar society.” (10) He goes on to suggest that “increasingly removed from the scene of destruction and devoid of particular references, the memories were transformed into amorphous destructive forces [and] were burdened with the mission to represent memories of war loss.” (11)

Despite Igarashi’s telling interpretation of the film from a distinctly nationalistic vantage point, I would argue that one should not summarily discount the inherent geopolitical events compelling the production. Although, as Susan Napier reminds us, “Godzilla is vanquished through Japanese science” (12) and the film itself becomes “a form of cultural therapy, allowing the defeated Japanese to work through the trauma of the wartime bombings in the scenes of panic and destruction and, with the film’s happy end, giving them a chance to reimagine and rewrite their devastating defeat,” (13) it is ultimately the reality of Western aggression that is at the core of the film. An alternate reading of the film and its central reptilian character recognizes the narrative as a prolonged meditation on extraterritorial uncertainty. *Gojira* sets the stage for understanding geopolitical fragmentation as well as the power relationships attempted, negated, and/or reinforced by that fragmentation: “In Godzilla films, it is the United States that exists as Other--a fact that Hollywood and American culture at large has masked. To see how we are seen by another culture is central to understanding that culture as other than a projection of our own internal social anxieties.” (14) The psychological ambivalence inherent in Noriega’s conceptualization of the recurrent Godzilla motif makes way for a richer understanding of the power struggles--internal and external--that unavoidably define traumatized populations. As a product of the atomic age, like its parallel, the bomb itself, Godzilla simultaneously represents the frenzy of scientific pursuit devoid of its humanistic precepts as well as the embodiment of what Mark Anderson labels a “Japanese melancholia.” (15) For Anderson the resulting synthesis of the two, creates a sense of cultural and national ambivalence quite difficult to reconcile: “After destruction and defeat at the hands of the United States, after a would-be war of liberation was redefined as a crime against humanity, after the Japanese troops that had been held up as paragons of virtue were accused of war crimes, it is any doubt that Japanese feelings towards the United States and their own war dead must have involved ambivalent feelings of both love and hate?” (16) Furthermore, the monster’s ability to potentially destroy Japan and, if unvanquished, the rest of the world, metaphorizes the exorbitant price paid for the failure of intranational and international reconciliation. Within the narrative of *Gojira*, “the contamination of modernity ultimately comes from the outside, and from the United States, situating Japan as a passive, perhaps even heroic victim of the cold war and perhaps even World War II as well.” (17)

### **The Caribbean Godzilla**

Jorge Molina's invocation of Godzilla, in his 2000 short film, *Yo Soy Godzilla*, occurs in a Cuba where, to the director, social, economic, and political monstrosities are readily apparent. His compelling employment of the archetype acts as a narrative of resistance that tries to undermine an apparatus of power that has left him essentially bereft of power. An avid admirer and collector of the films of George Romero, David Cronenberg, Tobe Hooper and Dario Argento, Molina actively engages in the creation of counterrevolutionary film, what he calls decadent and degenerate art, within a nation beholden to the principles of the revolution. A Cuban-born avant-garde underground film director, working outside of the government's sanctioning board for cinema, the ICAIC (*Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industrias Cinematográficas*), Molina appropriates archetypal images of global horror (vampires, slashers, werewolves, monsters) in order to explore his philosophical and political ideology under the repression of a totalitarian regime. *Dolman 2000*, the collection of short films in which *Yo Soy Godzilla* appears, uses the horrific in order to impart to the audience the horror that is living in modern-day Cuba outside of the dictates of the regime. Employing a single camera and using almost no editing, Molina traps the audience within visceral scenes of mutilation, sexual coercion, and dismemberment all while the camera refuses to look away. The brevity of the films, along with almost no attempt at narrative structure or storytelling, creates an atmosphere where one questions even the fictitious nature of the violence perpetrated.

In one of the more sedate offerings in the collection, Molina uses Honda's creation to compellingly explore a distinct moment of socio-political convergence. The monster is both his dissection of the Castro government as well as the difficult acceptance of the monstrosity he himself has become under this government. The director seems unable to create a vision of contemporary Cuba that is critical of the system without exploring his own transformation, his own complicity. Similar to the inability to mourn the war dead in the original 1954 film in an environment where political oppression reconfigured the national narrative, Molina seems unable to mourn his own country's loss of freedom and the multiple revolutionary anti-Castro dead who have been seemingly erased from history. Unable to be part of the nation and apart from the nation, Molina uses his camera to autobiographically depict the monster that he has become and that history has wrought.

His Godzilla is a vision of himself. The creature represents those whose artistic enterprises have failed to reach any semblance of a substantial audience. Rendered impotent by the dictates of the regime, his characters attempt to find avenues suitable enough to express those intrinsic beliefs taken away by the exigencies of totalitarianism. The identity politics necessary to extricate these characters from a system founded upon the mythology of universal identity, namely that of revolutionary, creates rather difficult quests for individual power predicated upon often times disturbing tendencies.

The ten-minute film begins with the juxtaposition of a radio broadcast counting down the island's fiction bestsellers and Molina's character at a rudimentary typewriter creating his own novel. The black and white film intersperses the typing with the cultural iconography that surrounds the novelist's living room. Pornographic pencil sketches, posters of B-movie gore films, and ink drawings of random vampiric activity construct an atmosphere of horror that shows the writer's penchant for the taboo culture of the United States and Europe. Surrounded by these items anathema to a nationalistic state, the author focuses intently on the blank page that will eventually carry the title of the work recently produced. The 1000-yard stare onto the empty page reiterates the turbulent nature of creation within a perpetually censoring environment. Given that the ultimate victory over individual expression is self-doubt and self-censorship, the author's initial inability to readily title his work covertly engages the Cuban artist's

struggle for apolitical labor within hyperpolitical circumstances. In Molina's work, however, this struggle takes a distinctly masculinist register.

Naming his text *Arma de Amor, Love Weapon*, the novelist's manuscript embodies the phallogentric drive believed to be imperiled by strict editorial practices and by a revolution defined by its movements towards the abolition of gender. Fearing emasculation at the hands of the state, the character steps before a mirror and utters his phrase of empowerment: *¡Yo Soy Godzilla!* He speaks this several times in order to embolden himself before a conversation with the editor at a state-run publishing house. The repeated invocation serves also to remind the viewer of Molina's alignment with a wholly foreign cultural product that would be perceived, in Cuba, as politically dangerous. Molina's Godzilla, the ultimate fusion of masculinity and destructive power, helps to ameliorate the fact that both of these concepts so central to his character have been destabilized by communism. This intimate call to arms, however, is disrupted by his discordant engagement with Cuban bureaucracy.

Repeatedly placed on hold and after what seems a profoundly long wait, the author begins a rather difficult conversation with the head of the publishing house. The author's explanation of his literary prowess and innate talent, given his creation of ten novels in the space of a couple of years, is met by the silencing concern of the editor as to whether this book is another one of those unpublishable little terror tales the writer is so stubbornly fascinated by. Told that this is not the appropriate subject matter for good Cuban fiction and that this recent attempt will also go as unpublished as the previous nine literary attempts, Molina's author wields a different type of disturbing weapon. The tirade that follows the rejection, although Godzilla-like in its intensity, reinforces the director's hyper-masculine gender politics. The author slanders the editor by hurtling a barrage of homosexual epithets through the phone line: "*Eres un maricón. Un maricón con leche en el culo. Maricón. Con leche en el culo y en la boca.*" The attack, translated as "You are a faggot. A faggot with cum in your ass. A faggot. With cum in your ass and in your mouth," serves to underscore the author's sense of intolerable emasculation at the hands of the state. Fearless of political repercussions or other more lethal forms of censure, the writer verbally attempts to mimic that which has been done to him artistically, culturally, and politically. Multiply unable to adequately display what he considers his productive potency via his work, Molina's author resorts to naming others what he perceives, covertly, is his own self image vis-à-vis the state, namely the repeatedly penetrated homosexual whose own "milk" fails to procreate neither a viable artistic product nor an identity masculine enough nor powerful enough to transcend revolutionary dogma.

Symbolically emasculated by the editor as well as by the regime, the novelist spends the remainder of the short film engaging in what Ian Lumsden has referred to as "oppressive masculinity." (18) The viewer follows the writer to a local bar. The author proceeds to drink in order to spur on some momentary amnesia and viewers are given the opportunity to eavesdrop on his conversation with a black prostitute. The dialogue in this scene shows the very precarious nature of self-aggrandizement and hypermasculinity in light of the author's inability to publish in his native land. Although he constantly returns to talk of his talent, ability, and vision, the woman at the bar's lone question, "Qué has publicado?"—"What have you published?" instantaneously deflates the image of himself as Cuba's great man of letters once again. His earlier self-portrayal as the resurrected monster, the one who will strive triumphantly through the streets of Havana and dismantle the government with his rage, cannot wholly cover over his relative impotence. The question, though apt, speaks of an unproductive history and a neglected self within a dictatorship that has left his own narrative unwritten as its narrative has taken precedence.

Molina's use of the prostitute as a symbol of the internal decadence of the island and the inability of the revolution to meet its goal of universal gender equality politicizes the short film even further. Her

presence speaks to the liminal spaces of life in contemporary Cuba where, despite the presumed pervasiveness of revolutionary ideals, moments of counterrevolution abound and some citizens do generate their own identities within societal margins. The prostitute marks the dictatorship's hypocrisy. Additionally, the color of her skin adds another potential layer of political commentary. In a nation whose political formation is primarily constructed upon the framework of economic and racial equality, the black prostitute serves to undermine those precepts entirely. Plying her trade for those interested in experiencing the exotic taboo other, she symbolically represents the failure of the revolution and her body acts as an initiation into, as Toni Morrison suggests, "a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability." (19)

Despite his attempt at remasculinization via renegade sex acts, the author is once again wholly undermined by his inability to inculcate a sense of machismo within a political system desirous, at least in spirit, of its eradication. Taking the prostitute home, after her feigned interest in his literary output, the author's physical desires are met with his own self doubts about his ability to perform. Rendered as an interior dialogue between himself and a photograph of Compay Segundo, a recently deceased Cuban performer featured in Ry Cooder's *Buena Vista Social Club* project and a film by Wim Wenders of the same name, Molina's novelist seems concerned about his approaching contact with what he perceives to be untamable black sexuality. Fearing he will be rendered impotent once again, this time in the presence of the woman he reduces linguistically to *la negra*, he enters the bedroom just as she removes the final article of clothing. Standing nude next to a poster of *The Naked Beast*, a 1971 Argentinian sexploitative horror film about a murderous hunchback, the prostitute's offered body is further metaphorized by its proximity to the advertisement. Within the environment of lust, horror, and savagery, the author feels enough gender security to utter the expanded version of his signature phrase: *¡Yo Soy Godzilla! ¡Tú eres Japón!*" The statement, while rendering his own unassailable masculinity, also speaks to the power dynamics the author wishes to inculcate within his private domain. Literally and figuratively erecting his own diminished status, Molina's character reifies the classic confrontation between the empowered and the powerless. His is not a nuanced reading of Honda's creation; instead he envisions himself as the source of power that nations are powerless to stop. Encapsulating his rage against the state, authority, and bureaucracy, Molina appropriates Godzilla as his alter-ego, his all-powerful double created by the exigencies of communism as well as cultural and economic deprivation. The use of the black body to counter his own issues of male inadequacy enacts a troubling discourse of unconditional authority, however. The unchecked masculine power-base, built upon the brutal destruction of Tokyo via the chaos of an invincible Godzilla, helps to initiate Molina's author into the vicious arena of sexual domination. Penetrating the black body, especially under the guise of obliterating his own unclear gender position and socio-sexual inadequacy, becomes coded as a phallic attack upon the revolution itself. Given the racial and sexual equality purported by the state, the author returns to a conceptual past girded by sexual intimidation, racial domination, and unquestioned male superiority. It is this return to the history before the emasculation, the time before citizens were left to the desires of others, which becomes the source of his momentary power.

Reconstituting a momentary glimpse into pre-revolutionary Cuba, Molina's writer upholds his own "savage encroachments of power" in order to "facilitate subjugation, domination, and terror precisely by preying on the flesh." (20) This predatory sexuality upon the prostitute's black body is short lived, however. The sexual montage that ends the film, an allusion to standard pornographic fare, has Molina's character only able to maintain the missionary position for a matter of seconds. The woman ably pins him on his back and uses the author's belt to engage in what appears to be a pleasurable foray into sadomasochism. The viewer soon realizes that her intent is much more sinister as she begins to tighten the

belt around his neck. The exchange of power as well as the move from pre-revolutionary fantasy to revolutionary reality is swift. The author, strangled to death by his own belt, and at the hands of the black prostitute, the naked beast, *la negra*, *Japón*, upends the promise of masculine power so central to the character. Made violently aware that old regimes and that their social and gender dynamics no longer can exist, the dead author suffers the consequences for his fascination with sexual terror, racial humiliation, and masculinist propaganda.

Ironically, the prostitute steals his manuscript for *Love Weapon* and finds herself at the center of sudden, phenomenal artistic success. The film ends as it begins with a radio broadcast of the new Cuban bestsellers. Only this time the announcer presents the incandescent talents of Vera Alberti, a woman whose first novel ushers in a new voice in Cuban letters. The once unnamed prostitute, known at first only for her profession and her skin color, is now named and celebrated. She also promises to deliver future novels as soon as she is able to “create” them. Left behind from this moment of racial and sexual equality is the novel’s original author. Never found. He is left strangled and nude amid the claustrophobic clutter of forbidden culture. In death, he transforms into a still metaphor of the revolution’s triumph over his art, his vision, his talent, and, above all, his chaotic, reptilian masculinity.

Molina’s brief film underscores the ongoing critical and cultural fascination with Honda’s creature despite the half century that has elapsed since its creation. That Godzilla’s presence has managed to be felt thousands of miles away in a small island where foreign popular culture is not only forbidden but also considered a counterrevolutionary act truly makes one realize how his iconic status has maintained him in “some sort of only partially suspended animation across generations.” (21) His legacy, despite whatever body of water from which he resurrects, is the pressing knowledge that “destruction is all around us, some of it wrought by nature, some by humans, often compounded by the incompetence (or arrogance) of humans who think they have conquered, tamed, or contained the furies of nature or the furies of their fellow human beings.” (22) As the embodiment of the tales untold, whether left unspoken after Hiroshima and Nagasaki or after the Cuban revolution, he will always rise up to speak for those who no longer cannot.

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## Lady Audley's Duplicitous Hair

*Tara Puri*

[...] No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

It was so like and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint medieval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend.(1)

This is the description of Lady Audley's portrait that is discovered in the middle of the novel, and forms a significant clue to the secret that is the core of the mystery. Since much of Victorian realism relies on detailed descriptions of outward appearances, the physiognomies of the characters being intrinsically linked to their 'real' inner selves, Lady Audley's person is repeatedly and eloquently described throughout the novel. Read as the externally interpretable signs of a private, perhaps subconscious, self, exterior detail is as important as patent psychological insight and it is no wonder that her personality is rendered through depictions of her clothing, her gestures, her hair. It is this last feature that I will be focusing on here, examining how given this propensity to read physical attributes, a woman's hair becomes a text that explains her. I will be looking at the power and signification that is infused into hair in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62), as well as the way in which it is intrinsically linked to Lady Audley's duplicity and the mystery that drives the narrative.

British fiction in the 1860s saw the emergence of the 'sensation novel', a genre that quickly claimed mass appeal as well as an equal amount of castigation in the popular press. Explaining the sensationalism of the new writing, Patrick Brantlinger writes: 'The sensation novel was and is sensational partly because of content: it deals with crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings'.(2) Though its various writers had their own special brand of structural and stylistic particularities, it was, more generally speaking, a hybrid form that was firmly rooted in the contemporary domestic realism of Victorian literature, while also borrowing freely from an earlier tradition of Gothic romance. 'Sensation' was not just a psychological category that elicited a nervous, emotional response, but also a moral category that gestured towards a cultural crisis most overtly embodied in its transgressive women. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* converges the seemingly antonymous qualities of both genres in the figure of a threatening anti-heroine who subverted the very domesticity and its attendant femininity that made her alluring in the first place.

The novel excited considerable comment when it was first published centering as it did around a beautiful bigamous murderess. Tapping into the stir caused by sensation fiction itself, the novel was a commercial success though it met with much criticism for its supposed lack of morality and its intent to shock the readers rather than to appeal to them. A year after the appearance of the novel, Henry Mansel published an essay in which he accused sensation writers of 'supply[ing] the cravings of a diseased appetite',(3) and producing an indiscriminating mass of readership that read only for 'the pleasure of a nervous shock'.(4)

Numerous critics compared it to an addictive, narcotic substance that created a form of mania in its readers, a large number of whom happened to be young women whose inexperience made them prey to its corruptible influence.(5) So pernicious was its supposed effect that even the Archbishop of York preached a sermon against sensation novels in the Huddersfield Church Institute in 1864.(6) But what made *Lady Audley's Secret* different was that, as Showalter argues, it was not only 'a virtual manifesto of female sensationalism, but also a witty inversion of Victorian sentimental and domestic conventions'.(7) In Braddon's novels gender roles are often unbalanced, the women usually taking over the properties of the Byronic hero, and therefore the shock of this novel is not the act of bigamy itself, but the fact that the 'bigamist is no longer Rochester, but the demure little governess'.(8)

Apart from the usual objections that its publication aroused, Mrs Oliphant found an additional element of discomfort with the novel. In her 1865 review of Braddon's works she upbraided the writer on making hair 'one of the leading properties in fiction. [...] What need has woman for a soul when she has upon her head a mass of wavy gold?'(9) Mrs Oliphant had perceptively recognised the prominence and symbolic authority of Lucy Audley's golden hair in the novel, and the unexpected way in which the mystery of the novel hinges on it. Mrs Helen Talboys' suspicious transformation into Miss Lucy Graham, who then goes on to become Lady Audley, is finally given away by the magnificence of her golden hair. Her every appearance in the novel is marked by a description where her hair is the focal point, pregnant with proliferating meaning. Her locks are described as 'the most wonderful curls in the world - soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through them'.(10) The phrases used are redolent of radiance and innocence - for instance, 'sunshiny ringlets', 'gold-shot, flaxen curls', that 'flashed hither and thither like wandering gleams of sunshine'.(11) It is her untouched beauty that makes her, at least outwardly, the ideal of the Victorian domestic angel, uncontaminated by the outside world, offering her husband the joys of the eden-like, virginal space that is her body.

While all clothing is an unmistakable kind of display, hair is a more nebulous category that exists in a liminal zone between the body natural and the body social. Since it is an extension of the body itself, it exudes a more organic sense of the true workings of a personality, but at the same time, it is a pliant, manageable feature that may be molded into a chosen pattern. It then functions as a kind of 'natural display', that is somehow more honest in what it reveals, and therefore more difficult to control, as well as to decipher correctly. The fascination with 'reading' women's hair - unraveling its meaning, mining its symbolic value, and using it as an extended metaphor for inner motivations - is evident in the kind of attention that it receives in Victorian writing. There are hardly any women characters in Victorian fiction whose hair does not garner at least a cursory descriptive glance, and more often it is described with recurrent deliberation and profuse detail, as critics like Gitter, Michie and Ofek point out.(12) 'The brown, neatly combed heads of the virtuous governesses and industrious wives; the tangled, disorderly hair of the sexually and emotionally volatile women [...]; the artfully arranged curls of the girl-women [...] are all familiar, even conventional, elements in Victorian character description'.(13) These generous portrayals of blonde, dark, auburn women, with curls, plaits or bands of straight hair become permeated with an abundance of meaning that goes beyond the descriptive fact to become crucial elements in reading not just the woman herself, but also various aspects of the novelistic world.

This preoccupation with hair becomes even more acute and conspicuous in the sensation novel. Indeed, the sensation novelists were striking at the very foundation of Victorian conventions of physiognomy and its link with morality by disconnecting the golden haired woman and her angelic femininity. By this overt stylistic technique they proceeded to suggest that 'no external sign could possibly capture modern womanhood, which was unfathomable, resisting unconditional univocal definition or "reading"'. The

representation of women's hair thus facilitated the authors' engagement in a debate which challenged traditional social and literary conventions, and explored new definitions of the feminine, the heroine, and the novel.'<sup>(14)</sup> Even as hair was impressed into a carefully created form, every stray curl that escaped from the tight coiffure, or every curl that was assiduously combed into it, tapped into an expressive economy that is located outside of mere representation. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, in being both a vivid signifier of the approved version of Victorian femininity as well as a threatening female sexuality, Lucy's golden hair releases itself from pre-formatted stereotypes and becomes in itself something more fluid and potent: a cipher for a self that is hidden behind these various impersonations. It then, I argue, moves beyond the culturally ascribed codes associated with it, and becomes a highly expressive medium of voicing individuality.

In analysing the powerful figure of the golden haired woman, Gitter's argument is based on the continued significance of blonde hair in western imagination. She asserts that this cultural fixation took on an even richer symbolism in the nineteenth century because it most fully embodied the Victorian preoccupation with both wealth and female sexuality. Though this is largely true, hair in general, irrespective of colour, was becoming a highly complex site where cultural and sexual anxieties about women could be displaced. It was not just the golden hair that was significant, as Gitter argues, but rather women's hair itself which had evolved into a intensely articulate and emotive attribute. Though the fair-haired women who inhabit Victorian fiction seem to be representative of an ideal of femininity that demanded a desexualised, unthreatening, domesticated quality, because of the value-laden charge of blondeness, and its auxiliary features, it became coveted for itself. It then had the potential to transform its possessor into a sexualised, powerful woman who was aware of her own value, and also thus conscious of how to use it to her own advantage. This was the other extreme of the angelic blonde, whose sexuality had been defused and channeled into marital blissfulness.

This kind of equation has a specific context: golden hair had increasingly gained its overtones of a corrupted materiality and unwomanly greed from the public debate on what was known as the 'Woman Question'. The New Woman was emerging and making her claim on the public sphere, to a right to higher education, to her own property, to suffrage, and to a certain economic and physical freedom. In 1857, the Divorce Act was passed and the bill to amend the Married Woman's Property law was presented to parliament in the same year. Both of these called into question traditional familial structures and challenged them from a position that was chiefly financial. This implication easily translated into the gold that was women's hair, and was already present in the discourse on sexuality that often took place through that obvious symbol of femininity. This gold hair then transformed the woman who possessed it into the ultimate commodity while also making her, in a perverse twist, intensely powerful as the mistress of that which was so highly estimated.

This symbolic appraisal of hair also has a direct link to the actual economic value that it was endowed with, adding another layer to the cultural and political matrix that fetishised it. The manifold implications surrounding women's hair were compounded by the premium placed on it by a culture where the dictates of fashion made it a highly coveted commodity. Long hair was admired and envied, and hairstyles were increasingly so gigantic and elaborate that hair itself was in much demand. Fake hair was a necessity for recreating the voguish hairstyles of the day, and by the late 1850s, the supplying of artificial hair had become a major industry, with hair from France, Germany and Italy being the most desirable. Paris was the major hair market of the world, and it was reported in 1862 that about a hundred tonnes of hair was bought in the Paris market alone. Hair was then imported in large quantities into England by wig-makers to meet the market for fake hair that the new styles had generated. This requirement was fulfilled by

young women suffering from poverty or as a regular occupation where women grew their hair to be sheared for paltry sums and then sold for huge profits by the hair merchants.(15)

The idea of the dazzlingly blonde Angel in the House that the Victorian woman is typically associated with, becomes less and less helpful as a basis for evaluation. The highly disturbing compound of the untainted, childlike but sexualised blonde female makes this formulation of the coherent, domesticated woman highly suspect. The proper Victorian wife morphs into the dangerous, powerful, sexually aware woman who lures men through the promise of her erotic charms, leading them to their doom in the figure of Lady Audley. She is made doubly dangerous by her own appreciation of the power of her burnished hair, and she deftly manipulates it in her ambition for social ascent. Hair then emerges as a powerful force even outside of the blonde women who support it, disengaging itself from the connotations it derives from its colour, to become a force of its own: intensely eloquent, sexually charged, and commercially viable.

This new kind of heroine, or rather anti-heroine, inverted the stereotype of the domestic novel and expressed female rage, frustration and sexual energy, as well as a gender hostility that often erupted in violence towards men. Wicked women have usually been brunettes, not blonde, simpering creatures that charmed all with their dimpled smiles and bright blue eyes. But there is a secret that Lady Audley's golden beauty conceals and whose existence is hinted at by those same overflowing ringlets that typify her as the household angel. Though the exotic and remote settings of Gothic fiction here give way to the upper-class, aristocratic home of Sir Michael Audley, the links between the two are kept alive in the strangely medieval architecture of the mansion which is then transformed into a modern mirrored paradise that reflects every luxury that offsets the new bride. And though the overtly supernatural devices of horror stories are abandoned by Braddon, the new locus of mystery and suspicion is Lady Audley's body itself. The sense of the uncanny is achieved by focusing on her redolent golden hair, which becomes the signifier of that something unsettling yet indescribable that lurks behind the veneer of the apparently stable home. The private, enclosed space of the family becomes the site of mystery that will result in the peeling away of the layers of secrets that the mistress of the house has built up, revealing her beauty to be a masquerade without meaning.

In employing a descriptive technique that revolves around an excessive detailing of Lucy's appearance and an over accentuation of her embodiment of the feminine ideal, the novel has the effect of making Lucy the cynosure of the reader's attention, just as she is the centre of all attention and drama in the novelistic world. Constituted as an object of scrutiny, she is made into a spectacle at the textual, as well as the narrative level. Not the passive child-bride she appears to be, Lucy manipulates her appearance to hide an intelligent, grasping hunger for upward mobility behind what Alicia contemptuously terms 'a blue-eyed wax-doll' charm, an 'ideal of beauty [that] was to be found in a toy-shop'.(16) In this thoughtless remark, Alicia is closer to the truth than she thinks, for she likens her stepmother to an artificial, synthetic commodity. But though Lucy appears to be ornamental, frivolous, and therefore benign, she in fact forms the greatest threat to bourgeois culture in the novel by too closely mimicking and thus parodying its ideal, revealing it to be an empty icon. It is a replicable idol that can be produced and reproduced inexhaustibly in its various versions – the unsullied orphan, the respectable yet vulnerable governess, the complacent wife – by an actress as consummate and driven as Lucy herself. In the novel, it is the innumerable repetitions of flowing hair that link all her performances and postures, for it is 'Lucy's most serialized accessory and perhaps the novel's most persistent token of her hyperfemininity'.(17)

As the novel progresses through a series of *mise en abyme* disclosures, the secret that is at the centre of Lady Audley becomes further obscured. The plot thickens, twisting and looping at every point like her own sinuous curls, till it leads us back to Lady Audley. In spite of all her cunning, carefully cloaked in

infantile blondness, her secret is uncovered by Robert Audley, her nephew by marriage. He plays the role of the idiosyncratic detective who first falls for Lady Audley's charms, only to be disenchanted as she is revealed to be a 'poor unhappy little golden-haired sinner'.(18) In a climactic scene that lays bare a concealed aspect of her personality, Robert and George Talboys, her first husband, are shown the way of penetrating into Lady Audley's locked private rooms. The entry to this inner sanctum is shown by Alicia, her step-daughter, after a query by Robert Audley: "Isn't there a secret passage, or an old oak chest, or something of that kind, somewhere about the place, Alicia?"(19) This entire episode of the hidden passageway and the first real clue to Lady Audley's identity is a clear parody of Gothic conventions. As the two men delve into an inky, subterranean secret corridor, full of unexpected bends and turns, they seem to be mining into the dark passages of Lady Audley's mind and body. They finally emerge into her voluptuous, untidy boudoir where they find a painting of her, commissioned by the infatuated Sir Michael and painted by a meticulous Pre-Raphaelite. It is this portrait, the description of which I started this paper with, that reveals the sinister truth behind her angelic features.

This painting that is so like and unlike Lucy lays claim to a semantic realm of its own: it captures the defining essence of the woman, recognising the various layers of identity which envelope her, and in the process of this recognition becomes a text against which her body needs to be read. Every single painted feature becomes a dysmorphic reflection of the living woman that then turns out to be a truer likeness. As every strand of hair takes on a life of its own, becoming invested with an independent energy, it takes over the entire Pre-Raphaelite work of art, its undulating curves replicating the paintings' typically ornate frames. It then dwarfs the woman at the centre of the piece, becoming a framing device itself, a setting in which to read the woman.

Pre-Raphaelite paintings seem eloquent in the way in which they depict women as larger than life emblems of a hallowed feminine complaisance or as icons of female power and sexuality. It was a style that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and shocked the public and the artistic establishment by its 'sensational' realism. It's almost photographic attention to every detail, its exaggerated naturalism bordering on the grotesque, its conflation of physiognomic accuracy and symbolic meaning, turned the 'self-conscious use of particular aesthetic conventions into an intricate debate on looking and knowing'.(20) It is on looking at this intensely suggestive painting of Lucy that Robert begins to fathom the secret shadow of her concealed identity, something that Alicia intuits, much like her dogs and horses who sense that there is something not quite right with Lady Audley. It is also this scene where Talboys recognises his dead wife in the face of the new mistress of Audley Court, and begins to comprehend the extent of her deceit.

Both Michie and Gitter, look at the models of Pre-Raphaelite paintings as obvious symbols of feminine authority and erotic energy, who derive their transcendent vitality partly through their magic hair. The Pre-Raphaelite painting that holds the secrets of Lady Audley's body and identity is itself the icon of Victorian female sexuality, and as such, it articulates and elaborates the paradoxes of Victorian representation. This image of the golden-haired goddess, at once emblematic of the idealised woman and at the same time disconnected from her, then expresses most fully the shifting and equivocal attitudes to the power and worth of female sexuality. Michie looks at this ambivalence, elaborating it on the body of the painted woman: 'On the one hand flamboyantly sexual, on the other, cloaked - even smothered - in layers of clothing, figuration and myth, Pre-Raphaelite paintings become at once the code of codes and the key to their unraveling'.(21) It is the portrait of Lady Audley that distills, codifies and projects her essence onto the painted body of the Pre-Raphaelite model, with all her representational implications and insinuations, and these in turn contrive to provide the fundamental clue to the truth of her character, and in doing so participates in the debate about the self that is central to the novel.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Lady Lilith' (1864-73) seems to be an incarnation of Lady Audley herself, the 'amber-haired syren'.(22) Rossetti's model embodies the same ambivalence, playing out the tension between an alluring sensuality and a troubling culpability. She is the ultimate *femme fatale* with voluptuous coral-red lips, enticing half-closed eyes, thick lustrous hair, and a curvaceous figure. As she narcissistically gazes at herself in the mirror, the viewer is invited to look at her - not only does the woman commodify her beauty, she too is a commodity that is available to the public gaze. Poised with her fingers combing her flowing hair, laying bare the wide expanse of her neck and chest, she is evocative of the mermaids who sit on rocks combing their long hair, leading wandering mariners to their death. This lush display of hair embodies an obvious sexual exhibition, with the manifest suggestion that the abundance of hair is directly proportional to the potency of the sexual invitation.

Accompanying the painting 'Lady Lilith' was a sonnet, 'Body's Beauty' (1868), with Lilith as Adam's first wife, whose 'enchanted hair was the first gold' (l.4).(23) She could deceive even before the serpent appeared and as she sat contemplating herself, drawing 'men to watch the bright web she can weave' (l.7), she put her spell on one so that it 'left his straight neck bent/ And round his heart one strangling golden hair' (l.13-14). (24) In this image, Lilith becomes a strange compound of Penelope and Medusa: one consigns her to the double faced fate of the virtuous wife and the devious woman, and the other to that of a vengeful, emasculating fury.

The Medusa is a frequently recurring trope in Victorian literature and forms a compelling image that combines the idea of female monstrosity with womanly tragedy. Though critics like Bram Dijkstra insist on the horrific, mutated, and gorgon-like aspect of Medusa and see her as a misogynistic figure used repeatedly, pre-dominantly by men, in paintings and literature of the late Victorian period, she is also the undisputable signifier of a disfigured beauty, a self-torturous specter of punishment.(25) Many elements of the myth, despite the ambiguity caused by the differing versions, suggest the tragic nature of the tale: admired for her beauty and her lustrous hair, Medusa offended Athena who then changed her locks into hissing serpents, thereby rendering her appearance so terrifying that no one could look upon her without being petrified into stone.

However, it is the kind of monstrous Medusa that Dijkstra talks about that is evoked in a critical passage in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Though the novel has had a varied publishing history, the text has remained largely consistent but for a three substantial revision.(26) In the chapter entitled 'Troubled Dreams', the account of Robert Audley's dreams was more explicit in the *Sixpenny Magazine* version but removed from all subsequent editions. It is one of these deleted passages that I want to examine here. In disturbed sleep, the terrifying image of Lucy as Medusa resurfaces in Robert's subconscious, providing another intuitive, spectral clue to her identity. In the manner of Gothic tales, *Lady Audley's Secret* too depends on a kind of knowledge that seems to emerge from the supernatural, finding utterance in portraits and dreams. So it is in Robert's dream that the 'feathery masses of ringlets' that the Pre-Raphaelite painter had rendered with such precision are mutated into Medusa-like serpentine locks:

[H]e was walking in the black shadows of this long avenue, with Lady Audley hanging on his arm, when [she] suddenly [...] wound her slender arms around him, crying out that it was the day of judgment, and that all wicked secrets must now be told. Looking at her as she shrieked this in his ear, he saw that her face had grown ghastly white, and that her beautiful golden ringlets were changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her fair neck. (27)

This dream is as disquieting as the oneiric episode of the portrait. In both Lady Audley's hair becomes a bizarre metaphor for the duplicity that hides behind surface realities, the seemingly stable familial and feminine identities. The serpentine flexibility of Lucy's hair and its sinuous, meandering grasp on Robert's masculinity and even his physical person becomes equated with Medusa's venomous weapons. The allure of Lucy's radiant beauty and her luminous hair is only a trap that is given away by this configuration where her delicate complexion becomes 'ghastly white' and her golden hair itself metamorphoses into slender serpents. Dijkstra remarks that by using the symbol of the snake, with its associated ideas of cunning and perversity, writers could be 'somewhat less graphic and yet satisfyingly symbolic'.(28) For him this serpentine feminine bestiality is an image of what he calls 'idols of perversity', and closely linked to the idea of the *vagina dentata*: a jawed, alarmingly aggressive, predatory female sexuality. The dry, ruined well into which Lucy pushes George Talboys, attempting to murder him and keep her secret to herself, could be seen as a variation, or rather a concrete materialisation, of the *vagina dentate*. Situated at the end of the lime-walk in the garden, suggestively, the well is reached through a winding path, neglected and half-choked with weeds. The 'unheeded decay among the tangled masses of briery underwood' and the 'patch of rank grass',(29) that surround the forgotten well become extended metaphors for Lucy's sexual depravity and her moral barrenness. Deceived, cuckolded and seriously injured, Talboys is barely able to escape with his life and climbs out of the swallowing well covered in 'green damp and muck, [...] scratched and cut to pieces'.(30) The entrapping well with its cover of briar bushes becomes another synecdoche, almost like her boudoir into which the two men had earlier made their way, for Lady Audley's body itself but here it takes on an added aggressive violence. Extending the metaphor of her hair and her body then, the voluptuousness of the hair becomes increasingly, though only furtively, suggestive of pubic hair and its imputations of a vigorous though rank sexuality.(31) The connection between the display of overflowing, luxuriant hair and an explicit sexual invitation that both the literary portrait of Lady Audley and the painted image of Lilith explore and exploit, here takes on a more grotesque aspect as the scene of the crime that is central to the novel takes on a surreptitious sexual charge, mapping the act on a terrain that reads like Lucy's bodily topography.

Another myth associated with the Medusa is that of Narcissus: both myths characteristically used for women, both playing upon the idea of a gaze so powerful that it has the ability to hypnotise. It is through the construction of this hypnotically beautiful, sunny haired protagonist that Braddon enters the contemporary dialogue about the prevailing notions of feminine identity, its need for negotiation and redefinition, its association with material consumption and Victorian commodity culture, as well as its deployment as a fraught site where all conflictual cultural and gender complexities could be played out. She wittily uses the stock images of femininity that trade in the symbolic and actual value of blonde hair - the binaries of the angel and the *femme fatale* - but in doing so emphasises the pliability and plasticity of that hair, thereby revealing the constructed nature of those representations, and of gender itself. The same gold could at one time become the glowing aureole over the devoted wife, while at another time it could become a web or a trap that would ensnare gullible, enchanted men, giving the golden hair the potentiality for denoting both saintliness and sexual enticement.

It is in the yawning gap between the idealised blonde woman and the associated natural goodness she is supposed to possess that Braddon arranges her mystery, making the possibility of interpreting the self through an exteriority that was natural and transparent impossible. This necessary disjunction between the real and the superficial is what she harnesses, making her heroine a compelling figure, engendering as well as entrapped in the illusion of her magical hair. Even as Lady Audley personifies the angelic wife viewed by Robert Audley at the beginning of their acquaintance, sitting with her Berlin-wool work in the embrasure of a window, 'her fair face, surrounded by its bright aureole of hazy, golden hair', a narratorial remark punctures the scene of domestic perfection. Her needle-work is the 'embroidery which the

Penelopes of ten or twelve years ago were very fond of exercising their ingenuity upon'.(32) In Homeric myth, Penelope was the faithful wife of Odysseus, who kept her suitors away during her husband's absence by weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, which she cunningly unraveled every night. She is then also a weaver of fictions, fabricator of untruth. By metaphorical extension, Lady Audley is then not only creating the myth of the ideal, golden-haired wife, but also believing in it and living it, but as the weaving of lies gets more dense, so the domestic myth becomes a snare in which she will be trapped.

Brantlinger argues that most sensation novels confined their startling disclosures to the family circle, but since the family itself was the touchstone of bourgeois values and morality, the effect of these 'voyeuristic, primal scene revelations' was highly subversive.(33) So the loving relations on which the household was balanced were exposed as being based on a forged respectability that concealed bigamists, adulterers, murderesses, vampires, imposters, and all varieties of criminal behaviour. They subverted the conventions of realist fiction and the truths it creates about familial and domestic life by using it in a modified form: these writers 'import[ed] romantic elements back into contemporary settings, reinvesting the ordinary with mystery (albeit only of the secular, criminal variety), and undoing narrative omniscience to let in kinds of knowledge that realistic fiction had often excluded'.(34) *Lady Audley's Secret* is insistent in showing truth and reality to be hidden entities, buried and concealed behind hollow facades that can only be exploded by trusting the intuitive signals. It is then not surprising that it is in a portrait, in a dream, and in Lady's Audley's own hair that the clues to the mystery are embedded.

The narrative thread slowly unwinds itself to reveal that behind Lucy Graham, the docile governess, lurks Helen Talboys, bigamist and suspected murderess. But the secret of the title is hidden behind yet another layer, and in a surprising twist, it is disclosed that behind Helen Talboys lies Helen Maldon - a woman with a self-confessed legacy of insanity. All these identities are subsumed under the name and facade of Lady Audley, who then herself is 'finally, and chillingly, hidden away under the invented, arbitrary name of 'Madam Taylor''.(35) This last fictitious name is the only one that is not made up by her, but is bestowed rather by the Audley heir, Robert, in his desire to protect the centuries old name of the family and to keep her from spending the end of her days in a prison. But even then, the name is suggestive of Lucy's extraordinary inventiveness, her ability to self-fashion endlessly.

From the very beginning Lucy is presented as an innate actress, intuitively acting to perfection all her roles, and as Taylor points out, in the process she undercuts the distinction between the natural and the artificial.(36) What connects and perpetuates her different roles are her acts of consumption and she slips from one role to another with increasing ease, led by her heightening consumerist aspirations. So the threat of Lucy's multiple performances lies not just in the gender relations that she destabilises but also in the class barriers that she transgresses. A deserted wife, the mother of a young child, and burdened with an alcoholic father, she poses as an orphan to get the post of a governess. It is in this position that she is asked by Sir Michael to be the mistress of Audley Court. What makes this proposal thinkable is her respectability as the governess to an honourable family, her refined manners coupled with her golden beauty, and the absence of a sordid, working class background. Her hair then works as a contrivance that helps her create the identity of compliant, good-natured, young woman who has seen life's hardships without being marred by them.

By foregrounding Lady Audley's impersonation of the proper feminine the novel harnesses the anxiety that that ideal of femininity is perhaps only a form of acting. The naturalness and rapidity with which Lucy moves from one role to another is part of the debate about identity, its stability, its potential for loss and duplication, that is a major concern of the sensation novel. Another aspect of the same concern shows itself in the idea of the doppelganger, or motifs of doubling that often appear in Gothic tales. So,

ministering to Lucy's cosmetic needs and starring in the role of the female confidante, is Phoebe, her washed-out maid who bears an uncanny resemblance to her mistress. This is a likeness that both maid and mistress notice, and Lucy even goes on to remark:

[...] you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want. My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, and yours is drab; my eyebrows and eyelashes are dark brown, and yours are almost - I scarcely like to say it, but they're almost white, my dear Phoebe; your complexion is sallow, and mine is pink and rosy. Why, with a bottle of hair-dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I, any day, Phoebe.(37)

With the appropriate make-up then the working-class girl could as easily transform into Lady Audley; a transformation that would replicate poor Helen Maldon's transformation into a Helen Talboys, who morphs into Helen Graham, who is then in a final fairy-tale twist asked to become Lady Audley.

But what makes Lucy so different from the various other look-alikes that surround her is that she seems to have a 'colour', an authenticity that they lack. Her resemblance to Phoebe and to Matilda Plowson, the unfortunate woman who substituted her in the grave, is one that makes her hair look particularly bright. Phoebe's colourlessness, and her washed-out, faded complexion and Matilda's lank, sunless hair are no match for the vital energy of Lucy's appearance. However, what is even more threatening than these numerous doubles is the suggestion that perhaps Lucy is not the original, genuine article. Being an artificial, cleverly constructed idol, she is only one of the duplicates. As Lyn Pykett points out, the novel 'raises the spectre that femininity itself is duplicitous, and that it involves deception and dissembling'.(38)

The real Lucy is lost in the proliferating versions of herself that she creates, but as each layer of identity is peeled away to reveal what lies beneath, it is the golden hair that links every assumed personality together. The very first clue in the novel falls in the hands of Phoebe and her fiancé, Luke, as they wander through Lucy's private rooms in the early pages of the novel, in a chapter called 'Hidden Relics'. Looking into one of her jewellery caskets, Luke pushes open a secret drawer, lined with purple velvet and containing 'neither gold nor gems; only a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby's head'.(39) Though not knowing the particulars of that infantile curl, it is a discovery that Phoebe shrewdly recognises the value of and is a secret that she hoards for a later date, something that might be useful in negotiating the price of a public house for Luke in exchange for silence. Though this is a strand of the narrative that remains unresolved, it does suggest the crucial role that hair of that uncommon glittering hue would play in the novel.

The second clue is also a lock of hair, but it is a specious keepsake given to Talboys by the landlady of the cottage where the supposed Helen Maldon had breathed her last. It is a long tress of hair wrapped in silver paper that she had cut off as the young woman lay in her coffin. Even in that moment of sorrow, Talboys' response hints at the cruel substitution: "'Yes," he murmured; "this is the dear hair that I have kissed so often when her head lay upon my shoulder. But it always had a rippling wave in it then, and now it seems smooth and straight"'(40) And he leaves the landlady's explanation that it changed in illness uncontested. This second memento returns to reveal Lady Audley's fraud, along with its genuine counterpart that is found by Robert Audley as he's looking through his friend's books. Looking for a piece of writing, or a fragment of letter that might prove to be useful in his detective pursuit, he comes across 'a bright ring of golden hair, of that glittering hue which is so rarely seen except upon the head of a child - a sunny lock, which curled as naturally as the tendril of a vine; and was very opposite in texture, if not different in hue, to the soft, smooth tress which the landlady at Ventnor had given to George Talboys after his wife's death'.(41)

All of these facts come together towards the end of the novel and form the denouement of Lady Audley's secret. As the seams of gender fabrication are unraveled thread by thread, it is made clear that the secret that hides at the heart of the novel is that Lady Audley is neither insane nor criminally inclined but rather that she is a consummate actress, successfully acting out desires for social and financial mobility. Lynn Voskuil points out that what outraged early critics was not the mere fact of Lady Audley's theatricality but its mode: 'that she has exposed Victorian femininity as an act is less alarming than the way in which she plays it'.(42) Her tool in the quest for the gold that the position of the mistress of Audley Court holds out is literally her golden hair. Its presence is vital to her success and the novel reads almost like a manual that exposes how it can be manipulated to attract a suitable husband. By her own confession, Helen/ Lucy/ Lady Audley had first begun to look upon her blonde loveliness as 'a right divine, a boundless possession which was to be a set-off against all girlish short-comings, a counter-balance of every youthful sin'.(43) And even in her distress she never forgets the beauty that she can use to her advantage, always being alive to the importance of outward effect. In her moment of utmost crisis, threatened by exposure and on the brink of a breakdown, having twined her fingers in her loose amber curls, her 'mute despair' gives way to 'the unyielding dominion of beauty [...] and she released the poor tangled glitter of ringlets, leaving them to make a halo round her head in the dim firelight',(44) still undeniably angelic in appearance if not in reality. The Medusa-like serpentine locks and their accompanying sexual threat have been reduced to pathetic, powerless disorder. The same image has been inverted and it here has the suggestion of a tragic feminine destiny, a wasted beauty, and a self-inflicted pain that Dijkstra's analysis leaves no room for.

When she is entombed in the remote sanatorium, far in a forgotten Belgian city, which is to be her home for the rest of her life she finally surrenders herself to an anguished despondency, refusing to repent: '[...] I *cannot!* Has my beauty brought me to *this*? [...] She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair; that beautiful nimbus of yellow light that had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty'.(45) But in spite of this eventual conclusion to Lady Audley's adventurous life, she continues to the proper lady. As the narrator notes at the moment she confesses her crime: 'All mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and disheveled hair, and an appearance in every way reverse of my lady's'.(46) By not employing these conventional signifiers Braddon is once again emphasising the arbitrary logic on which they are based and therefore making visible the ease with which someone with the appearance and intelligence of Lady Audley could insert herself into the role of the accepted upper middle-class Victorian woman.

Having recognised the value of her hair, she had traded on her infantile beauty to bigamously marry into a title, thereby creating a transfer of meaning - her hair no longer being a sign of inward purity, but infused by greed, ambition, and a murderous cruelty. Hair enters the realm of commerce by becoming so infused with signification, and at her most virtuous, the woman would save it to spend in the marriage market, purchasing herself wedded bliss in return for her good management. In her more menacing incarnation, the hair and its value would either be thoughtlessly squandered or be deceptively used to create a web for sexual entrapment. But as Gitter points out, '[w]hether she is purchasing domestic happiness or vicious profit, [...] in using her hair the woman compromises its value as an emblem of sublimity'.(47)

So while Pykett claims that Braddon's descriptive excesses typified her 'habitual fetishisation of woman's hair',(48) it really displays Braddon's incisive understanding of a society that had fetishised hair in fashion, trade, artistic and literary representations, and even in mourning convention. It was reduced to a highly estimated commodity in the social and cultural marketplace - a thing of obsessive attention that finds its most curious manifestation in the hair jewellery that was so popular at the time. In novels like

*Lady Audley's Secret* where these descriptions are in excess of the demands of realism, hair takes on its own semantic realm, moving from being a psychological and emotional landscape to something animate. It actively claims possession to a life of its own, becoming independent and energetic, at times aggressive, erotic and wild, at times potently, austerely elegant. Lady Audley's sensational hair, with all its Gothic overtones of stealth and deceit, becomes a metonym for the crux of anxieties about the New Woman of the period. It is a cipher for the erotic and commercial overvaluation of hair, but it is also a subversive element that finds its way into the new sensational aesthetics and becomes a prominent focus of narrative pleasure in the text.

1. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), p. 72.
2. Patrick Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37.1 (1982), p. 1.
3. Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863), p. 483. As quoted in Krysta Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 44.
4. *ibid.* Mansel, p. 489.
5. This is an idea that Braddon herself explored in the later novel *The Doctor's Wife*, where the heroine is an enthusiastic acolyte of sensation novels and a firm believer in the truth of the fictions it purveys. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), ed. Lynn Pykett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
6. Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', p. 7.
7. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1982), p. 164.
8. *ibid.*, p. 165.
9. Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwood's*, p. 263, 369. As quoted in Galia Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade', *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 103.
10. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p.13.
11. *ibid.*, p. 32, 66, 125.
12. Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA*, Vol. 99, No. 5, (Oct., 1984); Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Galia Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade'.
13. Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', p. 941.
14. Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade', p. 103.
15. Richard Corson, *Fashions in Hair: The First Five Thousand Years* (Hairdressers' Technical Council, 1966), Chapter 12. The cutting of hair in most Victorian novels is shown as a remarkably traumatic experience and the wearing of false hair as an act of grievous feminine duplicity. In Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, Marty South is cajoled and seduced by the village barber into selling the wealth of her hair to be made into the fake braided locks that will adorn Mrs. Charmond's head and draw Winterborne to her. Marty's eventual decision to cut her hair arises out of poverty, but also out of disappointment in love, and signifies a kind of loss of innocence and hope. Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887), ed. J. Gibson (London: Penguin Classics, 1981).
16. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 262.
17. Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy*, p. 65.
18. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 250.
19. *ibid.*, p. 69.
20. Jenny Bourne Taylor, ed., Introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. xxii.
21. Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 123.
22. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p.280.
23. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Writings*, ed. J. Marsh (J.M. Dent, 1999).
24. *ibid.*
25. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
26. Natalie M. Houston, ed., Introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret* (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 34.
27. *ibid.*
28. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 308.

29. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 270.
30. *ibid*, p. 414.
31. I am indebted to the anonymous reader who suggested these connections between the Medusa image, the *Vagina Dentata*, and the dry, abandoned well that entraps George Talboys.
32. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 122.
33. Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', p. 26-27.
34. *ibid*.
35. Taylor, p. xv.
36. *ibid*, p. xix-xx.
37. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 60.
38. Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 90-91.
39. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 34.
40. *ibid*. p. 45.
41. *ibid*. p. 160.
42. Lynn M. Voskuil, 'Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), p. 615.
43. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 293.
44. *ibid*, p. 294.
45. *ibid*, p. 384.
46. *ibid*, p. 333.
47. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', p. 946.
48. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p. 98.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies***

(Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009)

With its revision of that famous first sentence Seth Grahame-Smith makes his intentions clear: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains.” Thus begins *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which is billed as an “expansion” of a regency classic and surely one of the most unlikely additions to the Austen-verse. A discussion of the plot would be largely redundant, as it’s basically identical to the original but with the inclusion of zombies and martial arts. England is plagued by a mysterious virus and overrun with hordes of the risen dead, known as “Unmentionables,” who overturn carriages and feast on the brains of their passengers. The Bennet sisters are a dangerous group of warriors, having learned their deadly arts under the tutelage of Master Liu in the confines of a Shaolin Temple. There, we are told, they “spent many a long day being trained to endure all manner of discomfort.” Elizabeth Bennet is now a sort of kick-ass proto-Lara Croft who is as comfortable sharpening swords as dispensing *bon mots*. Thus the verbal sparring that characterised the original text is now transformed into frequent, cartoonish bouts of combat; Darcy’s confession of love becomes a drawing-room brawl and Lady Catherine’s admonishment to Lizzy into an epic battle involving ninjas.

But all of this sounds much more exciting in summary, as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is a curiously lifeless affair to read. One of the most obvious problems of *Pride and Prejudice* acting as the book’s palimpsest is that Grahame-Smith’s passages suffer in comparison to those written by Austen. His attempts at mimicking her style are wildly uneven, with the occasional jarring use of an Americanism or an unlikely metaphor interrupting the story far more than anything involving the undead. For example, he writes that “Bodies lay everywhere: in pews; in aisles – the tops of their skulls cracked open; every last bite of their brains scraped out, like pumpkin seeds from a jack-o-lantern.” Given that Austen hardly ever used similes and Halloween, hence jack-o-lanterns, didn’t exist at the time, this comparison seems misjudged. Similarly his knowledge of Irish geography is quite shaky. Elsewhere, he refers to the “St. Lazarus Seminary for the Lame at Kilkenny” being in “Northernmost Ireland”. Three pages later it is referred to as “Kilkerry” then later on “Kilkenny” again. Although these points are minor they are still somewhat distracting when they occur and only act to undermine Grahame-Smith’s attempted mimicry. Indeed the original is still so entertaining that when one encounters another passage involving “Unmentionables” and his limp prose, one almost feels like skipping it in order to get back to the main story. Another problem is the fact that the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is so tautly constructed that he is always struggling to find ways of getting the characters outdoors and dispatching zombies or fighting each other while still adhering to the original’s basic trajectory. One gets the feeling that the book would probably have been better served had he departed more radically from Austen’s work rather than trying to find ways of shunting zombies into the story. Indeed the moments that really work best are those when there is an actual effort to compliment the original text. For example, Mr. Collins’ speech about how he and Charlotte “have but one mind and one way of thinking” is now rendered ironic by the fact that she is a drooling, brain-dead zombie. There is also admittedly a guilty joy in seeing some characters finally get their dues, such as when the smarmy Mr. Wickham is rendered limbless, incoherent, incontinent and has to be carried around in a bed by four servants.

One has to wonder then: what is the aim of this book? Is it a post-modern exercise in fusing high and low culture? The literary equivalent of a musical mash-up? A subversive scheme to smuggle a classic tale of

romance into the hands of young boys who are probably more interested in torture porn? Or a cash-in on a classic whose rights have expired? Could this thus be the beginning of new trend where we see canonical texts with genre conventions grafted on? If so, then how long before we see other works, such as “Dawn of *The Dead*” wherein Gabriel Conroy has to battle the risen corpse of Michael Furey in order to win back the heart of Gretta, on our shelves?

In a recent interview, Grahame-Smith admitted that the idea for the book came from his editor who had a list of similarly remixed titles. “I owe the title to my editor at Quirk Books. He'd been wanting to do some kind of literary remix or mash-up, and he had lists of possible books. On one side he had *Wuthering Heights* and *Sense and Sensibility* and so forth, and on the other side he had things like pirates and robots and vampires. And one day he called me excitedly and said all I have is a title: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.” And as a title it is pretty funny. But I think part of the reason it works as a title and not as a book is not only due to its poor execution but rather the discrepancy between how *Pride and Prejudice* is (unfairly) perceived as a paragon of stiff romance and its actual content. It is constantly marketed, remade and repacked as a romantic tale but a new reader must be surprised to find out how little the central love story actually occupies the text. Certainly many subsequent adaptations must be in part to blame for de-fanging what is an, at times, acidic comic vision. Is there thus an argument to be made somewhere that perhaps *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is in fact a more faithful rendering of this vision than the rather flaccid romantic versions which it has spawned? One could posit that it actualises the latent violence and danger of the original, as well as drawing attention to the Bennets’ need for protection and self-protection. And if so, one has to wonder, what would Jane Austen herself think of all this? Maybe the author of *Northanger Abbey*, not to mention an admirer of Ann Radcliffe, would perhaps find at least something amusing about a horror version rather than another adaptation featuring sumptuous scenery and pouty starlets.

At any rate this isn't the final word on the “expansion” of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elton John's production company, Rocket Pictures, recently announced that *Pride and Predator* is in the works which will see the bounty-hunting alien facing off against the residents of Longbourne. Arnie as Mr. Darcy, anyone?

**BRIAN DAVEY**

**David Moody, *Hater***  
(New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006)

An officious office manager strides down a busy London street, thinking happy thoughts. Suddenly he notices a little old lady walking past him. Something about her is different, wrong. As he stares, he feels terror rise up in him – there's something not right about her. His fear turns to panic and he lashes out, stabbing her with the umbrella in his hand, stabbing the grandmother in the stomach and screaming incoherently at her. The manager is eventually dragged away from the woman's battered corpse, his eyes filled with fear and hatred of everyone around him.

The random attacks quickly spread. All across the UK people are attacking strangers and family members for no apparent reason. The rate of murder seems to be rising exponentially and every day it gets worse.

In the midst of this Danny McCoyne is just trying to get through the day at his crappy job in the Council's car clamping section without being strangled by irate drivers and not being sacked by his harridan boss. To make matters worse, his relationship with his wife is deteriorating, he's sick of his kids and his father in law openly hates him and takes great pleasure in showing up his inability to look after his family.

*Hater*, by author David Moody, is a novel mired in paranoia about others, drawing its inspiration from *Night of the Living Dead*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and any film by Ken Loach.

What makes *Hater* stand out from the plethora of other similar novels is that Danny is not a member of a Special Forces team, he hasn't received training in mystical arts and he doesn't have a job directly connected with working in crisis situations. He is, in fact, slightly irritating, a bit of a loser and incredibly human. Moody draws the reader into his tale of a civilisation collapsing through his easily identifiable characters. Everyone has had that job they've hated and wanted something better in life. Danny's life hasn't turned out the way he planned it, he hates his job, he's starting to hate his wife and now mobs of people are roaming the streets killing each other.

*Hater* was initially vanity published by Moody, who used his website to promote the book. Moody has published several other books through his own publishing house (subsequently wound up since the success of *Hater*) which proved relatively successful in their own right. After the book developed a following, *Hater* was picked up by Orion Books in the UK and has subsequently been re-released, with a promised sequel currently being produced. It is, in fact, one of the few success stories from vanity publishing, normally the home of rambling insanity, dire poetry and the odd bout of racism (trust me, some of the books I've been asked to review by the Journal's Generalissimos have left me feeling grimy and in need of a shower...).

*Hater* is excellently paced, with the reader drawn into the mystery of what is causing the average citizen to turn into a violent maniac and whether or not Danny will be able to carry his family through the crisis without strangling his father in law or being subject to the brutal oppression being instigated by the government to keep control of the country.

However, despite the good pacing, the novel's ending comes a tad abruptly, with a number of plot twists arriving in swift succession and being resolved almost as quickly. Indeed, Moody's approach to plot development is reminiscent of that of Stephen King, with the majority of the book given over to it and character development. Unlike King (thankfully) Moody is actually able to deliver on his build up, with

the ending, despite the fact that it occurs remarkably quickly, being of suitable grandeur to warrant the previous couple of hundred pages spent on exploring the characters' relationships.

*Hater* has been described as a zombie novel and it does feature some similarities. The survivors find themselves locked away within their homes, only able to watch the world fall apart on TV without being able to do anything to stop it. Moreover, in a similar vein to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, paranoia is rife throughout the novel. Suspicions rise as to who is or isn't a Hater. In one instance, a man arrives at Danny's offices, angry at having had his car clamped, a normal enough incident a few days previously. Now, however, anyone displaying anger is considered a potential threat and he soon finds himself in a dangerous situation pleading with Danny that he is in fact not of "them".

By emphasising this aspect of the threat, Moody also does a good job in dismissing many of the problems that are part and parcel of zombie fiction. A zombie plague would in reality be easy enough to stop. It's not like a walking corpse blends into a crowd. The smell alone is enough to identify them, let alone their leaving bits of themselves behind every time they bump into something (hand-eye co-ordination wouldn't be so good either.)

I would dearly love to discuss one of the plot twists but can't, as it would ruin the book for those who have not already read it. Suffice it to say that it turns the entire novel on its head, and whilst one may eventually extrapolate it from the plot, it still comes as a surprise and is one of the more attractive aspects of the novel.

*Hater* is an excellent novel and one I heartedly recommend. The characters are welcomingly human, the pacing excellent and the end, if not shocking, certainly much less expected than what is normal within this type of fiction. Go buy it!

**RICO RAMIREZ**  
*Buenos Aires Correspondent*

**Caliban's Mirror: Brigid Cherry, *Horror***  
(London: Routledge, 2009)

“Just keep repeating – it isn't only a movie ...” These are the final words of Brigid Cherry's highly entertaining book *Horror*, the latest addition to the Routledge Film Guidebooks series (which also includes books on James Cameron and the Bollywood phenomenon). Like the book as a whole, its closing caveat elicits a grin of aesthetic pleasure from the reader (even if he or she is not already a horror fan and thus fails to recognise the province of the phrase - the tag-line for William Castle's *Strait-Jacket* (1964) which was introduced to a wider audience via a poster for the 1972 version of Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left*). This, however, is followed rapidly by a twinge of uneasy discomfort, as we realise that we have been confronted once again by the fact that the point of horror is to turn the spectacle of nasty things happening to fictional characters into entertainment – to render it, perversely, fun. Indeed, the main strength of Cherry's book is that it brings us face to face with the worrying fact that we all too frequently snicker at a wittily allusive death scene or find satisfaction in a grimly neat but thoroughly dystopian narrative *dénouement*.

Nonetheless, in keeping with the work's status as a yet another primer for the student of horror film, the tricky matter of what James B. Twitchell terms the dreadful pleasures of the cinematic horror text, is left, to all intents and purposes, as enigma for which she offers no conclusive explanation. That said, it would be doing Cherry a disservice to insist that *Horror* sits on the fence as regards the issue of why exactly horror films remain enduringly popular despite – or rather because of – the horrific images and disturbing subject matter that are their very *raison d'être*. Specifically, and very sensibly, within the parameters of its status as an unbiased overview of the genre and the critical responses to it, one which is quite explicitly aimed at third-level students new to the genre, the book does not shy away from asserting with a certain degree of conviction that the concerns and iconography of horror cannot and should not be divorced from the socio-cultural conditions in which they are produced.

This, however, is by no means all that the book is concerned with. Rather than being organised chronologically or, as has become increasingly popular in works of this nature, in terms of various motifs or image clusters (such as Tony Magistrale's *Abject Terrors* (2005) and Carole Zucker's *The Cinema of Neil Jordan* (2008), both reviewed in earlier issues of this journal), *Horror* is divided into four sections which move from the technical and the aesthetical to the cultural and the political. The book begins with the most basic issue of how we can define horror and which films can be labelled as such, before tackling the aesthetic techniques used to arouse dread or disgust in the viewer. From here, it discusses the aforementioned problem of the pleasure that viewers derive from watching horror, and concludes with an elucidation of the ways in which the genre has been associated with, springs from, or is seen as giving rise to various cultural and social ills.

While all of this is handled from a laudably open-minded viewpoint, supported by an impressively wide-ranging knowledge of the genre, I would not wish to suggest that my praise for *Horror* (or indeed for horror) is unmitigated. Apart from the uneasy sense of complicity or indeed of vulnerability which viewing the latter can often arouse, the former is quite simply badly punctuated. This minor carelessness extends to some clunky phrasing which interrupts the flow of the argument and can at times impede comprehension. In particular, the assertion that horror films articulate, among other things, anxieties “of the difference of cultural Other” (170), while far from impenetrable, made this reviewer pause, reread the

very long sentence from the beginning in order to work out what was being said, and make loud tut-tutting noises.

More importantly, the book also displays a marked tendency to skim over intriguing points which are raised by the relentless stream of explanation and exposition. One example of this comes during a discussion of the first *Saw* film, where Cherry notes that “Adam is set up as a passive observer in life (a variation on the postmodern zombie [as consumerist automaton] perhaps)” (202), a potential goldmine of an observation which she fails to tap into in the rest of her discussion of the film. Similarly, when postulating that both the form and content of *The Blair Witch Project* imply that “technology gets in the way of seeing,” in another parenthesis, she remarks that this idea “perhaps links back to theories of the gaze in horror cinema” (188), the focus of much of the previous chapter; and yet, once again, she never follows up on the implications of this link. Such speculative asides, of which there are several other examples, are, of course, more or less inevitable in a work which sets out to be “a steppingstone to deeper exploration of the ‘black lagoon’ of horror cinema” (211) rather than an aesthetics or theorisation of the genre in its own right. *Horror* discusses such works as Noel Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror* and Carol J. Clover’s *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (often at some length) – but emulating or challenging them does not appear to be part of the task it has set itself. Indeed, places where the text gestures towards but fails (or refuses) to engage with potentially fruitful overlaps between its carefully demarcated sections provide precisely these stepping-stones, gaps into which students of the genre can insert their own meanings, interpretations and knowledge.

Perhaps rather less forgivable is the tendency to give the impression (even if only for a few pages) that other critics’ arguments are being unreservedly embraced and endorsed. On a number of occasions, this reviewer found herself scribbling disapproving notes in the margins, only to find it necessary to scribble them out again several moments later when it finally became clear that Cherry was in no way advocating such an approach or reading. This occurs with particular frequency in relation to gender issues, including the assertion that the final girl is unambiguously coded as masculine; and that “the female spectator [is] forced to adopt the male gaze” (131). While these ambiguities regarding Cherry’s views are generally cleared up fairly rapidly, other less-than-unproblematic assertions are left un-critiqued, such as Freud’s association of the eyes with castration anxiety; the (again) parenthetical insistence that to see slasher films as legitimating and indeed encouraging misogynistic violence is to occupy an “aberrant reading position” (137); the declaration that the figure of the “archaic mother” in *The Brood* is “outside of the patriarchal order entirely” (116); and an almost shockingly sweeping suggestion that “ghosts and hauntings [...] are [...] frequently associated with femininity (and hence lesbianism)” (154). Admittedly (and leaving to one side questions of authorial intention), this sentence is merely an exposition of Patricia White’s critique of *The Haunting*, rather than a statement of belief or opinion that should be read as held by Cherry herself. Nonetheless, if this is indeed “meant” to be read as a way in for students new to the genre, such assertions are essentially irresponsible, as they encourage readers to collapse terms such as “femininity” and “lesbianism” together willy-nilly, and to cite theoretical and critical concepts as “truth” rather than utilising them as further text to be examined and unpicked.

What is more, in this regard, *Horror* often falls down on the very point which it establishes as its founding principle. While the plots and premises of such films as *Psycho* and *Halloween* are more or less widely known to the point of having entered the popular consciousness, lesser-known but often (though by no means always) generically important films like *Ginger Snaps*, *Slither*, *Suspiria*, *Silent Night*, *Deadly Night* and *Cat People* are mentioned with little if any explanation or indication of what their contents might be. Of course, there are plenty of other books out there where such information can very readily be obtained, not to mention the internet. Be that as it may, it’s difficult not to feel that a brief introductory

sentence here and there would help to clarify several places (especially in early chapters) where film titles are bandied about in a manner which seems to presume that the reader will already know everything there is to know about them.

That said, it is these early chapters which, in many ways, take *Horror* out of the realm of run-of-the-mill introductory guides and make it something really quite exciting to read. Chapter 2, “Horror Aesthetics and Affect,” includes some particularly clear, illuminating and often riveting sections on lighting, special effects and camera work which, for readers who have come to horror film from other disciplines (such as literary studies), or who are simply fans of the genre but neither experts nor well-versed in the grammar of shot and cut, opens up whole new levels of signification and interest within the images we see on our screens. I, for one, was delighted to learn that the kind of shot (which features prominently in *Vertigo* and *Jaws*) where a character stands still while the space around them appears to lengthen and skew vertiginously is (with misleading sweetness) called a “dolly zoom,” while the disorientating effect of films such as *Evil Dead 2* can be attributed to something known as “Dutch angles.”

When followed by some genuinely enlightening discussions of everything from lynch mobs to moral panics, from so-called “torture porn” to the allegedly more refined scares of the uncanny, this hard-headed information renders Cherry’s *Horror* something of a treat. Most valuable, perhaps, is the way in which it reminds us that moral outrage in the face of traumatising, nauseating or unsettling images may be mere conservative scare-mongering, but that it is far from reactionary or naïve to be afraid of what horror shows us. Indeed, the book insists that “The ideological subtexts of films are always about the time and place in which they were made, whatever their historical or geographical setting,” going on to note that “The fact that horror cinema deals with anxieties that are of great concern to the culture can thus explain some of the pleasures of the audience” (169). To a certain extent, Oscar Wilde’s aphorism that “the nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass” – a face that is both alienatingly monstrous and hideously familiar – is directly applicable to modern horror. At the same time, and as *Horror* makes admirably clear, this rage can transform equally into narcissistic desire, or even simply into a sense of relief that these anxieties exist and are recognised outside of the viewer’s individual consciousness. As Cherry puts it herself, when we watch a horror film, it is imperative, lest we fail to recognise its culturally relevant, subversive or even radical implications regarding race, gender, power or authority, and the realities of death, that we repeatedly remind ourselves that it is far more than “only” a movie.

***DARA DOWNEY***

**Shaun Tan, *Tales From Outer Suburbia***  
(Allen & Unwin, 2008)

*Tales From Outer Suburbia* is a collection of fifteen short stories written and illustrated by Shaun Tan. The collection is marketed as a children's book, but the text will appeal to adolescent and adult readers too. The stories are by turns fantastic, surreal and sinister, ranging from fond recollections of a foreign-exchange student's visit to instructions for making your own pet out of broken kitchen appliances. *Tales From Outer Suburbia* presents the familiar as something not only strange, but absolutely alien. Throughout the collection, Tan draws upon and feeds into popular and theoretical concepts of the suburbs; as homelands, as playgrounds, as places of violence and danger. The empty centres of suburban gothic are deftly evoked; there is no title story here, only a restless switching of character and focus. None of the narrators are named and few are identifiable as either male or female. Like Tan's other books, *Tales From Outer Suburbia* is beautifully, superbly illustrated with strange, delicate and stark images in pencil, oil, pastel and water-colour. The fabulous illustrations make the book an object of beauty, something to leave out on display for others to run their hands and eyes over in envy. These illustrations do not merely supplement the narrative; at times they subvert it and at other times, completely replace it. Each story is paired with a different visual medium and the images range from complete pictures to weird, pared-back graphics. Though there are threads and motifs running through the narratives, the illustrations make each story distinct. The contents page reinforces this idea, showing a battered envelope covered with stamps which bear a tiny fragment of one of the main illustrations. The stamps – and the stories they represent – are all jumbled, implying that the book is not supposed to be read in any particular order. As a result, the book seems less like a coherent work and more like a clutch of odd, mismatched stories; not so much a collection as a group of found objects.

While some of the stories like “The Water Buffalo”, “No Other Country” and “Eric” are light-hearted, many others, like “Wake”, “Stick Figures” and “Broken Toys” are far more sinister and the overall collection evokes a sense of uneasy, uncanny dread in the reader. As the collection progresses, it becomes clear that Tan's suburbia is less whimsical fantasyland than wasteland; an unknowable place of violence and uncertainty. In “Our Expedition”, Tan brings this unknowability to the fore. Two brothers, arguing over whether or not their town ends at the edge of the map, travel through the suburbs, trying to find the end of the known world. They discover that at the point where Map 268 ends, the ground falls away at a huge cliff with nothing beyond it. Tan seems to suggest that the suburbs represent the very end of civilisation. This eschatology is echoed and distorted in “Alert but not Alarmed”, where every family is required to keep a scud missile in their garden, ready for some distant war. The illustrations show garish cartoons of brightly-painted warheads sandwiched into suburban gardens. The disturbing power of this story is derived, not simply from the incongruity of the image, but from the calm acceptance of the weapons into the suburbs which pre-empt the destruction of the known world.

Violence is either anticipated or inherent in many of these stories. This violence ranges from the rows which break out between couples in “Undertow” and “Grandpa's Story” to the awful but gentle catharsis of “The Nameless Holiday” in which a reindeer comes to take gifts back, but only takes “objects [...] so loved that their loss will be felt like the snapping of a cord to the heart.” There are physical acts of violence too: although the delicate creatures in “Stick Figures” are presented as “just another part of the suburban landscape”, the narrator's benign attitude is soon undermined by violence as the elegant, delicate stick figures are beaten “with baseball bats, golf clubs, or whatever is at hand, including the victim's own snapped-off limbs.” The savage attacks on the stick figures could be seen as an elaborate metaphor for

the struggle between nature and humanity, but it seems more likely that the attacks are completely meaningless; as pointless as all suburban violence.

Probably the most potent and disturbing story in the whole collection is “Wake”. It opens with a bleak statement: “On a cold night last winter there was a fire at the house of a man who only days before had beaten his dog to death.” Inexplicably, when the man staggers out of the burning house with his possessions, he is immediately surrounded by “a hundred dogs of every shape and size [who] snapped at him viciously when he tried to hit them, but otherwise remained still, staring impassively at the flames.” The dogs' silence is eerie and the man's impotent rage is ridiculous; and the result is an unsettling story in which power is suddenly transferred from man to beast. Tan's terse, almost offhand treatment of such brutality is shocking and so it is this story more so than any other that elevates *Tales From Outer Suburbia* from simple fantasy to sure-handed suburban gothic. While “Wake” does not have the apocalyptic scale of “Alert but not Alarmed”, the story is clearly synecdochal; in having the neighbourhood dogs wreak vengeance on one man, Tan dramatises the possibility of revolution, essentially unsettling the whole balance of power in suburbia. “Wake” questions our willingness to call the suburbs home, our inability to recognise the weirdness of our environment, and interrogates the relationship between human and animal, between civilisation and primitive instinct. “Wake” succeeds in dealing with such big ideas because it is so tightly written and while it is brutal in its language and content, it never becomes grotesque. That none of the stories in the collection ever slips into pastiche or hyperbole is a mark of Tan's sure skill as a writer; in fact some of the stories are so subtle, so delicate and seemingly simple that it's not until long afterwards that their gothic significance becomes apparent.

And *Tales From Outer Suburbia* is certainly a significant gothic text. Tan's work is playful, absurd, strange and disturbing, recalling the work of writers such as Vonnegut, Palahniuk, and Dahl, artists as diverse as Hokusai and Hopper, and television shows like *Desperate Housewives* and *Twin Peaks*. In its evocation of the uncanny and in its portrayal of the apathy, uncertainty and downright strangeness of the suburban landscape, the collection breaks new ground in children's literature. All too often, children's gothic falls into parody and pastiche, borrowing plots from texts which have slipped out of memory and out of copyright but Tan's collection is strikingly original. For although the collection will be found – like Tan's other books – in the children's section, there is nothing childish about the text. What appear to be the simplest of the stories turn out to be the most sinister and those that seemed initially very frightening are often quite funny. Tan's deft juxtaposition of the strange and the familiar and the sheer scope of his imagination make this collection very accessible and very engaging. There is a power to the illustrations and a quirky, eccentric charm to the stories that will make the collection very appealing to readers of all ages. No doubt, some people will gasp in horror at the idea of handing such an exquisite and violent book over to a child, but Tan insists that *Tales From Outer Suburbia* is aimed at exactly the same audience as his earlier picture-books. I absolutely agree and I would whole-heartedly recommend this collection to any child. After all, there is no point warning our young readers about bogeymen if we refuse to show them what bogeymen are capable of.

**JANE CARROLL**

**Jonathan Maberry, *Patient Zero***  
(New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009)

Worryingly for authors, it now appears that in order to get a new horror novel published, it is first necessary to write a compendium to it. Max Brooks produced "The Zombie Survival Guide" and then the excellent *World War Z* (a book that has set the bar for zombie fiction and which is now undergoing development hell for a Brad Pitt film).

Now Jonathan Maberry – the author of *Ghost Road Blues*, the recipient of a Bram Stoker Award and author of *Zombie CSU*, a police-procedural manual on how to deal with an undead rising (no really, it's about 400 pages long and covers everything from examining the initial scene of an attack to how to clear up after the zombies have been taken out) – has added his own take on the zombie genre with *Patient Zero*.

*Patient Zero* is a 24-episode novel that follows a US government law enforcement branch as it tries to stop an impending zombie plague. *Patient Zero* takes a slightly different approach to its characters than that taken by *Hater* (reviewed above). Joe Ledger is a cop (with previous military training) who is part of a tri-state task force set up in the wake of 9-11 to track down potential terrorist cells and stop them from committing nefarious activities. After one mission goes wrong (don't they always?), Ledger finds himself on leave, with a partner in hospital and being escorted into unmarked vehicles by suspicious men in sunglasses. It soon becomes apparent that the evil terrorist Muslim who Ledger shot during his previous mission has gotten up off his slab in the morgue and started eating people in a hospital despite a large hole in his chest where his heart used to be.

Informed that the terrorist was infected with a new bio-weapon developed by a group of Islamic extremists linked to Al Qaeda, Ledger soon finds himself tracking down terrorist cells across the United States, all the time aware that time is running out. The action in the novel is non-stop, with the small team of combat specialists (all that's left of the DMS military forces after the rest were wiped out in the hospital outbreak) jumping from one world-ending threat to another. The relentless pace is matched by some excellently written descriptions of the fight scenes and throughout, it is apparent that Maberry is making use of his previous novel, with *Zombie CSU* seeming to act as a bible for the writing of this follow-up novel.

*Patient Zero* can, however, become rather ridiculous at times. At one point we discover that the wife of the Islamic fundamentalist who is trying to destroy the world with zombies is an expert in biological weapons, a nymphomaniac and wears suspenders (and nothing else) under her burqa. Nonetheless, the plot is surprisingly intricate for a zombie novel, eschewing the standard "group of survivors with disparate personalities trapped in a shopping mall/city/prison", with several double crosses occurring, an ever-increasing threat in the form of more advanced versions of the virus, and the rededication of the Liberty Bell... .

Importantly, *Patient Zero* adds a new dimension to the zombie genre. Here, the plague can be stopped before it starts, so rather than being post-apocalyptic, it is pre-apocalypse and does not carry with it the sense of impending doom that fills many similar fictional offerings. The virus used to create the zombies is also relatively believable (although if you had a degree in Molecular Biology I'm pretty sure you could identify some weak points). The virus is an engineered disease mixing parasites and prions, the proteins that cause such fun diseases as CJD and Kuru with later generations spreading faster and faster, upping

the threat. What is more, Maberry takes a somewhat more real-world approach to an outbreak than is usual in zombie novels. It's not ignored and passed off as an outbreak of African rabies or mass hysteria. Rather, the threat is met head on, resulting in an exciting read that on occasion will have you deeply embroiled in the plot. At other times, however, you will find yourself grunting in disbelief at the slight implausibility of the story – for example, Al Qaeda-linked terrorists releasing a zombie plague on Earth only to be headed off by a New York cop who also happens to be an ex-specials forces judo expert.

Characters within the novel are relatively well realised, although many of the supporting characters are two dimensional, especially those that make up Ledger's special-forces team. This makes it a bit difficult to tell them apart and we feel little or no emotional attachment to the characters, so when they (inevitably) get eaten by the undead, we just don't really care. There is also a bit of a tacked-on love story that could have you occasionally gagging, but thankfully Maberry gets to the zombie killing quickly and effectively.

Put all this aside, turn your brain off (if you can find the switch) and try not to think about the plot too much and you'll have a fun and enjoyable read. Just don't expect the book to do anything to improve American/Islamic relations...

***EOIN MURPHY***

**Colin Haines, “Frightened by a Word”: Shirley Jackson and the Lesbian Gothic**  
(Uppsala: Uppsala UP, 2007)

Haines has a big task in store. He aims not only to theorise deeply but also to read closely three of Shirley Jackson’s novels, *Hangsaman* (1952), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1963). He theorises them primarily in terms of the queer theory of Judith Butler and the psychoanalytic feminism of Julia Kristeva, especially their arguments regarding the abject. As Haines shows, Butler emphasises the abject’s origins and concreteness. The subject rejects what originates in the body, then transvalues it into the not-self, then denies its origins, and finally projects it onto the other. By contrast, Kristeva emphasises not the concrete origins in the subject, but the abstract resolution – the subject’s need to find an object that deserves to get the garbage. Haines also sagaciously theorises Sigmund Freud, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Louis Althusser.

Two critics central to his method are Terry Castle and Pauline Palmer. Drawing on Palmer, Haines addresses the sign “lesbian” as not only representation but also configuration. In other words, he elucidates the word both as an image in representation, and as a position in its discursive context – as a note in the social arrangement and literary text. For example, an important aspect of textual configuration he emphasises is focalization. If a character under the sign of “lesbian” (implicitly or explicitly) is the narrator, or even just a third-person narrator’s point-of-view character, then the signifier “lesbian” tends to move from the abject to the subject, thus enabling the reader to sympathise and identify with the abject. He elucidates the extent to which social discourse as a whole and literary discourse in particular have represented and configured lesbianism tangentially, obliquely. Discourse had to reject lesbianism in order to admit it. So traditionally, the image was usually masked – veiled not simply in gossamer but in double crepe. In literature, the taboo image escaped the prison house of language most often in the taboo form of Gothic. It was in Gothic that the vaporous “lesbian” condensed into the cloudy figure of a ghost.

In the Lacanian terms Haines uses, social and literary representations of “lesbian” as abject have tended to endorse the heterosexual Symbolic of the Law of the Father. But Haines goes beyond Castle and Palmer by demonstrating that this interplay of representation and configuration is undecidable because resignifying “lesbian” does not necessarily give that sign a positive valence. Neither the attempt to valorise “lesbian” nor the attempt to parody it is necessarily subversive. For example, a lesbian character as authorial delegate can endorse the Law. So can a parodic lesbian who attempts to flaunt the Law by exaggerating the emblems of the Law’s abject with such costumes as the Amazon, the gym teacher, the diesel dyke, or the bar dyke. The reason, Haines argues, is that it is neither the intent of the author’s nor the logic of the text’s conventions, but the audience that determines if there is a subversive effect. Resisting totalisation and closure, Haines does not try to resolve arguments over of intention, implied readers, reading communities, and pragmatism. He does not try to settle the issue by choosing one camp and then talking up his pick. The pit of contention is where he leaves it. With the sign “lesbian” theorised in terms of Butler and Kristeva on the abject, he then discusses their theorising about horror and terror as he will apply them to the Gothic. Simply put, horror both precedes and causes terror. Horror is the threatening undecidability that terror tries to dispel. And it tries to dispel the horror by making it abject, inverting it from here and now and I, to there and then and it.

In his reading of *Hangsaman*, Haines considers the extent to which this novel destabilises heterosexual literary conventions. He points out that as an image of representation, Tony is apparitional, ghostly, derealised, and in that regard, not much of a transgression against heterosexual discourse. Similarly, Mrs. Waite’s attempt to resist Mr. Waite infantilizes Natalie by putting her into the pre-Oedipal position in such

a way that Natalie is as derealised as Tony. On the other hand, *Hangsaman* does disturb the ideology of heterosexuality in two ways. In a *tour de force* recuperation of Levi Strauss, Haines discusses how gendering in kinship systems facilitates economic circulation. The exchange of women into their husbands' families arises in conjunction with economic exchange. By having no last name, Tony is thereby somewhat outside, not merely of the gender system but also the society. Thus her configuration in society presents possibilities outside of gender constructions. In addition, when Natalie abjects Tony, both the representation and configuration undermine gender constructions. On the surface, Natalie is making the lesbian abject. But under the veil of the apparitional, Natalie is rejecting the Father insofar as Tony is the last link in the metonymical chain stretching back to Natalie's molestation at the hands of Mr. Waite's friend. In addition, this development in the representational image is the plot's turning point, and as such the implicit abjecting of the Father holds an important place in the novel's configuration.

Tony's dual function as both underwriting the Law of the Father as well as erasing it is possible because the feminised, the secondary, can sometimes police discourse in service of the Law of the Father. As Haines points out, the female college students perform their interpellation through surveillance and interrogation of the new initiates. Haines reminds us that for Althusser, the machines most responsible for interpellation are the school and the family.

A similar erasure of the patronymic surname occurs in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Theo has no last name: "I'm Theodora. Just Theodora." Moreover, Theo is open and concrete, not veiled and ghostly. Haines discerns that the ghostly abject is the pre-Oedipal child that Eleanor was before her interpellation into the service of the Father, which culminated when she became her mother's servant. With the discernment of a detective working a cold case that has been gone over many times by previous investigators, Haines discovers that when Eleanor says, "I will not hurt a child," the child implicitly says that Eleanor has already hurt her. Explaining his reading in terms of Butler's revision of Althusser, Haines notes that the call to interpellation is sometimes answered imperfectly. When hailed by interpellation during her early subject formation, Eleanor misrecognised her place in ideology, and the ghostly voice of the disembodied child reminds her of that fact. Thus the archaeology of the subject in *The Haunting of Hill House* recalls the archaeology of the subject in *The Bird's Nest*, the protagonist of which is a multiple personality who has misheard the call multiple times.

Haines finds that while *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is similarly conflicted, it subverts constructions of lesbianism even more than does *The Haunting of Hill House*. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* not only represents lesbianism as a concrete image, but also configures the lesbian as both protagonist and first-person narrator. Merricat is not just the butt of irony but also creates it, for example when she offers sugar to the ladies who have come for tea. In addition, she tricks the townsfolk by maintaining the fiction that it was Constance who did the poisoning. Correcting Palmer's implication that a first-person narrator is the authorial delegate, Haines points out that a reader's identification with any narrator is partial and conflicted. With Merricat as the focaliser, the reader's position is much closer to the position of the abject. While this proximity will engage some readers, it will horrify others. In addition, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* satirises the heterosexual plot resolution with its configuration of two women as the heirs to the Father's estate. The novel further satirises the law of the Father by making comic fools of Uncle Julian and Cousin Charles.

Haines offers a perspicacious application of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" to both sisters. If melancholia is failed mourning – the inability to accept and adjust to death or other loss – then the melancholic idealises the lost object (be it person, belief, fetishized commodity, and so on). Compounding the problem, the idealised lost object reproaches the melancholic, because the melancholic cannot live up

to the lost object as perfect example. Ironically, the melancholic's self-accusations are introjections of the depressive's denials of what the lost object really was. Haines considers the possibility that Merricat is not melancholic because it is not her parents that she wants to preserve, but rather the just deserts they withheld from her. By killing them, she takes over their agency and sets the situation aright. By using their clothing, household utensils, and personal effects in her magic rituals, she makes their power work for her – she makes happen what they prevented: her coronation as princess of all that she surveyed. She acts the way they should have. In so doing, she makes them atone for mistreating her, then absolves them, and then rehabilitates them.

Constructive criticism? Well, the only thing that is definitely a fault is the lack of an index. Other than that, only quibbles. Haines has cast his net deeply and come up with an impressive catch.

***DARRYL HATTENHAUER***

## FILM REVIEWS

### *Credit Crunches:*

***Drag Me to Hell* (Dir. Sam Raimi) USA, 2009**

Lionsgate

*Drag Me to Hell* is Sam Raimi's first horror film since the workmanlike supernatural thriller *The Gift* (2000). Given that the only vaguely horrific project the *Evil Dead* director had been associated with since then was the truly awful *Spider-Man 3* (2007), it was only natural that fans and critics alike would harbour some doubts as to whether mainstream success had robbed Raimi of the energy and inventiveness which infused his early work. It's a relief to report, then, that *Drag Me to Hell* is not only a return to form for Raimi, but also the most enjoyable American horror movie in quite a while, a witty, gleefully over-the-top film that, while never exactly *scary*, is nevertheless highly entertaining. Crucially, there is also an enjoyable element of *schadenfruede* at work here. After all, given the current economic climate, who in their right mind *wouldn't* want to see a film in which someone who works in the banking industry is tormented for two hours?

Indeed, the film's economic subtext helps elevate it above the level of entertaining but ultimately shallow multiplex fodder. It may well be the first example of full-blown credit crunch horror, a film in which the uneven battle between those who wield economic power and those who conspicuously lack it is dramatised in a manner as timely as it is amusing. In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King rightly pointed out that the mediocre 1977 haunted-house movie *The Amityville Horror* resonated with middle-class American audiences because it was a prime example of the horror movie as economic horror story. The unlikely catalogue of supernaturally induced domestic disasters undergone by the Lutz family paralleled the post-oil crisis economic uncertainties of an entire generation of baby boomers. In a similar fashion, *Drag Me to Hell* functions as both revenge fantasy and cautionary tale for a generation for whom the current fiscal crisis has come as a profound, if not exactly unheralded, shock.

The film's protagonist is an unassertive but quietly ambitious loan officer named Christine Brown (Alison Lohman) who hopes to be offered the position of assistant manager of her local branch. As Rami makes clear in the opening scenes of the movie, Christine is used to denying herself in order to get ahead. She's an insecure country girl who has left behind her alcoholic mother and moved to the big city, and what stands out most in these introductory scenes is her capacity for self-denial. A former over-eater who now assiduously watches her weight, she is seen looking longingly into a bakery window, and she gazes at unaffordable clothes with a similar hunger. Her long-term boyfriend, an up-and-coming young psychology professor named Clay (Justin Long), comes from a wealthy family, something which causes her much anxiety. Christine has painfully managed to reinvent herself, but her insecurities clearly lie close to the surface. However, even though she commits many deeply questionable acts during the course of the film, she never becomes a wholly unsympathetic character, largely because Lohman's performance is such an appealing one. Indeed, Christine is that rarest of creatures: a female character in a genre movie who comes across as a genuinely nuanced individual.

Christine is ultimately doomed by her own (understandable) ambition. Fearing that she will lose her promotion to a smarmy new (male) co-worker, she heeds her manager's advice to be more aggressive with her clients and denies a needy old gypsy woman, Mrs Ganush (Lorna Raver), an extension on her overdue mortgage. Guaranteed not to be viewed in a positive light by those for whom shamelessly old-fashioned ethnic stereotyping is a turn-off, Mrs Ganush may well be one of the most grotesque

characters Raimi has ever essayed, a veritable caricature of the monstrous feminine who hacks up putrid phlegm incessantly into a dirty old handkerchief, has one milky false eye, and claw-like finger nails. Old age, infirmity, and ethnic difference here become markers of monstrosity.

And yet, despite the fact that she is transformed into a completely unsympathetic fiend shortly thereafter, the scene in which the desperate, and desperately proud, old woman gets down on her knees and begs to be allowed to stay in her home is still affecting. In an act of self-serving cowardice, Christine pretends that the final choice is down to her boss, and not herself. In fact, she is very much the bad guy here, and there's an appealing moral complexity at work throughout most of the film, even though it essentially becomes a rather standard 'vengeful old hag versus pretty young girl' story of the type seen in countless fairytales. Christine may be a victim, but she's by no means an innocent, and many of the film's funniest scenes are those in which it is made clear that she will do practically *anything* in order to escape the consequences of her callous actions (there's a scene involving her pet kitten which demonstrates Raimi's refreshing willingness to showcase his protagonist's ruthlessness). And the consequences are certainly severe. Having failed to terrify Christine into reversing her decision during a supernatural assault in an underground car park, Mrs Ganush unleashes a curse which will mean that her young nemesis will be dragged to hell within three days.

There follows a succession of witty set pieces in which Christine becomes aware of the truth of the old woman's curse and tries to avoid her terrible fate. The trouble is, she can no longer ask Mrs Ganush to lift the curse, because she died shortly after pronouncing it. What's particularly interesting about the film as it goes on is that the differences between her and Mrs Ganush are ultimately not as great as they first appear. Indeed, the elderly, physically grotesque, poverty-stricken and needy old woman represents everything that Christine herself has tried to leave behind and fears becoming in the future. Given her profession Christine knows only too well that those who fall between the cracks will soon get stood on, and has no intention of letting this happen to her. Her series of bruising, nasty, and amazingly *gooey* encounters with the old woman could be seen as a battle against marginality, against the hard-drinking mother she left behind, and against those aspects of herself she would rather painfully repress. This is the return of the repressed at its most obvious.

Tropes of consumption and appetite are prominent features of the film. Mrs Ganush's attacks repeatedly climax with gross-out moments in which she clamps her gaping, toothless mouth onto Christine's face, as though trying to eat her head first (like the fairytale witch she evokes). One could also see disturbing psychosexual connotations at work here, in addition to the obvious trope of the all-consuming monstrous mother. But consumption (both quasi-cannibalistic and consumerist) is referenced in plenty of other ways as well. For example in one well-executed and genuinely amusing scene, Christine must sit through a formal dinner with her boyfriend's snooty parents and try not to lapse into hysterics even though Mrs Ganush's false eye turns up in her dessert. Furthermore, it soon becomes obvious to Christine that if she wants help, she must be prepared to pay a high financial price for it. She goes to a fortune-teller named Ram Jas (Dileep Rao) to seek advice, but is told that the only woman who can lift the curse demands ten thousand dollars for her services. The ambitious young banker must then gather up all of her worldly possessions and hock them at the local pawn shop, like one of her cash-strapped customers desperate to fund a mortgage repayment. Even good witches need cash, it seems, and tellingly, this one lives in a palatial Spanish-style mansion, a stark contrast to Mrs Ganush's cramped and dirty old house. Humiliatingly, the money Christine raises at the pawnshop isn't nearly enough to pay the fee, and her blandly supportive, Platinum card-wielding boyfriend steps in to provide the rest of the cash. It's fitting, then, that the film's rather obvious final twist hinges on the possession of a rare coin (which has become confused with a cursed button); crucially whether or not someone has an item of currency on their person becomes a matter of life and death.

Christine's ruthlessness and willingness to go to any lengths mean that by the end of the film, the ordinary, likably flawed girl we met at the outset of the story is actually well on her way to becoming the perfect cog in the corporate machine. Although Raimi makes it clear that she hasn't quite completely lost sight of her basic humanity (she does, at the last moment, balk at passing the curse on to anyone else), the previously mild-mannered Christine has displayed a survival instinct to rival that of any traditional Final Girl, and tellingly, she is ultimately rewarded by that long-hoped for promotion at work – it seems that her aggressiveness will have a corporate outlet after all. One would have thought that having encountered at first hand the consequences of hard-hearted business decisions she would have run a mile, but instead Christine is delighted that she can finally satisfy her materialist appetites – it is notable that the first thing she does after receiving her promotion is finally to buy herself a stylish new coat. But Raimi has one last (rather obvious) trick up his sleeve. Long-time fans of the director will know that the moment a character in a Raimi film talks about heading to a cabin in the woods, things will soon go badly wrong, and the same applies here. Though we may feel that it's a disproportionate punishment for one act of foolish ruthlessness, Christine must ultimately pay a terrible price for her uncharitable behaviour at the beginning of the film. What makes her fate truly poignant is that we know that those who were truly responsible for her actions – the bosses who encouraged her to put profits before people – have escaped scot-free. Here, as in real life, it is the ordinary citizen who pays the price for corporate greed, and for naively abetting a system which privileges profits over humanity.

*Bernice M. Murphy*

***Not Quite Hollywood* (Dir. Mark Hartley): The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!**

Australia/USA, 2008

Optimum Home Entertainment

Throughout the 1970s, a generation of Australian directors (Peter Weir, Philip Noyce, Gillian Armstrong and others) produced a series of home-grown films, garnering international plaudits aplenty and putting Australian filmmaking firmly on the map. Bolstered by the introduction of government funding schemes, there emerged a national film industry intent on fostering local talent and generating a cultural Australian product aimed at a local and an international audience. While *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *Newsfront* (1978), and *My Brilliant Career* (1979) typified the so-called 'New Wave' of Australian cinema, another collection of filmmakers (George Miller, Brian Trenchard-Smith, Anthony I. Ginnane and more) were also hard at work grinding out a very different tradition, taking their influence primarily from 1970s US exploitation cinema. In *Not Quite Hollywood*, Mark Hartley offers an entertaining and affectionate homage to the untold story of this other Australian cinema, one that did not seek to depict the country as 'nice girls in white dresses vanishing into rocks', as Barry Humphries (Dame Edna Everage herself) wryly puts it.

Hartley's encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject helps assemble an exhaustive and well-researched catalogue of underground films as well as an impressive role-call of contributors. He traces the emergence of genre filmmaking in Australia from 1971, a year which saw the relaxation of censorship laws and the introduction of the R-rating, invoking it as evidence of a seismic shift away from a conservative to an apparently more liberated society that was game for the development of locally cultivated 'Ozploitation' cinema. The film comprises three main sections, starting with the aptly-named 'Ockers, Knockers, Pubes and Tubes', which focuses on bawdy sex comedies such as *Stork* and *Alvin Purple* (Dir. Tim Burstall, 1971 and 1973 respectively). It's not till the second segment that the film really comes into its own, though. 'Comatose Killers and Outback Chillers' charts the production of horror films and thrillers (the 'universal currency of the movie market', according to Trenchard-Smith) for export to international territories, including the inevitable marketing strategy of casting non-Australians in high-profile roles in films. So Jamie Lee Curtis and Stacey Keach took top billing in *Roadgames* (Dir. Richard Franklin, 1981), while Donald Pleasance and George Peppard teamed up in *Race for the Yankee Zephyr* (Dir. David Hemmings, 1981), and *Harlequin* (Dir. Simon Wincer, 1980) boasted the impressive pairing of David Hemmings and, um, Robert Powell. The final segment, 'High Octane Disasters and Kung Fu Masters', details outrageous disregard for human safety in the making of such notorieties as *Turkey Shoot* (Dir. Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1980), the chronicles of stuntman Grant Page, and the biker movie tradition (including *Mad Max* (Dir. George Miller, 1979)). Finally, it marks the death of Ozploitation in the mid-80s and the recent resurrection of its spirit in the work of Greg Maclean (*Wolf Creek*, 2005), James Wan and Leigh Whannell (*Saw*, 2004) and the Spierig brothers (*Undead*, 2003). Throughout we're treated to a barrage of clips running the gamut from ribald sexploitation flicks, biker movies, kung fu thrillers and of course blood-spattered horror, all edited together at breakneck, ADD-friendly speed. These are intercut with talking heads from a large number of key players in the production of these films, as well as chief-enthusiast Quentin Tarantino. In particular, Tarantino just can't contain himself when talking about the subject of any film that showcases cars, and anyone who's sat through *Death Proof*, his self-indulgent and misjudged contribution to *Grindhouse* (2007), won't be surprised to hear him gush that Australians have a talent for filming cars with, ahem, 'this fetishistic lens that just makes you want to jerk off'...

Tarantino's involvement with the project has no doubt helped secure a broader release for the film than might otherwise have been likely, but his contributions actually prove the least enlightening of any on display here. In fact, he proves so effusive and apparently indiscriminate in his enthusiasm for the subject that it almost becomes redundant, effectively tarring the dross (a sizeable amount) with the same brush as the forgotten gems (*Long Weekend*, Dir. Colin Eggleston, 1978) and the established classics (*Mad Max*). Far more interesting are the often irreverent contributions from the filmmakers themselves, recounting tales of shoe-string budgets and gonzo filmmaking of the highest order, such as the decision to pay a group of Hell's Angels in beer in exchange for their work as extras in biker movie *Stone* (Dir. Sandy Harbutt, 1974); Henry Silva's reluctance at dangling from a helicopter for a stunt leading instead to him being hoisted 70-feet and dangling from a crane instead in order to film a climactic scene for *Thirst* (Dir. Rod Hardy, 1979); and there's some eye-popping footage of Dennis Hopper with a blood alcohol level so high that he was actually declared dead on the set of bushranger classic *Mad Dog Morgan* (Dir. Phillippe Mora, 1976), and was banned from driving *and* being a passenger in a car in the state of Victoria. Throughout, there's a healthily candid honesty about the status of quite a few of these 'forgotten classics', such as from effects man Bob McCarron on *Howling III: The Marsupials* (Dir. Phillippe Mora, 1987), who confesses 'We all knew it was rubbish'. In particular, sardonic writer and filmmaker Bob Ellis is on hand at every turn to balance Tarantino's enthusiasm with a litany of razor-tongued putdowns ('Tony Ginnane and his films should be burnt to the ground and the ashes sown with salt').

*Not Quite Hollywood* proved one of the highlights of both the Horrorthon festival in Dublin in October 2008 and the Dublin International Film Festival in February this year, and its recent release by Optimum Home Entertainment is now giving it a deserved opportunity to reach a wider audience. That said, it does lose some of its charm on a repeat viewing, in particular in its slightly blinkered gloss of the gender politics of the early sexploitation material (a fact not helped by the fact that John D. Lamond, director of many of the sleaziest films under discussion, such as 1974's *Australia After Dark* and 1979's *Felicity*, is interviewed in a strip club while an exotic dancer performs in the background). This first section is by far the weakest of the film as a whole, and it proves much more illuminating on the subject of later forays into horror, kung fu and biker movies in particular. There's also something of an interpretative sleight of hand at work in its division of 1970s Australian cinema entirely along the lines of genre filmmaking and highbrow 'New Wave' material; after all, Peter Weir made the genteel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (which is in fact one of the best slices of Australian gothic, a restrained, ambiguous and deeply unsettling film) and the weird *and* wonderful *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), a fantastic genre flick in its own right. Overall, though, Hartley has produced a good-natured and nostalgic celebration of an under-exposed body of work, at least some of which merits rediscovery, and which is now beginning to find an audience thanks to his stellar preservation efforts.

***Jenny McDonnell***

***The Roger Corman Collection***  
***Five Guns West (USA, 1955) / Gunslinger (USA, 1956) /***  
***Premature Burial (USA, 1962) / The Haunted Palace (USA, 1963) / The Masque of the Red Death***  
***(UK, 1964) / The Wild Angels (USA, 1966)***  
**(Dir. Roger Corman) USA, 2008**  
 Optimum Classic

Once upon a time there were B movies. From the early days of the Hollywood Western and Horror in the 1930s and the Poverty Row thrillers and chillers of the 1940s right through to the exploitation boom and midnight movie of the 1960s and 1970s, cheaply produced, quickly made movies (often genre movies or movies with an eye on exploiting certain cultural niches) entertained, bemused and offended millions. With a handful of writing credits and small acting roles to his name, Roger Corman's life-time association with the B movie began in earnest in 1955 with his directorial debut, *Swamp Women* (not a horror movie, as the title may suggest, but a women's prison break picture with the statuesque noir bad girl Marie Windsor). Now 83 years of age and still in the biz, Corman has some 56 directorial credits and an astounding 386 producer/executive producer credits to his name. With titles such as *The Beast with a Million Eyes* (1955), *It Conquered the World* (1956), *Sorority Girl* (1957), *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), *Teenage Doll* (1957), *Not of This Earth* (1957), *Teenage Cave Man* (1958), *She Gods of Shark Reef* (1958), *War of the Satellites* (1958) and the marquee-friendly *The Saga of the Viking Women and Their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent* (1957), Corman soon established himself as a resourceful and efficient director of B features – so much so that, to this day, he is often referred to as 'King of the Bs'. Of course, such catchy titles have a habit of being applied to more than one person. Edgar G. Ulmer, the director of such stylish and wonderfully loopy films as *The Black Cat* (1934) and *Detour* (1945) has also been referred to as 'King of the Bs'. But while Ulmer was frustrated by the compromises he made as a Poverty Row director, once saying "I really am looking for absolution for all the things I had to do for money's sake", Corman apparently delights in his ability to turn out a movie on time and on budget (actually, he often beat the deadline and came under budget), as his 1990 autobiography, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* attests.

Leaving aside the niceties of artistic integrity versus commercial success, Corman's cinematic legacy is, much like a bug-eyed multi-limbed B movie monster, hard to classify. A number of noted film directors have worked with him, usually early in their careers; they include Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, Jonathan Demme, Joe Dante, Ron Howard (may God forgive him – Corman, that is), John Sayles and James Cameron (may God forgive him again). Actors who found some of their earliest acting roles in a Corman picture include Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, Bruce Dern, Dennis Hopper and Robert De Niro.

All this namedropping is rather meaningless, however, in terms of attempting an evaluation of Corman's own work. If I were to attempt to categorise his directorial work (admittedly, a somewhat foolhardy endeavour), I would say that his career has a number of distinct, if overlapping, phases within specific genres. In the earlier part of his career (up to the earlier 1960s), there is a preponderance of fantastical movies – Horror and, to a lesser extent, Science Fiction (though by the mid-1950s these two genres were often impossible to disentangle from one another); there is also a good smattering of 'action' movies, in the form of Westerns and Gangster/Crime movies. The third film category of this early period is Juvenile Delinquent movies like *Teenage Doll* (1957) and *Sorority Girl* (1957) (a surprisingly good JD film starring Susan Cabot (aka Wasp Woman) as a poor little rich girl whose unpopularity at school causes her to bully and brutalize her fellow sorority girls in a merciless fashion). It should be noted, of course, that

the JD film itself can trespass into other cinematic territory, as is evidenced by Corman's 1958 movie *Teenage Cave Man*, starring a neatly groomed, twenty-something, Robert Vaughn as a confused and rebellious teen Hominid.

The first half of the 1960s saw some of Corman's most celebrated directorial outings, in particular his liberal adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe stories at American International Pictures, many in collaboration with writer/scenarist Richard Matheson – *House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *Premature Burial* (1962), *Tales of Terror* (1962), *The Raven* (1963), *The Haunted Palace* (1963) (despite lifting the title from a Poe poem, this one is actually a loose adaptation of H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward'), *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964). With the exception of *Premature Burial*, with Ray Milland (aka the *Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, 1963) in the lead role, all of these movies starred the urbane Vincent Price at his serio-comic best. This period of Corman's career also saw the release of the cult classic *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) and his most explicitly political film, *The Intruder* (1962). The latter stars William Shatner (in one of his earliest lead roles) as a virulent racist determined to stir up trouble in a small Southern town. Often considered to be one of Corman's finest films, and one of his most personal in terms of its undeviating attempt to engage with the issue of racism in modern America, *The Intruder* was one of Corman's few box-office failures, despite garnering excellent reviews. It seems that after the commercial failure of *The Intruder* Corman began to shy away from films with an overt message, focusing instead on genre films with solid commercial potential, thereby leaving social commentary (if any) firmly embedded within, supposedly foolproof, genre entertainment.

The latter part of Corman's directorial career, from the mid-to-late 1960s took on a distinctly grim tone, with films like *The Wild Angels* (1966), *The Wild Racers* (1968) (uncredited), *The Trip* (1967), and *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967). While *The Wild Angels* was a bleak documentary-style depiction of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, *The Trip* (written by Jack Nicholson and starring Peter Fonda, Bruce Dern and Dennis Hopper) was the first major studio film to deal with the effects of LSD. In particular, drug/road movies such as these spoke of a new disaffected era, not just in terms of 1960s counterculture but also in terms of filmmaking (at least for Corman). Having been faced with editorial interference from AIP, who wanted to push *The Trip* as an anti-drug tract, once again Corman seemed to back away from a committed stance and, as the late 1960s turned into the 1970s, he vacated the director's chair, instead focusing on his role as a producer.

Now, you may ask "What exactly has this potted history of Corman's directorial career been in aid of...?" Good question. In part, such a lengthy preamble seems necessary in order to review a DVD box-set of a director with such an amorphous identity as a filmmaker. Like it or not, DVD box-sets based on a single director's work will always have a whiff of 'director as auteur' about them. And, as I hope the above has at least suggested, Corman, as director, is certainly a 'mixed bag'. Having said that, this box-set is a mixed bag too. It includes some of Corman's best known and critically acclaimed movies, most notably *The Masque of the Red Death*. One of (if not *the*) best of Corman's AIP Poe adaptations, *Masque* is a lush, baroque tale of cruelty, injustice, perversion and debauchery, with Vincent Price at his very best as Prince Prospero, a medieval Satan-worshiper who terrorizes the local peasantry while using his castle as a refuge, for himself and his privileged guests, against the 'Red Death' plague that stalks the land. As if that wasn't enough, it's got Hazel Court and Jane (I-was-Paul-McCartney's-girlfriend-before-Linda) Asher; the most mindboggling sumptuous cinematography by Nicolas Roeg; and a chilling epilogue more than a little reminiscent of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. While not in the same league as *Masque*, *The Haunted Palace* is another solid outing for Corman and Price. It tells a creepy enough tale of Price as a nice fellow who, upon moving into an ancestor's palace/castle with his lovely young wife (Debra Paget), finds his mind slowly taken over by said ancestor who is – you guessed it – a cruel Satan-worshiper determined to

wreak revenge on the descendants of the villagers who burnt him at the stake. *Premature Burial* is a so-so film, which suffers from a plot with not quite enough going on in it. Ray Milland is obsessed with the fear of being buried alive; the rest of the film is taken up with his attempts to avoid this fate and his increasing monomania. Milland could certainly be said to have camp-value in this film (he's a veritable hock of ham), but, unlike Price, one feels he's not enjoying such a possibility, and considering the smug and reactionary nature of his odious little directorial jaunt, *Panic in the Year Zero* (released the same year as *Premature Burial*), my guess is concepts such as black humour and gentle irony were a little bit beyond the purview of his X-ray vision.

Well, that's the horror done... or is it? The rest of the box-set consists of two early Westerns, *Five Guns West* (1955) and *Gunslinger* (1956), and the aforementioned Hell's Angels' flick, *The Wild Angels* (1966). As an avid fan of Westerns, I secretly delighted in getting the chance to infiltrate the pages of *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* with my thoughts on *Five Guns West* and *Gunslinger*. I only wish they were better. *Five Guns* is a serviceable Western that gets pretty dull half way through. Starring John Lund, Dorothy Malone (collars turned up and pouting, of course) and Mike Connors, it tells the story of five condemned Southern prisoners who are saved from the firing squad and promised pardons on the condition that they undertake a mission to head west and bring back a treacherous Confederate who has a stagecoach full of Confederate gold. They take a rest stop at the farmhouse of Malone and her infirm father and things start to unravel, both for the characters and, unfortunately, the plot. *Gunslinger* is a rather terrible little film; more's the pity because I really wanted to like this one. This no-budget Western stars Beverly Garland, one of the B feature's leading ladies, with titles such as *Swamp Women* (1955), *Curucu, Beast of the Amazon* (Dir. Curt Siodmak, 1956), *It Conquered the World* (1956) and *Not of This Earth* (1957) to her credit. Starring alongside Garland, in the baddie role, is Allison Hayes (the 50 Foot Woman herself), another leading lady of the 1950s B movie, starring in films such as *The Undead* (1957), *The Unearthly* (with Tor Johnson) (Dir. Boris Petroff, 1957), *Zombies of Mora Tau* (Dir. Edward L. Cahn, 1957), *The Hypnotic Eye* (Dir. George Blair, 1960) and, of course, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (Dir. Nathan Juran, 1958). John Ireland is floating around in there too as a gun for hire. The basic plot is quite clearly an attempt to bring a 'feminist' twist to this male-dominated genre. With all the men either too dumb or too cowardly to assume the role, Garland takes over the job of town Marshall when the previous Marshall (who is also her husband) is shot dead. Hayes runs a goodtime saloon (with some of the saddest excuses for cancan dancers I've ever seen). Of course, the two soon come to loggerheads, and John Ireland is caught in the middle when he falls in love with the woman he's hired to kill (or as he refers to her at one point, "The busty Marshall"). Everything is in place here for a rollicking piece of camp, but like so *very many* films with camp potential the howlers are just too few and far between and what we're left with is a boring film that's a soggy mishmash of plot devices and dialogue lifted from other (inevitably better) films – my advice is, if you want to see a good Western with decent gun-toting women look no further than Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954).

And now, to Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra... to be perfectly frank, I didn't hold out much hope for *The Wild Angels*. And while it turned out to be a bit of a stinker I have to admit it wasn't entirely for the reasons my prejudicial attitude had in mind. With Peter Fonda in a pre-*Easy Rider* biker role, I expected the usual pseudo-philosophical, social dropout, counterculture garbage from him, but with Nancy Sinatra in tow (quite literally), I had prepared myself for something even more cringe-worthy (perhaps even in a good way). Alas the pseudo-philosophical misfit stuff was just about discernible but if I cringed at the film it wasn't in a good way. It's a fairly nasty little film about a fairly nasty bunch of people, replete with savage violence, meaningless death, gang rape and the desecration of corpses. You certainly couldn't call it social commentary, as its tone is, for the most part, guided by its semi-documentary slant. You'd be hard pushed to call it a social document either as its depiction of the motorbike gang's activity may not be

completely beyond the realm of possibility but is nonetheless quite clearly souped-up to appear as outrageously appalling as possible, while slyly avoiding being overtly graphic. As such *The Wild Angels* is probably a perfect example of a mid-60s exploitation flick, and, as the twelfth largest-grossing film of 1966, I guess it did its job. For anyone who is interested, the excerpt from Primal Scream's song 'Loaded', which begins with the following lines, "We want to be free! We want to be free to do what we want to do!", is sampled from this film.

All in all, a mixed bag. I thought about the other Corman collections out there and how they had a similar potluck feel. And I also wondered how things could be done differently in order to give more coherence to future releases; perhaps collecting his films by genre or by actor? But it didn't take me long to come to the conclusion that the wavering quality of the films in Optimum's *Roger Corman Collection* and the lack of genre and thematic coherence that the films in the box-set display is all part of Corman's unique position in the moviemaking business, and as such is, in a sense, a fairly accurate reflection of his work. In all likelihood, if you already own some of the better films in this box-set you shan't be running out to buy it; and considering there are no extras to tempt you (apart from some original theatrical trailers), you can hardly be blamed. Having said this, the box set is reasonably priced with some high quality films on it and some undeniably weaker ones that are nonetheless curiosities for the Corman fan.

***Elizabeth McCarthy***

***The Last House on the Left***  
**(Dir. Dennis Iliadis) USA, 2009**  
 Universal Pictures

If there's one thing that watching horror films has taught me – apart from the fact that one should never hold a costume party on the anniversary of a brutal massacre, coal mine collapse, or accidental drowning caused by negligent camp counsellors – it's that making a trip to a cabin in the woods is never a good idea (see *Drag Me to Hell* for further confirmation of this fact). And if that cabin in the woods is by a lake, well, frankly, you're just asking for trouble.

This certainly holds true in the recently released remake of Wes Craven's 1972 'classic' *The Last House on the Left*, which has as its protagonists a happy, comfortably well-off professional couple who, to their own ultimate detriment, have clearly never seen *Funny Games* (Dir. Michael Haneke, 1997), *Friday the 13th* (Dir. Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), or even pondered Fredo's fate at the end of *The Godfather: Part II* (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). If they had, they'd know that lakes in horror films only exist so that bodies can be disposed of in them or giant crocodiles can lurk ominously beneath the waves. Disappointingly, there are no outsized amphibians here, but what we do have instead is a phenomenon that's almost as rare: a remake of a 1970s cult favourite which actually isn't all that bad. That isn't to say that it's a masterpiece; rather, that compared to the woeful likes of Rob Zombie's *Halloween* (reviewed in issue 3 of this journal) and Michael Nispel's ineptly banal take on *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Dennis Iliadis' remake at least has a decent cast, a genuinely compelling storyline, and a tendency to come up with bracingly nasty uses for household implements. It also helps that unlike the other original films cited above, Craven's movie – in my opinion at least – isn't half as significant or as 'groundbreaking' as some critics and fans have made it out to be. In fact, I've always thought it as something of a murky, genuinely repellent, and fatally uneven mess, complete with ill-advised slapstick cops. Any interest lies not so much in the film itself but in its admittedly fascinating socio-cultural overtones and relationship to the rest of Craven's remarkably consistent oeuvre, which has consistently and effectively undermined the notion that the suburban milieu is somehow a particularly safe place for families, and in particular, children and teenagers.

*The Last House on the Left* (1972), his horror debut, remains the most controversial film of his career, and is still unavailable in uncut form in the UK. Filmed in the prototypically suburban town of Westport, Connecticut, the original version of *The Last House on the Left* was a gory, visceral update of Ingmar Bergman's medieval-set drama *The Virgin Spring* (1959); it centred on a pair of prosperous and complacent suburbanites, John and Estelle Collingwood (Gaylord St James and Cynthia Carr), whose peaceful existence is suddenly violated forever by a brutal act of violence which prompts them to commit terrible and irrational acts of their own. On her seventeenth birthday, the Collingwoods' sheltered daughter Mari (Sandra Cassel) and her wrong-side-of-the-tracks pal Phyllis (Lucy Grantham) leave behind the safety and security of the suburbs and head into the city to see a rock concert. However, while buying marijuana the girls naively fall into the clutches of the first of Craven's soon-to-become characteristic antifamilies, a deeply dysfunctional gang of escaped convicts led by the sadistic Krug Stillo (David Hess).

After enduring sexual abuse at the hands of the gang in a grimy inner city tenement, the girls are bundled into the boot of a car and driven to a wooded area, which, by coincidence, happens to be only a short distance from Mari's home. Phyllis makes a desperate bid for freedom, but is soon recaptured and graphically disembowelled. Mari tries to plead for her life, but is raped and then shot dead as she wades

into a nearby lake. (See? Lakes. It never ends well.) Perhaps even more shocking than the physical violence onscreen, which was here depicted in a notably gritty, realistic fashion, was the psychological torment and humiliation undergone by the girls at the hands of Krug's gang of misfits. Even Craven's murderers themselves look sickened by what they have done when the violence subsides; there are unmistakable echoes of similar real-life atrocities here, such as the Mai-Lai massacre perpetrated by US troops in Vietnam in 1968 or the murders committed by the so-called Manson 'family' in 1969. In an ironic twist inspired by Bergman's film, Krug's gang, now stranded in the forest due to car trouble, decide to seek help from the nearest house, and end up on the Collingwoods' doorstep. By now concerned about their daughter's prolonged absence, Mari's parents are initially quite hospitable to their unlikely guests, but are soon made suspicious by their odd demeanour and desperately unconvincing attempts to behave in a 'civilised' manner. When realisation dawns, the formerly sedate suburbanites decide that it's time to get their own back, and famously do so in a manner that leaves the boundaries between revenge and cold-blooded murder, savage and suburbanite, well and truly blurred.

The remake wisely sticks fairly closely to the original story, and the interest here once again lies in watching the manner in which the 'good' family, the Collingwoods, are opposed to their evil counterparts, Krug (Garret Dillahunt), Francis (Aaron Paul), and Sadie (Riki Lindhome), a vicious gang of criminals. The gang is first seen securing Krug's escape from custody and murdering a couple of jokey cops (a nice allusion to the original's ineffective comedy police who spend their time fooling around with escaped chickens and the like). The ill-fated Mari (Sarah Paxton) is a sensitive and driven seventeen-year-old who quietly resents the over-protectiveness of her parents Emma (Monica Potter) and John (Tony Goldwyn), an academic and doctor respectively. One way in which this version is an improvement over the original is that the Collingwoods are afforded significantly more character development this time round. Their anxiety regarding their daughter's whereabouts and activities derives not from sexual or social paranoia (as in the original) but instead stems from an understandable desire to protect their only surviving child: a son, Ben, has died just over a year previously.

Mari's friendship with local girl Paige (Martha MacIsaac), though only briefly enumerated, is rather more convincing than the working class bad girl/middle class good girl dynamic of Craven's script, as is the manner in which they fall into the hands of the gang. Upon a chance meeting with Krug's son Justin (Spencer Treat Clarke) in the grocery store, the girls adjourn to his motel room to smoke weed and hang out. Just as in the original, Krug's son is the sensitive one of the gang, but Justin is even more of an abused youngster than his template, the childlike and drug-addicted Junior in the original. Once more, the girls are driven into the woods where, as in the original, the film's most disturbing scenes take place. It could be argued that, were it not for the extremely unpleasant nature of the interlude in the woods in Craven's film – which includes scenes in which both girls are raped, humiliated and ultimately murdered in a graphic and realistic manner which remains shocking to this day – the film would not have aroused half of the critical attention that it did. One of the most interesting aspects of the remake, then, was always going to be how Illiadis handled this section of the film.

Certainly, it's still a deeply unpleasant scene, and although the sheer nastiness of the original has been toned down somewhat (there is no disembowelling here, thankfully) it remains difficult to watch, featuring as it does the sexualised torture of two young girls. The fact that the two young actresses portraying Mari and Paige are rather more sympathetic and human than the identikit starlets usually featured in such scenes does make their treatment here all the more disturbing, but as ever, the depiction of rape onscreen remains an inherently problematic issue. As in Craven's film, there's certainly nothing that could be seen as remotely titillating here (unless one has a very sick mind indeed), but Mari's assault by Krug is also fairly graphic and prolonged. One presumes that, as in the original, the fact that Paige and

Mari's ordeal constitutes one of the longest sequences of the film serves to prime the audience to cheer on her parents' revenge: the more the girls suffer, the more the audience can enjoy the brutality ultimately meted out to her abusers. Indeed, it's an inherently questionable dynamic which infuses the rape-revenge narrative in general, from *I Spit On Your Grave* (Dir. Meir Zarchi, 1978) and *Ms. 45* (Dir. Abel Ferrara, 1981) (in which rape victims turn on their tormentors) to the more male-centric likes of *Deliverance* (Dir. John Boorman, 1972) and *Death Wish* (Dir. Michael Winner, 1974) (in which the main character, like the Collingwoods, is avenging the rape of his daughter).

Once more Krug and the gang end up on the Collingwoods' doorstep (Mari has caused a crash which has wrecked their getaway vehicle), and are taken in by the somewhat wary but hospitable couple. Once their unexpected guests have been cleaned up and settled into the guest house, however, John and Emma make a shocking discovery: they find their gravely wounded daughter, who, unbeknownst to the gang, has survived a gunshot wound and managed to struggle home. They tend to her wounds, but the fact that Mari had taken the car that day means they have no way of getting her to the hospital: a severe storm has also (naturally) knocked out the phone lines. To make matters worse, when Emma finds a medallion worn by Mari that day lying on the kitchen counter (having been left there by the traumatised Justin when he figured out whose house he was in), the couple realise that their daughter's attackers are lying sleeping just a few yards away.

In the 1972 version of this film one had the definite sense that, in watching the Collingwoods exact a gory revenge, one was witnessing not just a battle between two opposing families but also a clash between two worlds – the stolidly bourgeois and the criminally countercultural. As the final moments of the movie made clear, Craven was emphasising the fact that the line between civilisation and savagery was one that could quickly be crossed: his middle-class avengers enjoyed their revenge just a bit too much, and having lost their daughter, the Collingwoods went on to lose their very souls. It was a bitterly nihilistic denouement which lent the film the vaguely apocalyptic tone common to many of that era's best horror movies.

Here though, many of the acts of violence perpetrated by the Collingwoods are committed out of genuine self-defence or in order to protect the gravely injured Mari. Right up until the rather silly but satisfying coda – in which John Collingwood finally puts his medical skills to macabre use – we never get the same sense that they have lost their humanity. The ending is also much more hopeful than that of the original. With Krug, Sadie and Francis dead, the Collingwoods make their escape from the last house on the left in a motorboat. Mari has been saved, and Justin, who ultimately turned on his abusive father, has been delivered from the clutches of his malevolent biological family, and will presumably find safe harbour with a new adoptive clan, the Collingwoods. It could be argued, with some justification, that this essentially optimistic rewriting of the original's decidedly downbeat ending waters down the impact of Craven's provocative debut, but I think that Illiadis was right to forge his own path here: his Collingwood family are warm, well-realised and above all, nice people who deserve a break, whereas Craven's suburbanites were smug, complacent and one-dimensional caricatures of middle-class morality. This version may not have the socio-cultural resonances or shock value of its predecessor, but it is a taut, effective, and relatively intelligent film which deserves to be considered on its own merits.

***Bernice M. Murphy***

*Coraline*  
 (Dir. Henry Selick) USA, 2009  
 Universal Pictures International

3-D films have been undergoing something of a renaissance in recent years, taking advantage of groundbreaking developments in digital technology to break free from the flimsy red-and-green specs and often flimsier movie monsters of its first golden era. Animated filmmaking in particular has embraced the process since the release of *The Polar Express* in 2004 (Dir. Robert Zemeckis), and this year has seen the likes of *Up* (Dir. Pete Docter and Bob Peterson, 2009) and *Monsters vs Aliens* (Dir. Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon, 2009) make waves at the box office. The process has an obvious appeal for horror filmmakers too, and continues to generate interest; January brought the release of *My Bloody Valentine 3-D* (Dir. Patrick Lussier, 2009) while another instalment in the *Final Destination* series (Dir. David R. Ellis, 2009) will take its bow later this summer. In *Coraline*, the first stop-motion film to be filmed originally in 3-D, the two trends converge, with suitably impressive results. Adapted from Neil Gaiman's 2002 book of the same name and directed by Henry Selick, *Coraline* presents a memorable and meticulously crafted gothic landscape, as might be expected from the director of both *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) and *James and the Giant Peach* (1996).

The film's protagonist is the titular Coraline Jones (voiced by Dakota Fanning), who must leave behind friends and familiar surroundings when she and her parents (Teri Hatcher and John Hodgman) move to a new home, the Pink Palace. Her distracted and busy parents make half-hearted efforts to keep their daughter occupied, setting her apparently pointless tasks such as counting the number of doors or blue things in the new house. Otherwise left to her own devices, Coraline sets about exploring her new world, populated by a collection of unhinged neighbours – Russian acrobat Mr Bobinsky (Ian McShane) and faded vaudevillians Miss Spink (Jennifer Saunders) and Miss Forcible (Dawn French). She also encounters a stray black cat (voiced by Keith Gordon) who will prove a useful ally, and the oddball grandson of the family's landlady, Wybie (Robert Bailie Jr), a character who did not appear in Gaiman's original (apparently introduced here to assuage fears that a female protagonist might not have enough general appeal). Soon, Coraline stumbles across a hidden door which conceals a passageway to what appears to be an alternative and luxuriant version of her own home-life, populated by friendly-seeming doppelgängers of her parents, with one suspicious difference. Her Other Mother and Other Father both have buttons for eyes, as do the Other versions of her neighbours that populate this world. Unperturbed, Coraline remains tempted and comforted by the exciting and apparently nurturing alternative reality into which she has stumbled, until she realises that the Other Mother preys on children like her, tempting them away from the family lives with which they feel dissatisfied, tricking them into staying in the 'better' world of her making, and replacing their eyes with buttons. Coraline's refusal to comply evinces a drastic change in the Other Mother – or the Beldam as she is otherwise known – who reveals her terrifying true form and tries to imprison young Coraline. She manages to escape, but on discovering that the Other Mother has captured her real parents, she must now find a way to save them as well as the souls of the Beldam's previous victims.

The film's tagline – be careful what you wish for – suggests that this is fundamentally a cautionary tale, a modern-day fairytale with instructional morals concealed within it. Thematically, the film has much in common with both *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*, in which a young girl's adventures in a fantasy world on the one hand prepare her for the necessary and inevitable experience of growing into

adulthood, and on the other teach her that, despite its flaws, there really is no place like home. For all its well-choreographed circus mice, angelic dogs and magical seeing stones, *Coraline*'s fantasy world remains an idealised, domesticated one, prompted partly by her feelings of resentment for her parents, and partly by her anxieties within a new home, an uncanny space in which everything and nothing is familiar. This becomes even more pronounced when she travels to the alternative world, which morphs into a nightmarish corruption of her own home-life in which she must learn to stand on her own two feet in order to overcome and defy her 'Other Mother', at the same time accepting her real mother (and father) for what they are – fallible people. Coraline's ordeal enables her to accept this realisation, and grants her the ability to recognise the magnitude of their smallest gestures (as when her mother presents her with a small, but thoughtful, gift). Unsurprisingly, then, the film ends on a *Wizard of Oz*-like endorsement of the pleasures of a more realistic home-life.

It's in the invention of both of these worlds, both real and fantasy, that *Coraline* proves most successful, and the employment of 3-D techniques is crucial in bringing both to life. Selick and his team have produced a subtle 3-D world in which the technique is neither intrusive nor ostentatious, saving its showiest and most charming piece of 3-D trickery for the culmination of the end credits. Elsewhere, it is used to augment the visuals, granting depth to the animated worlds on display by fleshing out backgrounds and textures and rounding out the richer visuals which are introduced as the alternative reality takes over Coraline's experiences. Such nuanced use of the technique means that when Selick & co. *do* push the envelope a little more (as in a creepy opening sequence which features needlework that appears to stab its way out of the cinema screen in a direct assault on the viewer's sense of perspective) it is all the more startling. The film's visuals are not merely intended as an all-out attack on the viewer, then, and they prove all the more unsettling as a result. The gradual introduction of disturbing images into a mundane world (such as a creepy doll with buttons for eyes that looks uncannily like Coraline herself, or the fog-bound woods that surround the Pink Palace) eventually gives way to the full-scale terror of the revelation of the Beldam in all her skeletal and arachnid glory, as the film hurtles towards its climactic showdown. In the end, then, *Coraline* is a beautifully realised vision of childhood fantasies and terrors – terrors that continue to resonate for an adult audience that may never fully grow out of them.

***Jenny McDonnell***

## MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

### *Left 4 Dead*

Developer: Valve, Publisher: EA  
Platform: Xbox 360 (review copy), PC

When Microsoft launched its underwhelming Zune media player it used the tagline ‘Welcome to the social’. Pity they hadn’t thought of that one sooner, it would have been just as good a fit for their Xbox LIVE service. With over 17 million subscribers pushed by tentpole titles like *Halo* and *Bioshock* it makes good business sense to explore potential ways of driving game and hardware sales – not to mention paid subscriptions worth in the region of \$300 million and growing. And that’s before we get to PC gaming.

The *Halo* experience has proven the model for console-based multiplayer online gaming, and 2007 saw a new approach to gaming leveraging this social space, using a freeform, sandbox campaign model typified by *Frontlines: Fuel of War*. No longer would levels have to be played through in sequence; instead, join up with your friends, pick a starting point and go – not entirely unlike chapter skipping on a DVD.

Valve, the developer of the much lauded *Half Life* series, took this malleable gameplay style and applied it to their zombie holocaust first person shooter *Left 4 Dead*.

This survival horror game draws inspiration from a variety of sources, from the classic rpg style of *Silent Hill*, the frenetic energy of *House of the Dead* and the fluid gameplay of the most recent *Resident Evil* games, but brings two novel elements to the genre: a new kind of AI and a style of multiplayer gameplay that demands a constant state of interdependence between players requiring tight formations and combined firepower.

Taking its cue from the classic Romero zombie movies the backstory is intentionally vague. Somehow an ‘infection’ has been released (to what extent we don’t know) and four people from disparate backgrounds are forced together to fight their way to safety. The ambiguous plotting is also something of a departure from the genre when put up against its progenitors, with their more overt reliance on ‘science gone wrong’ shenanigans. The current *Resident Evil* entry, for example, relies on a linear story of corporate machinations and a comic book cast of the bold, beautiful and unrepentantly maniacal, aided by cut scenes to keep things chugging along. Similarly this year’s *House of the Dead* instalment, the Wii’s *Overkill*, occasionally tries to ‘inject’ some fun into the proceedings by adding a love triangle, crime lords and a hint of incest – and why not?

In comparison *Left 4 Dead* might seem embarrassingly threadbare but the lack of soap opera histrionics only serves to create an atmosphere of pure desolation and focuses the mind on gameplay.

The player has the choice of any four characters: biker Francis, grizzled soldier Bill, Louis, a regular guy trapped by circumstance, and horror geek Zoey.

Gameplay is split into four campaigns varying in location from a desolate city to a small town to a disused airport and a typically bloody jaunt in the woods. The campaigns are presented in a similar fashion to a series of four films (albeit stand-alone), with players taking on the roles of the main characters within a

film about a zombie apocalypse. Valve has developed this to the extent that film posters were used to promote the game, and once a campaign is completed it lists the credits in the standard film format, listing the gamers as having been “starring as...”

Each campaign is subdivided into five chapters, all of which are accessible through the main menu. Stuck on a specific chapter? Don't worry about it, just move on to the next, or change campaign completely. It's not like you are actually in 'competition' with anything – or that your characters will find the solution to the zombie problem. Staying alive long enough to get rescued is all you have to do. It just turns out that 'all' is something of a task. .

The bad guys – perhaps unfair to call them such – come in all shapes and sizes. The Horde represent bog standard zombies/infected who do most of their damage through weight of numbers; Witches, who would rather be left alone to weep but are devastating when they attack; the annoyingly agile Hunters; Boomers, who attract the Horde by vomiting bile all over you; Smokers who use their rather long and elastic tongue to strangle their prey; and huge mindless berserkers called Tanks. It's quite a rogues gallery but it does expose a disjointedness in the backstory: are we dealing with the shambling, decomposing walking dead of Romero – for shamble they do until roused – of unknown origin, a ferocious *28 Days Later*-style yarn of viral infection or do the range of enemies represent a 'third way' of supernatural interference? All three interpretations are open to debate but really they are of little consequence. It's not like you get the chance to find out; this just isn't that kind of ride. Instead, *Left 4 Dead* is intended to be driven, not by plot, but by characters. The uniqueness of the game thus becomes apparent, as the gamers themselves fill the shells of the playable characters, providing the weakness and strengths with their own gameplay strengths and playing styles rather than developer applied boundaries (such as having the old gaming stereotypes of a slow but powerful character, a fast but weak character and an all rounder that everyone wants to play...).

Pulling the strings is a new kind of AI developed by Valve, dubbed the Director. There are two AIs driving the gameplay. The first controls the spawning points, intensity of attack and the numbers and location of infected you will encounter. Its role is to keep you challenged but not to the extent that you find the action so tough as to get you frustrated. Replay value is top of the agenda so the game moulds itself around your level of ability.

The second Director controls the score and sound effects, issuing audio cues called 'crescendo points' used to foreshadow sudden attacks of either individual or hordes of zombies. The conceit will be too familiar to gorehounds, but nonetheless enjoyable for it.

Structure aside, the look and feel of the game is strong on atmospheric and, naturally, everything takes place at night. The use of Smokers and Boomers present constant threats to your field of vision, as do your teammates from time to time stepping in the way of shoots and then complaining that you've just shot them in the back, although it must be said, on the single player campaign, the friendly character AI is excellent, with fellow, game controlled, survivors regularly healing and saving you from zombie attacks without prompting

The character designs, however, do belie the game's aspirations as a cross-platform success. While perfectly acceptable on a PC one gets the feeling the Xbox 360 is not exactly being taxed. In comparison to *Halo* or *Gears of War* the lack of fine detail gives *Left 4 Dead* a slightly brittle feel, with pieces of your cohorts literally disappearing in front of you in tight spaces.

Having addressed this much it's time to get into the real reason for playing *Left 4 Dead*, the multiplayer modes. These come in three flavours: local multiplayer, multiplayer online and versus – where you can play on the side of the infected.

Regardless of which mode you pick two factors are given: the firefights will be frequent and frenetic, and any attempt to stray from your teammates will result in a nasty end. This is not a game for glory hunters or team killers; success demands four guns blazing at all times. This can be particularly difficult when deciding just how fast you should move through a level, whether to concentrate on taking a position and picking off targets from a distance or make a call on who the last person to get on the escape chopper should be. These seem like small points but try acting on them while being chased down by dozens of infected. It's a harsh lesson on the concept of loyalty.

A patch is currently available via Xbox LIVE that expands the versus mode which lets you play the part of the zombies, taking over from the Director in choosing spawning points, lending more of a tactical shooter element in terms of where to place special zombies and when to mass your zombie horde for the final attack that will leave nothing behind but a few splatterings of survivor meat and some temporarily sated undead appetites.

Back to single player mode and you'll find it a much lonelier experience. As the characters have no distinct personalities beyond which weapon they use it can be hard to go back once you've gotten a taste of multi-player. What's more you can virtually walk through the levels if you stay to the rear and do the bare minimum to pull your weight. The other characters will even turn around and heal you without prompting.

All things considered, *Left 4 Dead* is another killer app for Xbox LIVE and a shot in the arm for PC gaming. It's best to treat the single player mode as a training session for the real thing and as for the plot holes...

Caveats aside, go forth and enjoy. You never know when the real thing is coming. And perhaps unsurprisingly, a sequel is already in the works.

***Niall Kitson***

*Left 4 Dead*

Graphics: 7

Sound: 8

Gameplay: 8

Replay Value: 9

Overall Score: 8

*back*

### ***Dead Space (18)***

Developer: Visceral Games, Publisher: Electronic Arts  
Platform: Playstation 3, Xbox 360 (review copy), PC

A massive ship lies floating in orbit around a broken world. No hails are answered, a few desultory lights blink in the darkness and there are no signs of life. On a routine mission it has mysteriously gone quiet and now you and a crew of rescue experts have been sent to see what the problem is. After a crash disables your own vessel you find yourself trapped inside the massive vessel, fighting the horror that lurks within...

No, despite the fact that the premise sounds eerily familiar, they haven't made a game of Paul W.S. Anderson's 1997 film *Event Horizon* - this is *Dead Space* - , although you can be forgiven for thinking they share a certain resemblance. *Dead Space* utilises the same Lovecraftian style of horror, down to a crew driven insane by voices only they can hear in their heads and the occasional vision of people who may or may not be dead.

*Dead Space* opens with a small rescue ship approaching the leviathan USG Ishimura, a military mining ship sent to a planet to strip it of precious metals and minerals. All contact has been lost with the Ishimura and the crew on the USG Kellion have been sent to help make repairs and investigate the reason for the loss of communication. Soon after its arrival, the rescue ship is destroyed and the crew is slaughtered by pointy limbed monsters called Necromorphs. One of the few survivors, Engineer Isaac Clarke, is left to repair the Ishimura and get off the ship alive, all the while trying to figure out what happened to the thousand strong crew and discern just what the hell necromorphs actually are.

*Dead Space* is essentially a revamping of the classic RPG survival horror genre. You're an isolated survivor, fending off hordes of monsters and trying to get to safety. Thankfully, *Dead Space* has several unique features that set it apart from other Survival Horror games. The main difference is that it does not use a heads up display or HUD. Rather than having half the screen dominated by information on health, ammunition and status updates, *Dead Space* makes use of the character model itself, with Isaac's environment suit showing his health via a blue strip running down his back. As he becomes injured the strip gradually fades away, eventually turning to a bright warning red when your health is low. Ammunition is shown via displays on your chosen weapon and mission information and communications from other survivors is displayed by a hologram that sparks out from the arm of the environment suit.

The environment suit also provides Isaac with some unique abilities. The suit can be used to slow time in a localised field and also to pick up and carry/hurl objects. These abilities are used within the game both for puzzle solving and for attacking enemies. Whilst these abilities are nothing new within videogames, they are used to great effect within *Dead Space*, for instance, the player is able to use the dismembered limbs of dead necromorphs to destroy new attackers.

The game adds an extra level of strategy for players via the nature of the necromorph enemies. They absorb bullets, with an early level enemy taking almost a full clip of assault rifle ammo to kill. The only way to quickly disable one of the necromorph enemies is via dismemberment, causing the creatures to gorily bleed out. This encourages players to choose weapons more suited to Isaac's engineering abilities like Razor Saws, Plasma Cutters and other engineering tools, rather than the normal FPS (First Person Shooter) weapons of automatic weapons and shotguns. A level up system utilising items known as power

nodes allows the player to improve their weapons and environment suit. However, the power nodes are extremely rare, making levelling up equipment a tough choice: Do you enhance the oxygen allowance within the suit or do you spend the node on upping the firepower on your plasma cutter? This adds a surprising amount of depth and in later levels you can find yourself spending minutes at a time trying to decide where best to spend your limited supply of credits and power nodes.

There is a slight puzzle element within the game, with it necessary for Isaac to restore ships systems in order to make his escape from the Ishimura. Some of these follow the simple flip a switch variety, but others, and the more fun ones, involve using the environment suits ability to slow time. Upon first playing, I ignored this ability, using it only rarely. However, as the game progressed the sheer usefulness of this ability became more and more apparent. Using it you can freeze arcs of electricity, massive rotating ventilation blades, and most importantly, slow down the hordes of necromorphs attacking you.

The lack of a HUD is remarkably refreshing with the genre, leaving an open screen to enjoy the excellent graphics. However, it can be difficult to use the holographic display, with the writing on the screen being very small and faint, especially in some of the brighter environments in the game. Whilst not a massive issue, it can be a tad awkward, especially if you are following the games back-story and trying to unlock the mystery of what occurred on the ship before your arrival. Another quibble is the repetitiveness of some of the missions. Isaac is continually sent on repair missions, from one end of the ship to the other and after you've fixed one part of the ship to be told another bit of it is malfunctioning for the eighth time, you find yourself hoping Isaac will tell them to go and fix it themselves, especially after you meet the Leviathan for the first time, a massive beast that takes up half the ship and has a tendency to attack you randomly throughout the game with its grasping tentacles.

Horror games have generally followed the survival horror template developed by early console games like *Alone in the Dark* and *Resident Evil* and *Dead Space* is no different. There is a focus on using limited resources to survive, and on later difficulty levels you spend much of your time scrabbling about for health and ammunition in an almost frantic manner, so much so that the feeling of relief that sweeps you when you get a few more plasma charges is unbelievable. The enemy design is also excellent. The Necromorphs are monsters born from the corpses of the recently deceased and take a variety of forms, from the pointy armed stalkers to the massive bosses that occasionally appear. By far the most disturbing enemy appears after you find a seemingly innocent medical report that mentions the number of pregnancies amongst the thousand strong crew. Soon after you meet the offspring of these births and they will freak you out a bit, especially when they grow tentacles...

*Dead Space* takes its influence from a variety of sources, unashamedly borrowing concepts from both videogames and films. The necromorphs scamper about through ventilation ducts in a similar fashion to Ridley Scott's *Alien*, launching unexpected attacks that will have you swearing and firing wildly. As the plot unfolds the Lovecraftian influence can be seen, with it becoming apparent that a cult was operating amongst the now deceased crew which worshipped a giant stone monolith that had been unearthed on the planet below. Later in the game the player will be stalked by a cult fanatic who openly welcomes his change into a monster, helping the necromorphs track down and slaughter surviving crew members.

*Dead Space* is a must have for horror game fans. Excellent graphics and sound are matched by wonderful gameplay, with Isaac moving easily throughout the vessel. Once you've fought your way across the ship and to the planet below, you'll find yourself itching to get back to playing it from the start, but this time on a harder level and with the hope that this time you won't jump *too much* when that tentacle grabs you.

But you will.

***Eoin Murphy***

*Dead Space*

Graphics: 9

Sound: 9

Gameplay: 9

Replay Value: 8

Average: 8

### ***Resident Evil 5 (18)***

Developer: Capcom

Platform: Xbox 360/PS3

This is the one we've all been waiting for. Ever since the phenomenally successful reboot of the *Resident Evil* series with the fourth entry back in 2005, gamers, and indeed scholars interested in how games reproduce the gothic, have been waiting with baited breath for this game.

You can breathe a sigh of relief: *Resident Evil 5* builds upon the success of its predecessor. The over-the-shoulder dynamic camera makes shooting enemies an accurate affair: technically precise but also visually pleasing. The camera can still be panned left and right of your character, giving you a good look at what might be lurking in the shadows waiting to attack you from each side. The weapons, much like in *Resident Evil 4*, can be upgraded at a market with diamonds and gold that you find on the corpses of your downed enemies. It's a nice aside which gives the game a stat-based leaning to add depth to the otherwise relentless action. These enemies themselves, not so much zombies, are classed as 'infected': civilians robbed of their humanity by being exposed to the game's biological virus. They aren't your standard undead fodder, and display a remarkable amount of intelligence for being in a game. These infected will naturally work out ways to get to you: climbing up ladders and over fences, jumping through windows and breaking down locked doors. To combat this, you're able to kick down these ladders and block entrances to buildings with furniture like wardrobes and crates. It all feels natural, far away from the scripted corridor roaming that both the *Resident Evil* series and countless other Survival Horror games are renowned for. This makes *Resident Evil 5* feel like a true successor to the now-classic fourth entry, a familiar continuation of tried and tested gameplay.

One thing new to *Resident Evil 5*, however, is the fully formed co-operative mode. While there was a brief pairing between *Resident Evil 4*'s protagonists Leon Kennedy and Ashley Graham, *Resident Evil 5* takes two player gaming a step further. The game can be played co-operatively throughout: one player playing as series veteran Chris Redfield, and the other his new assistant, Sheva. There are points in the game where both characters must rely on combining their abilities such as one giving the other a leg up to a higher platform, or using their collective strength to barge open heavy doors. While it's not a revolution in design, it thoughtfully expands the *Resident Evil* formula into areas of gameplay well tilled by other franchises, such as *Gears of War* or *Left 4 Dead*. However, when *Resident Evil 5* is played with only one player, Sheva is controlled by the game's own artificial intelligence. Here is where the clever co-operative gameplay is slightly undone. Occasionally, the artificial intelligence will make bad decisions when directing her: using the most powerful weapons on the weakest of foes, or getting stuck in a horde of zombies when trying to follow you through a level. This somewhat breaks the immersion of character and environment that the game works so hard to build up.

The setting of *Resident Evil 5*, North Africa, is perhaps the most interesting element of the game, and one most worthy of analysis with respect to Gothic studies. Here, the tropes of Post-Colonialism are rendered Gothic through the game's surface: its visuals and sound. In the power vacuum left by the absence of colonial regimes, dictators of the nation itself have swept in to abuse the power of its newfound freedom. The game's depiction of this abuse is manifested through tribal warfare. However, rather than this being the representation of racist conflict as some segments of the press noted, it is instead the game's recurring biological virus which powers the violence between people; science having the power to strip human consciousness from the human body, rendering it abject where no abject existed before. However, *Resident Evil 5* provides what is most certainly an outsider's view of Gothicised Africa. Its main

protagonist, Chris Redfield, is an American agent sent in to deal with the spreading of the biological virus in much the same way as *Resident Evil 4*'s Leon Kennedy in another foreign national environment with Gothic associations: the heartland of rural Spain. While both games feature fantastically well-researched architecture concurrent with each setting, both are also subject to misappropriations and misinterpretations of the local culture, left in ruins or horrifically transformed by the biological virus. For example, in *Resident Evil 4*, the leader of the infected monks, the Los Illuminados, speaks with a strong German rather than Spanish accent, and frequently uses modern Americanisms in his grand speeches, breaking the illusion of restaging the Spanish Medieval Catholicism of classic Gothic. Similarly, in *Resident Evil 5*, the developers get sidetracked in representing the local culture as predominantly Voodoo: a spiritualism that has its origins in the colonial West Indies, and is now only a residual identity in current-day Africa.

Here, the transition from *Resident Evil 4* to *Resident Evil 5* charts the movement of Gothic setting from its eighteenth century European origins in Spain and Italy to the more recent Developing World and the New World. However, as the cultural inaccuracies inherent within each game reveal, these environments are not the games own. Unlike the aspects of Gothic in some videogames, such as the Ukrainian developed *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* or Nibris Software's upcoming Polish peasant Gothic game *Sadness*, these two entries in the *Resident Evil* series are essentially a combination of Japanese and American representations of other cultures and nationalities, which are seen as savage, backwater regions of the globe where unconstrained science can run amok. Like the parasite virus which features in the games itself, they invade a nation and alter its surface appearance to suit their own ends. Indeed, this Gothic idea of replicating or doubling a past or culture has been something inherent within the Gothic since the eighteenth century novels of Matthew Gregory Lewis or Charles Robert Maturin created a world of die-hard Catholicism to suit their own (admittedly high cultural) Anglican agendas. While *Resident Evil 5* merely contributes to the entertainment aspects of the Gothic without having any high cultural aims of its own, it does succeed in expertly translating this fear and danger of the unknown and the barbaric into the videogame medium. It is graphically breathtaking and works well on repeated playthroughs, as finding all the hidden treasures can become something of an addiction. Also, the extra 'Mercenary Mode' from *Resident Evil 4*, where you play through segments of the game as other characters, is back. Whatever your taste in period Gothic- and whether you're a fan of the series or a Survival Horror fan in general - this is sure to entertain you for a long time to come.

***Stuart Lindsay***

*Resident Evil 5*

Graphics: 9

Sound: 9

Gameplay: 8

Replay Value: 8

Average Score: 8.5

### ***F.E.A.R. 2 (18)***

Developer: Monolith Productions, Publisher: Warner Bros Interactive Studios  
Platform: Playstation 3, Xbox 360 (review copy), PC

Any game that carries the acronym F.E.A.R. is surely one to watch out for if you're a horror fan. *F.E.A.R.*, the first game in the series, followed an unnamed member of the F.E.A.R. recon squad, who have been sent to retrieve a rogue military commander and his troops. Over the course of the game you discover that in true *Heart of Darkness* fashion the general had been involved in various unpleasant activities including creating a clone army, cannibalism and torturing a young psychic girl called Alma in order to control her powers. Unsurprisingly this didn't end well, with a subsequent nuclear explosion levelling a nearby city.

And this is where *F.E.A.R. 2* comes in.

After the production of two less successful expansion packs for the first game, a true sequel has been produced, taking place slightly before and just after the events at the end of the first game. This time you play Michael Bennet, a member of a Delta Team sent to arrest Genevive Astride, the president of Armacham Technology Corporation, the company responsible for creating Alma and the clone soldiers. During the course of this mission you come under fire from the Company's black op troops and begin to have visions of a little girl with long dark hair leading you through Armacham's headquarters. After tracking down Astride, you witness a massive explosion tear its way across the city you are in, wiping out the majority of the population and leaving the streets the domain of clone soldiers and black op troops.

*F.E.A.R. 2* adds a few improvements over the original, with a slightly improved graphics engine and vastly improved AI on enemy NPC's. Now, rather than stand limply in front of you soaking up bullets, they kick over tables for cover, use flanking manoeuvres and, most annoying, throw grenades at you willy-nilly. This adds an extra level of difficulty to the game in that you have to formulate the best tactics to deal with these clever enemies, rather than attack all guns blazing.

As with *F.E.A.R.*, you have the ability to slow time during battles, the result of your being part of the Harbringer project (which you only discover during the course of the game). The ability to slow time is relatively well utilised, with you finding yourself using it almost constantly to get an advantage over the hordes of enemies attacking you.

*F.E.A.R. 2* uses as the focal point for its horror elements a scary little girl. Creepy children have always been a common occurrence in horror and gothic texts but it's interesting that over the last decade in particular, thanks to the Japanese horror boom, little girls have gone from being symbols of innocence in the world to being harbingers of doom and terror, much like ravens were in ancient times. Just the sight of a little girl with long black hair is enough these days to send me screaming in the other direction as I just know they're about to do unleash some sort of horrible psychic attack upon me.

In the original game, Alma, the aforementioned scary little girl, was used to great effect, initially appearing as a fleetingly glimpsed figure from the corner of your eye, leading the player across levels to scenes of great bloodshed. A sighting of Alma was generally followed by the vision of a corridor splattered with blood and battle hardened soldiers scattered around the place like rag dolls. Added to this the seemingly endless swarms of clone troopers and the occasional mutant monstrosity all of which meant that *F.E.A.R.* was a game to play with the lights on.

Unfortunately much of the horror is lost in *F.E.A.R. 2* simply because Alma's back-story has already been explored. In addition, rather than build upon the horror elements of the original, *F.E.A.R. 2* just replicates them to no good effect. The majority of scares now come from the sudden attacks of mutant humans, rather than the slow build up from mild trepidation to utter terror at what was around the next corner that made *F.E.A.R.* stand out from other horror/FPS games. To be perfectly honest, after fighting my way through a half dozen levels of the game and facing off against soldiers, mutants and the occasional naked ghost woman I just felt bored with the game, wanting to hurry through it just to get it over and done with.

The in-game environments are surprisingly drab, consisting of a dark palette throughout. At one point I found it necessary to turn up the brightness level just so I could find my way out of a series of rooms. The external environments are not much better, with the nuclear explosion turning the light into a drab grey and making it difficult to pick out enemies from the background. At one point, whilst being attacked by a fourteen foot high mech (that's a two legged robot with large guns, on it to non gamers) I could barely make it out in the haze. Whilst this could be merely included to make the game more realistic (it is set after a nuclear explosion, so a clear summers day it would not be...) in a gameplay context it just means you spend a lot of your time squinting and cursing at the screen as you get shot at seemingly from nowhere.

*F.E.A.R. 2* is a relatively good shooter, if a little poorly paced in places with sections of the game dragging along. This could be forgiven, for at times the action does become frenetic, with room to room shoot outs testing your skills. However, the sheer lack of horror in a horror game is unforgivable. There are few scares in this game but the plodding pace of the gameplay and the exposition via email and information dump does nothing to heighten the mood. A similar method is used in *Dead Space* but snappier writing added to its plot rather than slowing the whole thing down as in *F.E.A.R. 2*.

If you want a solid shooter to kill time until *Halo 3: Recon* comes out then you could do worse than *F.E.A.R. 2*. However if you buy games based on their ability to make you want to turn on the lights, than this is best avoided. Invest in *Dead Space* or *Left 4 Dead* and then watch the original version of *Ring* again – it's got all the scary dead girls you need.

***Rico Ramirez,***  
***Buenos Aires Correspondent***

*F.E.A.R. 2*  
Graphics: 7  
Sound: 8  
Gameplay: 6  
Replay Value: 4  
Average Score: 6.25

***Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone: The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street***

(Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009)

Original Script: Rod Serling

Adaptation: Mark Kneece, Illustration: Rich Ellis

*The Twilight Zone* was a hugely influential television show, airing 1959-1964, that brought Science Fiction and Horror to the masses. Created and hosted by the ever-present Rod Serling, it produced innumerable classic episodes, often adapted from short stories by writers such as Richard Matheson and Ray Bradbury. The show created a dynamic within television that has been repeated ever since, with the more recent *Masters of Horror* and *Masters of Science Fiction* showcasing the best of directors and writers.

Following a lackluster TV series in the 1980's and a movie that gave the world the immortal line "Wanna see something really scary?" (Trust me, it's traumatic when you're nine) *The Twilight Zone* franchise is now experiencing something of a revival, with classic episodes of the original TV show being reproduced in Graphic Novel form.

One of the first of these to be produced is the classic tale of paranoia run wild *The Monsters are Due on Maple Street*. In the suburbs of an unnamed city, strange lights are seen flashing overhead, causing random power outages, and spreading confusion throughout the gathered residents. When a young boy begins to suggest that aliens are behind it all and that they could be in human form, the story gradually shifts from one of suspicion to outright hysteria as the suburbanites turn on one another to try and root out the alien threat.

The original story is reminiscent of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, with the fear of the enemy within being the main driving force behind it. In the Cold War era when the story was originally written, there was a very real fear amongst Americans that their supposedly safe and secure neighbourhoods could harbour communist sympathisers just waiting for their moment to strike. This trend was particularly prevalent the 1950's and 60's, with a number of science fiction films taking their queue from this fear. For example, the 1953 film *Invaders From Mars* tells the tale of a young boy who believes his parents have been replaced by aliens hiding out in a nearby swamp. After being told he's imagining things (in the best B Movie fashion) it is eventually revealed that David is telling the truth and the only way to protect yourself from the extraterrestrial foe and its malevolent mind control is to wear a metal colander on your head. Good for keeping out mind control rays *and* draining pasta...

The artwork, however, is the biggest let down here. Within this medium it is obviously extremely important that both writing and art work well together but here the art of Rich Ellis fails to have much of an impact. When characters become stressed in the story large sweat droplets appear, in a style reminiscent of Manga more than traditional American style comics, and whilst this should not be a problem, it is used continuously; eventually this device is so overused that it looks as if the graphic novel is set during a rainstorm. The colour palette used is also a tad drab, with muted colours adding little to the thick pencils used to outline characters. With a blocky style to the artwork all round, there is little finesse to the panels and they can be quite static at times. The, at best, average artwork doesn't compare at all to the work of Alex Ross or even the more comic style of Cam Kennedy and detracts from the overall story significantly. It is, of course, possible that the artist was trying to emulate the style of comic book art used

in the 1960's, reflecting the origins of the story. However, a more considered, less rushed, approach to the artwork would have added significantly to the reading experience.

I won't even discuss the reveal at the end: suffice to say, does it have to be Whitley Streiber-style Grey aliens all the time? Surely there's some other form of alien life out there that could be trying to take over the planet?

*The Monsters are Due on Maple Street* is still able to raise a shudder at the notion that human civilisation is only ever a few steps away from anarchy; all it takes is the loss of electricity and a few unguarded words for hysteria to descend and for neighbour to attack neighbour. This rendition of a classic story does not, in truth, do the original episode justice. With a few tweaks to the plot and improved artwork this could have been an excellent addition to the *Twilight Zone* mythos.

Unfortunately, it just isn't in the Zone...

***Eoin Murphy***

***Freaks of the Heartland***

(Dark Horse, 2005)

Writer: Steve Niles

Artist: Greg Ruth

Rural areas always seem to hold some spectre of suspicion for urbanites. In horror films, city folk who go off on a short break to the country invariably find themselves getting the Ebola virus (*Cabin Fever*, 2002), being stalked by feral children (*The Children*, 2008) or getting brutally murdered by cannibals hiding in caves (*The Hills Have Eyes* (1977/2006), *The Descent* (2005), *The Cave* (2005) and at least three other films). This trend has become more and more apparent in horror films over the last few years, and it's interesting that very few horror films are set within cities themselves (although [*Rec*] (2007) and *P2* (2007) do make excellent use of city environments, they again rely upon the isolation of the main characters, replicating rural locations via quarantined apartment blocks and underground parking lots at four in the morning).

This apparent fear of isolated areas, and indeed isolation itself, has of course long been an important trope in horror and gothic literature as well as video games (such as *Silent Hill*).

This trend has continued, with the almost viral like spread of isolation, mutating itself sufficiently to infect the graphic novel medium, with Steven Niles (of *30 Days of Night* fame) once more mining gothic stereotypes for inspiration, delivering a tale of an isolated rural community entitled *Freaks of the Heartland*.

Rather than feature a band of rural cannibals, undead civil war patriots or hordes of vampires, Niles's story (collected in a 6 issue Graphic Novel) follows Trevor, a young boy who lives in a hick town in an unidentified state, spending his days helping out on the farm, playing with friends and, oh yes, feeding his twelve foot tall, six year old brother who's chained up in the hayshed, out of sight of the neighbours. It's just like a typical childhood in Leitrim really...

The result of an unexpected birth, Will has been born different, growing far quicker than any other child and occasionally showing signs of telepathy and other, ungodly, abilities. His only friend is his brother who occasionally breaks him out of the barn and away from their violent father's watchful gaze, so the giant child can have some semblance of a childhood that doesn't involve counting chickens or eating the rotten mush that provides his meals.

As the story progresses it soon becomes apparent that Will isn't the only such child in the small town and soon enough both youths are caught up in a desperate bid to rescue the other freaks and take them somewhere safe, before the reactionary townsfolk coalesce into a pitchfork wielding mob.

*Freaks of the Heartland* is generally a good read, with Niles providing believable dialogue throughout but for the occasional blip. The artwork is excellent, with Ruth's use of pastel colours and strong lines emphasising the dustbowl countryside in which the story takes place.

There are, however, problems with this work. The graphic novel would have been excellent, with a hint of mystery regarding the birth of the children, the god fearing parents and innocence of the children

working wonderfully as a plot. However, that's when it falls apart. Rather than leave the birth of the mutant offspring a mystery, Niles attempts to explain it, which would have been fine but for his apparent inability to decide on which explanation is best. At one point it's mentioned that things haven't been the same since the bombs fell, suggesting the children are the result of some post nuclear war mutation. This would account for the fear of outsiders and for the near desert that the town sits in. Later, however, it's mentioned that all the women in town fell pregnant in the same week, after strange lights were seen in the sky (as occurred in John Wyndham's 1957 Science Fiction novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos* and the 1960 movie, *Village of the Damned*, based on the novel). This seems more derivative than a tribute, and hints at a certain laziness in Niles's storytelling. Yes, the reason for the children's birth is not in any way central to the story, but an effective back-story, even if only delivered in a few lines of dialogue, would have with added to the depth of the story. Instead, the two divergent explanations serve only to confuse and annoy the reader. Better to have left it a mystery than explain it by liberating the explanation wholesale from a classic science fiction novel. Other narrative excesses soon begin to occur. For example, the mutant children start to exhibit extraordinary abilities (at one point one of them breathes fire...). This dramatically alters the feel of the story. Giant mutant children are one thing, but ones that breath fire are just a tad ridiculous. If Niles had decided to focus on a more basic plot (i.e. children try to escape ruthless parents) the graphic novel would have been far more effective. The additional plot contrivances that Niles adds shifts the somewhat low key story from one that drew you in to the tale to one which you read sceptically.

The artwork is excellent for the most part, but can occasionally become difficult to make out, with multiple images occasionally being used in a single panel which resulting in a somewhat confused morass of visual information.

Some of the characters are also a bit stereotypical, with no real attempt to add depth to characters, instead relying on typecast characters to drive the story forward. For example, Trevor and Will's father is a bitter, hard drinking redneck, who beats his wife and non-mutant child and rules the family home with an iron fist. His mother is meek and repressed, a character that's barely utilised at all within the novel and serving no real purpose in driving the story beyond an again somewhat stereotypical death. A bit more character development could have shifted this graphic novel up a notch in terms of interest for the reader. Instead, the standard characters result in an interesting read but provides nothing to lift it above the mass of other graphic novels and collected works already out there.

The collected works is currently undergoing Development Hell and is due to be made into a film in 2010 with *Pineapple Express* (2008) director, David Gordon Green, adapting it for the big screen. It is too early to say whether the film will improve upon the original material (as was done with the excellent *30 Days of Night* (2007)) or if it will be yet another comic book to movie adaption that fails to spark even the slightest interest (as with Frank Miller's version *The Spirit* (2008)).

Whilst *Freaks of the Heartland* is a distracting read for half an hour, it lacks the impact of similar stories, such as Grant Morrison's excellent *We3*, which does far more to illicit an emotional response from the reader with its cyborg dog, cat and rabbit than a half dozen of Niles' mistreated mutant children.

**Rico Ramirez**

## TELEVISION REVIEWS

### **Glimpsing the Wolf: *Red Riding***

(Channel 4/ Optimum Home Entertainment, March 2009)

A word of advice. If you happen to buy the DVD box set of the *Red Riding* trilogy (1974, 1980 and 1983, based on the novels by David Peace and directed by Julian Jarrold, James Marsh and Anand Tucker respectively), skip the interview with Jarrold that is one of the special features on the first disk. Better known for his work on *Becoming Jane* and, as he admits himself, for period drama and comedy in general, his description of the product of his labours as “very fast-moving thriller *noir*” and as “staccatto” and “edgy” is jarring in the extreme, not to mention simply inaccurate. If, like me, you find yourself completely gripped by Tony Grisoni’s script and the show’s stunning yet thoughtful visuals, which combine to create an effect which is unsettling, even Gothic, rather than “edgy”, it may even feel as if Jarrold’s comments go some way towards undermining the power of the three films as a whole. Thankfully, however, the sheer brilliance (which I have no qualms about proclaiming loudly and often) of these five gruelling hours of television drowns out the inappropriateness, even (in the context) the frivolity of the “thriller” label.

Where it comes from, however, I suspect, is from the fact that, in the wake of the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises, and the films which they have inspired and been inspired by, even spectacles of extreme violence such as those featured in, for example, David Fincher’s *Se7en* (1995) have come to seem almost quaintly restrained. What *Se7en* has in common with the *Red Riding* trilogy is the way in which the graphic and highly disturbing images around which the plot revolves are often nearly out of frame, half obscured by out-of-focus shots or darkness, or flashed across the screen with unnerving rapidity. Combined with the concerns with narrative and visual innovation (rather than merely wondering how much more gore, screaming and inventive torture can be squeezed into a two-hour slot, not that both *Red Riding* and *Se7en* exactly skimp on any of the above), both texts (if we can indeed take *Red Riding* as a single text) often come across as somehow more high-brow than the more straightforward examples of the “torture porn” genre. Indeed, several reviewers have remarked on what they see as *Red Riding*’s conscious literariness, the product primarily of Grisoni’s commitment to sticking as closely as possible to Peace’s books (despite leaving out *1977* altogether and tweaking some of the plot details in order to facilitate the transition to television). This quality has led some online commentators to express their disappointment that it isn’t *more* violent (though frequently in terms which suggest that they wish it was indeed a “fast-moving thriller”), while others are horrified and outraged by what they see as a gratuitous display of blood and guts.

The reality, as these disparate reactions imply, lies somewhere between the two – and with good reason. The subject of the trilogy is the disappearance and murder of a number of young girls in West Yorkshire in the early 1970s, which become entangled with the Yorkshire Ripper case, only to re-emerge in the early 1980s in a community still reeling from the revelations of his horrific crimes. While these events would provide ample enough material for a disturbing drama series, what makes *Red Riding* special is its thoroughly dystopic engagement with high-level corruption and the effects that it can have on the lives of those who the criminal justice system ostensibly protects. Its fictional West Yorkshire is peopled by police officers for whom brutality is standard procedure (and be warned, this goes far beyond a bit of slapping around of prisoners – there are cigarettes involved, among other things), paedophilic clergymen, and powerful property magnates possessed of monstrous appetites, and everything in between. By charting the ways in which these characters become entangled with (or are intrinsically implicated in)

real-life events, *Red Riding* presents us with a world saturated with meaningless, endless violence that seems to serve little purpose beyond its own perpetuation and concealment. The murderer who rapes, tortures and sews swans' wings onto the shoulders of little girls, and indeed the actions of Peter Sutcliffe himself, are by no means aberrations or the invasion of the cosy world of bourgeois normality by alien horror. Instead (in manner which can even be compared with the second season of *Ashes to Ashes*, also reviewed in this issue), horror irrupts from within, is the product of the everyday practices of a bigoted, patriarchal and fiercely secretive society and flourishes there unchecked.

To go into any real detail regarding the plot of the three films would be to reveal rather more than is desirable in a text which relies on the confusion of both characters and audience, a confusion that permeates both the dialogue and the often highly impressionistic, even dreamlike camerawork of the trilogy. That said, according to James Marsh, director of *1980*, in a "Making of ..." feature on the same DVD, Grisoni's original script was even more "delirious" and "weird", characteristics which Marsh toned down in order to ground the work more fully in a sense of the "real world." This is particularly evident in one of the deleted scenes from *1974*, which offers the audience an alternate ending. Instead of the cataclysmic car crash (which begins to occur but is never fully portrayed) with which this first film comes to a typically devastating but grimly triumphant conclusion, this deleted scene brings us far deeper into the stygian realms exploited by the films' villains as the theatre for their unspeakable (and, indeed, in keeping with the trilogy's chilling restraint, never fully spoken) crimes than in the finished product even dares to do. Terrifying but characteristically ambiguous, this blood-soaked, grime-encrusted, horribly suggestive climax would indeed have brought the series unequivocally into the terrain of Gothic horror. Somehow, however, the refusal to do so in the films as they stand heightens rather than detracts from their impact as Gothic – or, as has been suggested in a review on Channel 4's *Goldplated* in issue two of this journal, a programme with which *Red Riding* has much in common, including visuals and thematic concerns, as secular Gothic. While many commentators have expressed their discomfort at the films' (and indeed the books') apparent efforts realistically and faithfully to represent West Riding in Yorkshire as it was in the '70s and '80s, the power of *Red Riding* lies in its ability to straddle an acutely painful line between the "delirious" fantasies of the horror genre and the appalling realities of the true-crime genre. Based on actual events and yet fictionalised beyond mere name changes and imaginative reconstructions, what we have here is a nightmare world that literalises the horrors that underpinned (and, as the films' less-than conclusive endings imply, continue to underpin) British society.

Where this becomes most evident is in the repeated appearance of characters who appear to be possessed of psychic powers. In *1974*, Marjorie (Cathryn Bradshaw), the disturbed wife of John Dawson (a corrupt, hideously wealthy property developer excellently played by Sean Bean), tells Eddie (Andrew Garfield), the reporter who is as close as the piece comes to having a hero, that he smells of death, despite knowing nothing of what he has seen or understood. *1983* revives this idea, in the form of psychic Mandy Wymer (Saskia Reeves) who holds a séance and insists repeatedly that she is in contact with both the dead children and Hazel, the little girl who is missing throughout the film. Both women repeatedly exhort the male characters to look "beneath the beautiful new carpets" for evidence of where those who have disappeared may have gone and who is responsible for their deaths, a phrase also repeatedly by Michael Myshkin (played by an expertly cast Daniel Mays), the intellectually impaired young man accused of the murders. This refrain, along with each of these three characters' insistence that the girls were killed by "the wolf" and the sing-song poem recited by BJ, the rent boy who has seen too much and comes to play a central role in the closing minutes, which merges with the words of a nursery rhyme ("One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,/ All good children go to Heaven") which is also a motif of the final instalment, adds to the Gothic atmosphere. There is more here than the events of a single time and place, these elements seem to imply. Instead, we have been privy to the most extreme manifestation of the more disturbing

aspects of the relationship between adults and children, between the “safe” world of daily life and the dangerous territory of the systems of power and authority which dictate and cannot be disentangled from that world.

Adding to this sense that the films have somehow tapped into a darkness that extends beyond the narrator confines of the particular is the choice of subject matter for each individual film. While *1974*, the most visually gritty of the three, focuses on the original slew of disappearances and the subsequent murders of a number of little girls, *1980*, mixes actual television footage from coverage of the Ripper case with overtly hallucinatory camerawork. By contrast again, *1983* goes some way towards uncovering the conspiracies hinted at in the previous two, even offering some possibility of redemption at the end, though without permitting any true revelation of the misdeeds which many of the male authority figures have committed – and certainly no sense that they will be brought to justice in the way that Sutcliffe was. It does so by concentrating on a disappearance which mirrors perfectly those which dominate *1973*, and the subsequent fallout, lingering mercilessly on the impact which the recurrence of these events have on those innocent men accused of the crimes.

Moreover, *1983* eschews many of the aesthetic and narrative flourishes of the two previous films, and presenting a vision of the early '80s which, in terms of iconography and *mis-en-scène*, could at times easily pass for the '90s or even 2009. The horrors that *1974* locks safely away in a vanished era of neon-lit bars, big moustaches and council estates reminiscent of Blur's “Park Life” video are thus dragged uncomfortably into the familiar world in which the viewer lives. And yet, it must be remembered, *1983*, unlike *1980*, features the medium, Mandy Wymer, a woman somehow connected to preternatural forces. This is not to say, however, that the events portrayed in the film are any less believable or that the corruption it depicts should be dismissed as nothing more than a conspiracy theory founded on mere superstition and irrationality. Indeed, what Mandy, Marjorie and Michael (an alliterative linking that cannot be accidental) pick up on is, in the world conjured up in each of the films, all too real indeed. By mingling this depraved, generally hopeless reality through the lens of a dreamy yet psychotic fairy tale (as, indeed, so many fairy tales are), through the quasi-supernaturalism upon which the Gothic as a genre relies heavily, but also simply by its hypnotically compelling images and plot, *Red Riding* beckons us closer to show us what we wish we had never seen – the rot that lurks beneath the swirling patterns and rich hues of beautiful carpets.

***DARA DOWNEY***

**Empty Vessels: *Dollhouse***  
(Fox, 2009)

One of the most eagerly awaited television shows of 2009 – at least for the vocal legion of diehards who are convinced that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon is some kind of secular messiah – was *Dollhouse*, which, after considerable behind-the-scenes tinkering, finally debuted in February. Was it worth the wait? Well, yes and no. The show certainly has an interesting premise, but despite some promising elements, its uneven nature was such that I am frankly surprised that it was recently renewed for a second season.

The basis gist of the show is as follows. Echo (played by Eliza Dushku, formerly of *BTVS* and the insufferably dull *Tru Calling*) is a so-called “Doll,” a kind of sentient zombie whose original personality has been wiped so that she has become a blank slate, ready to be imprinted with any personality (or “imprint”) assigned to her. Echo and her fellow “Dolls” are playthings for the rich and the powerful, hired out on demand to fulfil the dreams of others and controlled by employees of the mysterious Rossum corporation, whose property they are for the duration of their “contract”. Many of the tasks undertaken by the dolls make them, essentially, prostitutes unaware of the very fact of their own exploitation: after a bespoke personality has been implanted into their head by computer geek Topher (Fran Kranz) each active can become whoever the client wants – be that trophy girlfriend, extreme sports enthusiast/ sex kitten or dead-wife substitute.

Occasionally – and rather less plausibly – the Dolls are imprinted with personalities designed to fulfil other tasks, such as hostage negotiator, bodyguard, spy, or, registering most highly on the silliness scale, *midwife*. When not out on an active mission, the Dolls – all codenamed after a letter of the NATO phonetic alphabet – spend their days in the luxurious underground ‘Dollhouse’ in a state of mindless childlike innocence which renders them docile, and apparently content to spend their time lounging round in pyjamas, eating salads, and exercising. We are told that each Doll has chosen to surrender of their own free will their original personality and become an active for a fixed period of time, although whether this decision is truly a voluntary one becomes increasingly questionable as the series progresses. Echo – whose original personality was named Caroline – certainly seems to have joined the programme for much the same reason that fugitives from justice used to join the French Foreign Legion: because she had good reason to want to stop being herself for a while (personally, I find that reading a good book is enough to do that for me, but perhaps that would make for a less exciting television show).

The show is an admittedly visually stylish melange of elements – there’s a strong dash of Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (the Dolls are, to recall Betty Friedan’s resonant phrase, essentially “biological robots”), a hint of Paul Verhoven’s *Total Recall*, and in Dushku’s endless dressing up and occasional penchant for ass-kicking heroics, a suggestion of J.J. Abram’s Science Fiction inflected spy show *Alias*, as well as an *X-Files/Fringe* style lone-wolf FBI agent (Tahmoh Penikett) who is determined to find out the TRUTH. The show is also, for its first five episodes at least, a bit of a dog’s dinner – a bit of a problem when the first season only runs to twelve outings.

So, where do the problems begin? Firstly, there’s the fact that this is essentially an acting showcase for someone who can’t really act. Required to take on any number of different personae during the course of an episode, Dushku can only really muster about four basic expressions: “sexy” (for the many assignments apparently designed to get her into as skimpy an outfit as possible); “thoughtful” (for the plots in which she must inevitably, wear glasses to reinforce the fact that she’s been imprinted with an

“intellectual” personality); “tough” – for the times when she unleashes her inner Vampire Slayer and kicks ass; and “child-like incomprehension” for her scenes back in the Dollhouse. Only the ass-kicking is done with any real feeling, a reflection of the fact that Dushku’s best role to date remains that of Bad-Girl Slayer Faith, Buffy Summer’s blue-collar nemesis. Tellingly, even when playing a blank slate, Dushku struggles to convince, and the gulf between her abilities and those of the actors playing her fellow Dolls – in particular the outstanding Enver Djokaj as “Victor” – becomes increasingly obvious as the season progresses.

As one would expect with Whedon, the supporting cast here – apart from the reliably wooden Penikett, who played a boring and self-righteous character in *Battlestar Galactica* and does the much the same thing here – is rather good, and when allowed more screen time, as in the later episodes of the season, really gets to shine. Head of the Dollhouse – well, the LA branch anyway – is the ruthless one-time Scientist Adelle DeWitt (Olivia Williams), whose right-hand man (and security chief) Laurence Dominic (Reed Diamond) seems to have a particular grudge against Echo. Echo’s so-called “handler” – the bodyguard/minder assigned to each active via a process of imprinting which leads then to instinctively trust this person – is a morally conflicted cop named Boyd Langton (Harry J. Lennix) who finds the entire concept of the Dollhouse extremely distasteful and has a strong sense of paternal protectiveness towards his charge. Annoying computer genius Topher is essentially a slightly darker take on Whedon’s standard geek character, whilst former *Angel* regular Amy Acker plays the psychologically and physically scarred Dr Claire Saunders, who is in charge of patching up the actives when they return from their assignments.

Crucially, Saunderson’s scars were inflicted by an at-large and psychotic male Doll named “Alpha”, whose murderous activities and relationship with Echo, along with her gradually dawning sense of self-awareness, form half of the first season’s major story arc. The other key arc is that in which FBI Agent Paul Ballard (Pennikett) obsessively tries to uncover the truth about the Dollhouse, which is officially viewed as an urban legend. Though Ballard’s scenes are often the duller in the show, his relationship with nice-as-pie next door neighbour Mellie (played by the rather good Miracle Laurie) actually becomes one of the most interesting strands of the show as the plot develops.

So what of the episodes themselves? Well the trouble is that the first half of the season, aside from some intermittently humorous moments and concessions to the overall narrative arc, isn’t all that interesting unless you’re going to be satisfied by Dushku playing dress-up for an hour. Unsurprisingly, these episodes were received poorly by critics and viewers alike, leading Whedon to assure fans that things would greatly improve by episode 6 (in itself a bad sign). But to be fair, that episode, entitled “The Man on the Street,” is a real turning point for the series, and concludes with a genuinely surprising revelation which is as good as anything Whedon has ever done. In addition, by focusing on the sexual abuse perpetrated upon one of the Dolls whilst in her vulnerable, and decidedly childlike inactive state, the show finally confronts the darker implications of the Dollhouse and all those who avail of its services (as well as facilitate its operation). The episode which follows, “Echoes”, is also one of the highpoints of the series, and for the first time showcases the engaging streak of wit and silliness which runs through the best of Whedon’s oeuvre. The release of a hallucinogenic drug which causes all non-Dolls to act like they’re quite drunk but which reactivates old memories in the Dolls themselves provides us with some much-needed background on Echo’s former personality, but best of all makes for some very funny scenes in which usually restrained characters such as DeWitt, Langton, and Dominic get to behave in a very erratic (and humorous) fashion – the scenes between Williams and Kranz back in the Dollhouse are particularly good here.

Of the rest of the season, “Spy in the House of Love” – in which DeWitt’s character is fleshed out a bit more and the identity of a secret mole within the Dollhouse is revealed – is probably the best, and we also get to find out what the ominously named “attic” to which rogue operatives are sent really is. Unfortunately, despite building up some promising momentum at last, the concluding episodes of the season, “Briar Rose” and “Alpha” – in which the increasingly unhinged Ballard finally closes in on his White Whale and Alpha returns to wreak havoc once more – aren’t as good as they might have been, perhaps in large part because these episodes depend upon us empathising strongly with Echo (aka Caroline). In fact, the revelations made about the true nature of another, ostensibly more minor character, are actually much more affecting and poignant than those involving Echo, whose role in the climax descends into a lame “Natural Born Killers” style rip-off which allows another Whedon alumnae, Alan Tudyk, to ham it up unashamedly. The truth is that original personality Caroline – in the brief scenes in which she is shown in flashback – is such an arrogant, self-righteous, and downright irritating person that it is difficult to care whether she ever gets to retake possession of her own body. Essentially, the problem with these episodes – as with the show in general – is that the lead characters, (Echo/Caroline and Ballard) – are actually the least interesting people in the show. As the occasional moments of real narrative daring and wit present in the show demonstrate, there is promise here, despite the inherently questionable premise (the Dollhouse, is after all, essentially a souped-up brothel for the super rich). However, like Echo herself at the end of the first season, Whedon still has a long way to go, and one suspects that without some major revamping the show itself won’t escape the real-life “attic” of permanent cancellation for long.

***BERNICE M. MURPHY***

**It was acceptable at the time: *Ashes to Ashes*, Season 2**  
(BBC1, April-June 2009)

As horror clichés go, the “Oh my god! I was dead all along!” reveal (of which the “it was all a terrible dream/bad drug trip” plot devices are closely-related variations) is surely one of the most overused. Though the trope provided the premise for the atmospheric classic *Carnival of Souls* and a few other reasonably good genre pieces (amongst them *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* and *Dead End*) it has all too often been utilised by lazy film makers and writers who want to have all sorts of strange things happen without necessarily coming up with a proper explanation for them. Horror enthusiasts are well aware therefore that if a character has some sort of near-death experience in the first twenty minutes of a horror film, it no doubt eventually transpire that they’d really kicked the bucket early on and the rest of the story was some sort of dying hallucination or disturbing glimpse into the afterlife (yes, I’m referring to you, *Jacob’s Ladder*).

From a genre perspective then, there’s nothing particularly original about *Ashes to Ashes*, the cop-show meets Sci-Fi/afterlife fantasy mash-up which has just completed its second season on BBC1, save perhaps the fact that the main character knows from the outset that what she’s experiencing isn’t real. The modern-day protagonist, police psychologist Alex Drake (Keeley Hawes), is shot in the head about ten minutes into the first episode and wakes up in 1981. The fish-out-of-water premise of course replicates that of the show’s immensely successful predecessor, *Life on Mars*, in which Detective Inspector Sam Tyler, a by-the-book 2004 lawman, was hit by a car and woke up in the drab and decidedly non- PC 1970s Manchester of his childhood. The main difference between the shows – apart from the fact that *Ashes to Ashes* has a female lead, a London setting, and takes place in the early 80s – is that whilst Sam Tyler was never quite sure whether he was dead, in a coma, a time traveller, or insane (at least until the final episode, which seemed to confirm the coma theory), Drake, who knows all about Tyler’s case, is convinced from the outset that everything she experiences in 1981 has been conjured up by her badly-injured brain.

Though it received a mixed reception upon its debut, and was often unfavourably compared to critical darling *Life on Mars*, to my mind at least, *Ashes to Ashes* is actually an even more enjoyable viewing experience. This may partly be down to the fact that whereas Sam Tyler’s 1973 was before my time, I do (just about) remember the early 1980s milieu in which *Ashes to Ashes* takes place, and the decade-appropriate trappings (including soundtrack, fashions and pop culture references) strike a nostalgic chord. Whilst self-consciously ‘gritty’ ’70s cop shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* were knowingly evoked by *Life on Mars*, the altogether more garish *Ashes to Ashes* owes much instead to the gloriously shallow *Dempsey and Makepeace*, in which unfeasibly large guns were brandished on a regular basis, stacks of cardboard boxes were driven though by fast cars, and for some reason, the same waterfront warehouse featured every second week or so. In other words, this is a show about how we chose to remember the 1980s (and how that remembrance has been filtered through the era’s pop culture), rather than a show about the *actual* 1980s.

It’s a conceit highlighted by the contrast between the *mise-en-scene* of the rather drab “present” and that of the (supposedly) fictional past highlighted in the first episode. The way in which modern-day London is presented to us in the opening moments of the first episode suggests that something is oddly colourless and out of kilter here from the start: eerie music plays on the soundtrack, the sky is grey, and as the skyscrapers of the financial district flash by, they’re viewed not head on but from a disconcertingly askew angle. One of them even has a figure standing on the roof as if getting ready to jump off, in a clear

reference to Tyler's fate at the end of *LOM*. When Alex awakens in 1981 however (whilst dressed, for some reason, as a high-class prostitute on a Thames party boat full of coked-up yuppies) everything suddenly becomes brighter, louder, and more gleefully outlandish in a manner that highlights the show's (and its protagonist's) metatextual awareness of its own fictionality.

As in *LOM*, Alex receives messages and updates from the "real" world through her television set. The use of a television as a conduit to another world evokes 1980s films such as *Poltergeist* and *Videodrome*: like the protagonists of these films, Drake spends a lot of her down time peering at the screen in the hopes of receiving a communiqué from the other side. The fact that many of these messages are delivered via children's television shows such as *Jackanory*, *Roland Rat*, *Rainbow* and *Grange Hill* also reminds us, that like Tyler, Drake has returned to a time, when, in real life, she was a child. Much of the first season of *Ashes to Ashes* therefore involves Alex's adult self discovering that many of the things she'd taken for granted as a youngster weren't quite as clear cut as they had first appeared – a literal revisiting of the past through adult eyes. In her frantic efforts to prevent the deaths via car-bomb of her rather annoying parents, Alex comes to realise the hard way that family life was not quite as idyllic as it seemed at the time. The climactic first-season revelation that the creepy pierrot Bowie-esque clown figure (of course, both *Ashes to Ashes* and *Life on Mars* take their names from the titles of David Bowie songs) which had appeared to her throughout that series was in fact her father, and that he was the one responsible for the bomb in the first place is an effective one, reinforcing the universal truth that events which may have seemed straightforward to us as children often become a great deal more complex when we revisit them as adults.

Similarly, the second season of the show is also concerned with revealing dark truths, in this case the fact that the Metropolitan Police is a hive of corruption and institutional abuse (yes I know: shocking news indeed). There are episodes dealing with murder, sexual abuse, black mail and nefarious Freemasons, who, whilst not quite engaging in *From Hell* style prostitute murders, nevertheless have a lot to answer for. What is also interesting is the fact that Alex's condition in the real world – hovering on the boundary between life and death – is interwoven rather neatly with the conspiracy plot which drives most the season's better episodes. The writers of this season have shown a greater willingness to explore the possibilities of her predicament by introducing into Alex's world Martin Summers (Adrian Dunbar), who is himself from the future as well – an intriguing development which calls into question the exact nature of this reality in a way largely glossed over by *LOM*.

The crime-of-the-week plots are usually fairly standard – Alex and her colleagues must deal with an evil loan shark, a ring of car thieves, a bent cop – but it's the way in which these plots intersect with Alex's own predicament which makes them truly interesting, and it's the increasingly well-observed character development and witty dialogue which make them enjoyable. Initially criticised for being a rather shrill and smug character by some, Drake is actually quite likable this season, and even if the whole "modern career woman versus sexist male colleague" dynamic which exists between her and her old-school superior Gene Hunt (Philip Glenister) is hardly an original one, it does lead to some of the series' funniest exchanges. Though she can be an irritating know-it-all, the fact that, unlike Sam Tyler, Drake has a very good reason to want to get back to the present, means that her character has an even stronger melancholic streak than he did. Drake also has a penchant for alcohol consumption which is actually quite notable: in practically every scene in which she's not engaged in detective work, she's downing a glass of wine whilst gazing rather mournfully into the middle distance. Maybe the show will actually turn out to be some sort of bizarre meditation upon the perils of binge drinking for the modern career woman?

Unlike *Life on Mars*, which ended after two seasons, *Ashes to Ashes* will return for at least one more run, which is why the second season ends on an outlandish cliff-hanger which wouldn't have been out of place in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Having been (accidentally) shot by Hunt, Drake wakes up – or rather, *appears* to wake up – in her own time: it seems as though death in 1982 means a return to the real world. But then, with the final few seconds of the episode, in which Hunt appears to her on the TV screen in her hospital room, it becomes clear that all is not as it seems: Drake may in fact now be in a coma within a coma (!), and her “return” is possibly a secondary reality created by her now-unconscious 1982 self. Yes, it all sounds rather silly, and perhaps it is, but *Ashes to Ashes* is still an entertainingly tongue-in-cheek confection which isn't afraid to include darker elements as well. What I'd like to see next though is an Irish take on the premise, in which a child of the Celtic-Tiger era Republic gets run over by the Luas, and returns to the dark old days of the 1980s. There, they could receive eerie messages through a two-channel TV set from the scariest hand-puppet of all time, Bosco, and experience at first hand what mass unemployment, emigration, high taxes and a deeply unpopular government are really like. Nothing like a glimpse into the distant past to really make you appreciate the present, is there?

***KELLY GRANT***

*Reaper*

(e4, 2008 to date)

In the short autobiographical piece “The Custom House” which is generally prefixed to his romance *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes how, due to the vicissitudes of political life, he found himself suddenly deprived of a job. His sudden ejection from the Custom House was, in his terms, effectively a form of decapitation, one in which the press took a great interest, leaving him, as he puts it, “careering through the public prints, in my decapitated state, like Irving’s Headless Horseman; ghastly and grim, and longing to be buried, as a political dead man ought.”

For those of us living on this side of the Atlantic, *Reaper*, the creation of Tara Butters and Michele Fazekas, belongs even more firmly than Hawthorne’s professional self in the ranks of the undead. Having been cancelled by the CW Television Network, its second season, which ground to a somewhat unceremonious halt in May 2009, runs to a truncated 13 episodes (the first season consisted of 18 hour-long episodes) and, despite talks with ABD and the SciFi channel, it seems unlikely that it will return for a third. As far as viewers in the Ireland and the UK are concerned, however, Season 2 is still in full swing (having already shown roughly half of the episodes, e4 promises on its website that the show will return in July). If *Reaper* were a person, he (it’s undeniably, even gleefully masculine, which is somewhat confusing, considering the gender of its creators) would be feeling decidedly strange right now. While being more or less dead in one country, he is somehow still alive in the other, with the knowledge of his impending death hanging over him like the tactless words of an unpleasantly accurate clairvoyant. Fans have howled their misery into cyberspace at this unnerving state of affairs, unable to suppress the pain of watching something that they are all too aware will end abruptly in a matter of weeks.

It is for precisely this reason, however, that this reviewer feels it necessary to assess the success of the show *before* its run ends over here in Ireland and the UK, while it is still wandering around with its head cut off and before it transforms irrevocably into a corpse, safely buried in the musty mausoleum of the DVD box set. Doing so is made even more imperative by the fact that, while it may be debatable whether *Reaper* is entirely successful in terms of what it sets out to do, it certainly contains promising elements and ideas. Were these identified and extrapolated upon by other darkly comic, supernaturally-themed shows, *Reaper* could very well, if indirectly, function as a revitalising force within a genre which is being increasingly pushed aside in favour of the hard-headed rationalism and debunking efforts of programmes such as *Eleventh Hour* and *The Mentalist*.

But what, you may very well ask, is *Reaper* exactly? What, as far as it is concerned, is it trying to do or be? And these are indeed very pertinent questions, especially considering that the show in many ways seeks to be all things to all people (but more on this later). A possible answer comes from the e4 website, which announces proudly, “It’s completely unlike CSI. **Stupid** stuff happens. Does ER have **satanic snowglobes**? Thought not. [...] There’s **explosions** and stuff. Does The OC have **cursed cardigans**? Exactly,” (emphasis in original). As this brief resumé strives to imply, *Reaper* most definitely does not take itself particularly seriously, a refusal which goes hand-in-hand with its efforts to appeal to a very specialised audience (male, late teens to mid-twenties, possibly quite well-versed in science fiction, fantasy and horror tropes and iconography). In essence, the plot (which bears many similarities to *Chuck*, another current comedy/ adventure/ male-oriented show) revolves around the character of Sam (Bret Harrison), who discovers on his 21st birthday that, before he was even conceived, his parents had promised their first-born child to the Devil, in exchange for which the latter cured Sam’s future father of a

debilitating disease. Now that he has come of age, the Devil (played with pitch-perfect and unremitting smarminess by a perma-tanned Ray Wise) has returned to claim his dues, by recruiting Sam to capture the souls of sinners who have escaped from Hell. Cue a range of tongue-in-cheek, colourfully early-*Batman* style villains, and an equally multifarious range of weapons (termed “vessels” in the show’s mythology) designed especially to ensnare each unique soul.

So far, so Faustian (with the added twist that Sam himself never willingly chose to sell his soul). *Reaper*, however, is far too embedded in late-’90’s/ early noughties’ pop culture to condemn its hero to life as a troubled loner. Despite his difficulties in keeping the details of what he does (while not struggling to hold down his dead-end job at a hardware store called The Work Bench) from Andi, the object of his frustrated affections, Sam is far from cut off from the world, supported as he is by two close male friends: Sock, a jovial, quasi-alcoholic waster, and the rather more resourceful Ben, who nonetheless seems terminally prone to being captured, injured, or both. What with friends like these, a workplace providing a ready supply of tools, plywood and electrical equipment, and unfeasibly tight work schedules handed out by Beelzebub himself, it is unsurprising that *A-Team*-esque shenanigans frequently ensure, as the less-than-heroic trio set out to vanquish the evil dead and send them screaming back to hell – without letting the world at large know what they’re up to. To a certain extent, his thralldom to the Devil forces him to be far more adult and responsible than his day to day employment, to which he is less than committed, but which he chose as preferable to college which apparently made him “sleepy”. At the same time, however, it also often causes him to behave in what, to those unaware of his predicament, make him seem even more of a no-good layabout than ever, missing work, failing to keep appointments (mostly with the increasingly exasperated Andi), stealing company goods to aid in catching souls. In the other direction, the demands of the “real world” mean that he often finds himself unsuccessfully asking the Devil for urgent time off at the last minute, when the safety of the world is threatened by crazed magicians or jealous undead women.

While all of this is lots of fun, in a slightly mindless, fan-boy kind of way, it often sits rather uncomfortably with the “mythology” story arcs dealing with Hell, Satan and his army of demon minions. In the later episodes of Season 1, Sam, Sock and Ben move into a new apartment, right next door to Steve and Tony, an apparently gay couple who insist on cooking fabulous meals for the main characters until it is revealed that they are in fact demons in disguise – a conflation of two different kinds of otherness which is either extremely politically incorrect or some sort of radical statement, an ambiguity which could perhaps have provided some interesting plot developments. As rapidly becomes clear, Steve and Tony are merely the tip of the iceberg. In fact, the episode “Rebellion” reveals that a whole host of demons have banded together, in a rather endearing reversal of the *Paradise Lost* scenario, to rebel against the Devil, and are planning on using Sam to lure the Arch-Fiend (who, it is hinted more and more strongly as the series progresses, may possibly be Sam’s real father) into a trap. The trouble is that the demons are by no means unsympathetic, in spite of their curving horns and leathery wings – their plot is the logical conclusion of the discussions conducted in a kind of self-help group for aggrieved fiends that they have established. What is more, Sam isn’t entirely convinced that he shouldn’t be helping them, and his confused loyalties, and the way in which (in an ending which I won’t give away) the Devil repays his indecision, make this a particularly interesting episode, which asks some fairly searching questions about those with whom we choose to side.

The rather interesting ideas about good and evil, power and subservience that this throws up are not, however, supported by any real narrative follow-through, and become tangled up with the chummy, buddy-show humour, the increasingly confused love lives of the main characters (who should have been exposed to enough *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* to know that dating a demon never ends well),

and the goofy action sequences that are at times somewhat reminiscent of one of the sillier moments of Brian de Palma's *Carrie* – when the male characters try on increasingly ridiculous tuxedos in preparation for the prom. In other words, *Reaper* hasn't quite worked out what it is, except that it's got supernatural stuff, lots of running around, and protagonists who are designed to appeal to a male adolescent audience mainly because they aren't particularly cool, handsome, clever or successful.

There is also the minor issue of why on earth the rather lovely, intelligent and capable Andi (Missy Peregrym) is bothered with a loser like Sam, particularly when his after-hours commitments frequently mean that he misses their dates and cannot provide a plausible explanation, acts strangely at the best of times and is absent from their mutual place of employment far more than a responsible, potential future husband ought to. At the same time, the fact that she works hard and tends to be relatively sensible has led the e4 website to declare, "You can throw stuff at Sam's love interest. She's annoying." Admittedly, this is only going along with the show's boy-centric status and its place in a genre generally lacking in strong/ sympathetic/ well-rounded/ not bimbo-ish female characters. Nonetheless, the programme's portrayal of Andi wavers on the brink of being rather more enlightened than one might expect, or than e4's comment would imply. Once she does find out about Sam's deal with the Devil (following which her ex-boyfriend shows up, having sold his soul to Sam's otherworldly boss, which has led to him somehow channelling Leatherface from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, very amusingly but rather randomly), she becomes a far more efficient soul-catcher than any of her male companions, and displays an impressively level head in a crisis.

Again, however, this is an element of the show that is first evoked and then apparently dropped. Her participation in the retrieval of souls wanes considerably in Season 2, perhaps in recognition of the fact that, as e4's flippant comment insinuates, her presence as part of the gang undermines the cheery, gung-ho masculinity of the thing – a problem familiar from, say, *Supernatural*, which has been reviewed in issue 3 of this journal. Andi's status, then, is that of an admirably independent female role model in a show where such role models are just as out of place as the more profound philosophical questions brought up by the part played by Hell and the rebellious demons.

Be all of this as it may, it is quite difficult not to like *Reaper*. Much like *The Big Bang Theory*, which is pretty much contemporaneous with it, it presents a world where mostly useless yet ultimately endearing specimens of masculinity are juxtaposed with the concerns of non-realist genre texts (in *The Big Bang Theory*, the physicist-protagonists are ardent fans of science-fiction comics), and are teamed up quite uncomfortably with pretty, long-suffering, quick-witted girls who, like Scully in *The X-Files*, don't quite get the whole thing. If ABC does indeed decide to re-attach *Reaper*'s head and renew it for a third season, perhaps some of these difficulties will be ironed out. As it is, even as it gallops inexorably towards the doom which has already befallen it in America, it provides its viewers (and this reviewer is not the least enthusiastic among them) with a glimpse of a possible future for horror-related TV shows, one where the genre finally succeeds in escaping from the pall of quasi-religious morality which has been thrown over it by such offerings as *Ghost Whisperer* and *Supernatural*. As previously mentioned, shows such as *The Mentalist* and *Eleventh Hour* set out explicitly to counter the supernatural by relentlessly demonstrating the dangers to criminal investigations of the kinds of assumptions about conspiracies, aliens and psychic abilities that Fox Mulder made regularly. This is all very well, but, as *Reaper* demonstrates (however fleetingly), such simple dichotomies break down far too easily. As Sam struggles to understand the line between good and evil, finding himself having to send souls to Hell who only ever committed a single bad deed in their lives, around him, the show as whole shows that Miltonic, even Biblical motifs and concerns can find a place within programmes that are unconcerned with the question of whether ghosts/ aliens/ telekinesis/ God actually exist (God does seem to hover in the background, but,

to paraphrase Woody Allen, he doesn't seem to have done much lately). Instead, it simply, and quite enjoyably, works from the assumption that the supernatural happens, but knowing that certainly isn't going to solve any of the protagonists' personal problems or troubling ontological uncertainties – indeed, quite the opposite.

I suspect, however, that, apart from its other flaws, the juxtaposition in *Reaper* of leathery-winged demons and gore (it doesn't show up often, but it's great when it's there, particularly in the form of a semi-exsanguinated cow in the Season 2 episode, "The Sweet Science") with slapstick humour may be a mash-up too far for the ratings-hungry networks to feel comfortable with. I can hear the grave-yard creak of the DVD box already ...

***PAT WOLFE***